

# TORONTO PROSE MILL



AUGUST 2018 / ISSUE 2

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# Toronto Prose Mill

August 2018 / Issue 2

Short stories by Canadian authors

Dear Reader,

Thank you for visiting Issue 2 of Toronto Prose Mill.

This past year has been an exciting time in our journey, as we observed a growth in our team, our readership, and our submissions. As a journal that exclusively publishes short stories from emerging Canadian writers, it has been uplifting to see the rise of such strong community engagement for such a unique subset of texts.

We'd like to thank all the individuals who worked hard to finish our second issue. We were happy to receive many more submissions this year and would like to acknowledge our team for helping us select and refine the stories that finally made Toronto Prose Mill's second issue.

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# A MARRIAGE IS LIKE A PAIR OF SHEARS

SHULLY SAPPPIRE

Your mother often tells you that she was special, that your father took notice of her because she was honest. She brought him the right amount of change every time. Other workers always skimmed some for themselves. She tells you that your grandfather did not want the marriage, did not trust a white man. But her younger sister, the stubborn one, the one who hawked clothes with her on dusty roads for hours stood and said:

“Papa, they will marry and when oyinbo carries me abroad, I will leave you here and go.”

Marriage is like a pair of shears, two people, like blades joined to each other.

Your mother tells you that before your birth, they threw your father in prison. Political instability ruled back then. Your mother ran around shouting at doors, praying in churches, fighting police officers outside the governor’s house until she found him. Your father rents her store when things are better, furnishes it with things she can sell. Something she can call her own while he works. There is a picture of them smiling on the wall, dressed in matching blue and white aso ebi. Your father wearing a simplified version of an agbada, the only time he’ll ever wear Nigerian clothing. Both are decked in traditional orange beads.

Your father starts to come home less, starts to ask you why your sister is wearing braids he doesn’t like. He yells more now, tells you your mother worries too much, and picks too many fights. He just wants to rest after a crappy day at work, he hates this country. Nothing works, he just wants to do the job, build a few things, and go home. But no, there’s politics everywhere. It’s the same story at every company, he works well with a few people. The company changes owners, he doesn’t get

along with the new people because they are younger, less intelligent, interested in the money but not the job. He asks you why your sister is wearing braids, again. Your mother prays and prays. There are several church services to attend, many deliverances to be delivered from. Fasting sessions that you think are unfair for a twelve year old. Your mother often wakes you up on Sundays and when you ask why you must go, she says your father's spirit is in you and you must pray it out before his people come for you. You start to think this is what madness must look like. But you go to church anyway, you pray and you fast. You sleep with the pillows over your ears. When you watch a movie your mother shouts about how all men cheat and that's all they are good for. You start to wonder why you picked this movie. Your mother spends hours on the phone with her sister, telling her she knows her enemies will not succeed and very soon, God will do something. They talk and make arrangements for a prophet to come to the house. Your aunty has still not gone abroad with you, she never will—not with you, anyway.

Sometimes a marriage is like a pair of shears, one blade is sharper than the other and the cuts are jagged and inefficient.

Your father is a civil engineer, you often follow him to work when you don't have school and see how buildings erupt from muddied grounds. You think what an amazing person he is. Your father is a big gardener, loved to take his time to pluck the weeds, plant the seeds. Water the sprouts, weekends spent re-planting and re-seeding. You would stand by him under the scorching sun, near the table that he used to do the transplants. He walks you through the process, explains to you why it is important to always ensure you trim the ends. He tells you the plants that need the most sun and the ones that need less water. The avocado he says needs the right balance because too much watering and too little watering will ruin it. The ixora with its bright red clusters nestled in green leaves needs to be kept moist but also in the sun. He goes on for a while differentiating the baby sprouts in the pots lining the entrance of the house from the grown but still fragile flowers in the flowerbed on the window sill. Your mother comes out from the house to put water on the table, your father directs the hose at her feet. You watch this insignificant flirtation and smile. These are the memories you hold when your parents' marriage starts to resemble a dead garden bed more than a growing plant.

Sometimes a marriage is like a pair of shears, it moves in separate parts and never really meets.

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For a long time when people ask you if you believe in love, you shake your head. What about your parents, they ask haughtily, they love each other. You smile and say nothing. They may have, once. You don't see them for a few years, your mother calls sometimes and cries. She tells you, she does not understand why your father is like this. She tells you she thought it would be different, that he would change. That he would become more open about the past, less stubborn with the family, more religious, less a drinker. When she talks like this, she often sits with palms facing up on her knees, lips downturned, a clicking sound coming from the back of her throat. As if waiting for someone to give her the answers. You think back to when you were younger and she said out loud, thinking you were not paying attention, that she should leave but for you and your sibling. You think how you hate her for not leaving.

Sometimes a marriage is like a pair of shears, together, it destroys.

It is now some years later, you understand some things more. You understand that your mother could not have left, she did not have anything else and did not believe she could make anything else. The marriage to a white man, the mixed children—these were her successes. This had to work for her. You understand your father is fighting demons, that he needs her. That the past he never talks about eats at him, that he cannot fail in another country. He too needs this to work. They come visit you, the memories of them fighting remain but it is no longer the strongest narrative. They jab each other playfully, your mother complains that your father's stomach is too big. Your father complains that your mother does not feed him enough. You start to understand that some things require perspective, that some things are never fully understood.

They take a new picture that summer, your mother stands smiling around her achievements: you, your sister, your father, and the highlight of the Canadian sun in mid-July. You feel a little sorry for her. Your privilege allows you think this way about your own mother. When she goes back home, she tells you she is going back to school. You are happy for her. She still calls sometimes and says things about your father. Your father does not drink anymore though, he sleeps at home all nights now. They walk around in the evenings, they don't talk about those years. Your mother tells you her enemies did not succeed, all the prayers worked. Hallelujah.

Sometimes a marriage is like a pair of shears, they stay together no matter what.

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# SUBTERRANEAN CONCERTO

JEANNETTE HARVEY

Look, I know this sounds unbelievable, but it happened, I swear it.

My name is Blunt. Julian Blunt. I forgive you if you haven't heard of me. It's been a while since I played the circuit.

What happened is this.

September, the beginning of the classical concert season in Prague, and I was about to perform with the Czech Philharmonic in the National Theatre.

In the backstage dressing room, I began to tremble. It was because of Rach 3—Rachmaninoff's Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor. It's the K2 of piano repertory, a work oversupplied with runs, arpeggios, and full-fisted chords with hardly a break in the forty-five minutes of musical gymnastics. An ill-conceived choice, given the circumstances.

I had, only recently, complained to my doctor about alarming symptoms. I sometimes stare at the keyboard and don't know where to place my hands. At other times, the piano keys swim like startled fish under my fingers. How can I explain? It's like, well, like that dream when all your teeth are loose and wobbling. Yes, exactly like that, if you can imagine piano keys instead of teeth.

"It's nothing more than performance anxiety," the doctor had said, and he'd handed me a prescription for beta blockers.

In the dressing room, I was still shaking when I slipped into my black pants and



white jacket. I ruffled my curls in the mirror for that tortured-artist look, remembering my mother's advice. "People also listen with their eyes, my boy. Give them something to look at."

But I have to admit it unnerved me, that mirror. Not because it showed my minor imperfections. It was what I didn't see in the depth of the glass that frightened me—the emptiness of my life, a non-reflective black hole that had sucked everything into it if, in fact, there had been anything there at the start. But I digress.

I strode to the window, parted the curtain, and leaned my forehead against the glass. The moon cold as tin, and swans gliding on the River Vltava. The birds, luminous against the dark water, seemed undisturbed by the finely-dressed ladies and gentlemen who were putting in time before the concert, strolling among the flowerbeds of roses and heavy-headed chrysanthemums. I shuddered to think I would soon meet them in the post-concert *soirée* where they would swill cheap champagne and speak obtusely of the music.

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To me, applause always sounds like rain on a roof. I strode onto the stage, squinting. That's difficult—trying to find the piano in the glare. Often, it's not in the place you last saw it—a conspiracy of stage hands.

Once I found the piano, I pulled out the bench, sat down, and, after a nod from the maestro, began to play.

The first movement is supposed to start unhurried and pensive, but the maestro was pushing the tempo. So typical of the new generation of conductors to do such things, if only to appear *avant-garde*.

By the third movement, I was using all of my reserve to keep pace. It sounded as if the orchestra and I were performing two different works. I glared at the conductor, but it did little to slow him down.

Perspiration stung my eyes and, for once, I took no pleasure in the dramatic bounce of my curls. Just get through it, I told myself. Get through the evening and go back to the hotel and pour yourself a stiff drink.

Then a noise. A horrendous metallic pounding. Could the audience hear it?

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I squeezed my eyes shut to block it out, and as I did so, I felt a sudden rush of cold air at my feet. I looked down. To my great astonishment a fissure had opened directly below me. And then I was falling...

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I lay where I landed, face down on a rock floor, the piano bench shattered all around. I was terrified to move. What if I'd broken my back? Or worse, damaged my hands? I wiggled my fingers, flexed my arms, felt my ribs. Nothing seemed broken. Blood oozed into one eye. I felt my forehead—a nasty, deep cut.

Wincing, I sat up with my legs spread out in front of me. In the dark, I fumbled for buttons and cuff links managing, finally, to slip first out of my jacket and then my dress shirt. With great difficulty I ripped off a shirt sleeve, cursing my tailor—a fastidious man who always insists on reinforced seams.

Shivering, I wound the sleeve around my head, knotting it at the back. Then I slipped back into my clothes and leaned, panting, against the stone wall. Where was I? My head throbbed. I could barely breathe. It was the same claustrophobic feeling I'd had as a boy when my mother locked me in the broom closet because of my inattention during a piano lesson.

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I realized I was in a tunnel. The fissure overhead had closed to form a ceiling of solid rock.

The hammering rang even louder than when I'd sat at the piano a few minutes before. The sound seemed to originate from the far end, where I could see a flickering light.

Brushing my hands over the slabs of rock sticking out from the walls, I inched my way forward, hitting my head against stalactites and wincing in pain.

The passage gave way to a dome-shaped cavern—a sort of amphitheatre—thick with the smell of decay. In the centre, on a stage built of flat limestone, a grand piano glowed in the light of four trembling tapers. Beside the piano, an old man crouched. He wielded a hammer to deal weak and imprecise blows at the chain that circled his ankle. The end of the chain lay loose, just a few feet away.

“You’re quite free,” I said. “That is, you’re not chained to anything.” I stumbled into the circle of light, brushing the filth from my jacket, thinking how wretched I must look.

The man looked up with watery eyes. “You must be another one.”

“Another one?”

But he turned away and went back to his hammering.

I sank to the floor, huddled against a piano leg, and pulled my knees to my chin. What was this crazy hellhole?

In this dazed state, my thoughts floated back to when I was a boy.

My new piano was mahogany, with a steel back as solid as my mother’s resolve—her only son would be the concert pianist she had failed to become. And who better to teach him than herself? But I was just six, and I wanted to be—what? A magician? A lumberjack? A fireman?

With the intensity of a smith pouring hot metal into a mould, my mother leaned over me. I clunked open the piano lid and played one sustained note, the sound resonating with sonorous sweetness until I lifted my grimy finger off the key. I remember the rattle of my mother’s silver bracelets as she patted my head.

“A budding genius,” she said.

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It was the silence that brought me to my senses. No whisper of wind. No birdsong. I raised my aching head. The old man had stopped hammering and now lay sickly pale beside the piano. I turned my attention to the rock walls and black mouths of the tunnels. Any one of them could lead to an exit.

“It’s no use,” wheezed the old man as if he’d read my mind. With great effort he sat up and brushed the strings of hair from his eyes. “There’s no way out. They keep us prisoners here.”

“Who?” I asked.

Then, as if on cue, a chorus rang out from behind a great block of stone. “No use. No use.” They were like children’s voices, brittle and shrill.

Figures emerged from the gloom, dozens of black, stick-like creatures with bulbous heads. They were half as tall as an adult.

I recognized them instantly. They were notes! Quarter notes. Eighth notes. Sixteenth notes. Half notes, too, moving decidedly slower than the others. And in the center, a whole note, egg-shaped, murmuring a tuneless chant.

The notes crowded around. “Play!” they demanded, and they poked their nasty sharp tails at the old man. Had they mouths? Yes, barely discernible. And they had eyes too—small evil slivers of white.

Sighing, the old man clambered onto the piano bench, dragging his chain. He slumped forward, his head almost grazing the keys. To my surprise, he began to strike up a lively rendition of Chopin’s “Minute Waltz.”

His playing, although not entirely accurate, propelled the notes into a frenzy. They somersaulted and hopped and spun. They vaulted and leaped and skittered, stirred by the rapid three-quarter time, and when he finished playing they toppled into a heap like a pile of spent matchsticks.

“It’s the only way they can express themselves,” mumbled the old man, mopping the sweat from his forehead. He looked down with disdain at the notes. “It’s the sound of the music that defines them. It provides them with meaning. Without the sound they’re nothing but a jumble of black marks.”

“They hold you prisoner to play for them?” But I might as well have been talking to myself, for he had slid from the piano bench and now lay, comatose, on the floor.

The notes crowded around me and began to tear at my clothes. “Now you,” they squealed.

“No!” I shouted, attempting to shake them off. “Not until you show me the way out of here.”

The notes stopped. They became silent. A half note blinked his eyes. “Out of here? But here is the only here there is.”

A note, much smaller than the others, stepped forward to speak, but she was jostled to the back of the group by her larger companions. She sat on the floor and a single tear streamed down her cheek.

The whole note, sitting in a niche above us, gave me a sneering look. “The sooner you become one with us, the better.” The others nodded in agreement before dragging me to the floor, biting and lashing with their sharp tails until I fell unconscious.

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When I came to, my head was spinning, my eyes unable to focus. The small note—the one who’d been pushed around by the others—was dabbing my forehead with a cloth she held in her dexterous tail.

“Don’t make it difficult for yourself,” said the note, who introduced herself as “Grace”. She cast a nervous glance into the shadows. “They don’t like it when I think for myself.”

She swished the cloth in a basin of water and wrung it out. She fluttered her eyelashes. “They say I’m melodically and harmonically non-essential. To them, I’m nothing but an ornament.”

“Eye candy,” I said.

“Ear candy,” she corrected.

I glanced at the old man who now lay with his arm dangling over the edge of the

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stage. “Listen, you need to help us. The old man is dying. And what about that chain?”

Grace lowered her voice. “He once tried to escape.”

“But he isn’t chained to anything.”

Grace smiled. “Well that’s beside the point. He thinks he is, and that’s all that matters.” Her smile faded. “Look, do as they say or they’ll kill you for sure. Just like the others.”

“What others?”

“Pianists, just like you.”

“How many?”

“Several.”

“Killed how?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Propping myself on my elbows, I glared down at her. “A slow death or a quick one? Is that it?”

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She bent down and gathered up the basin before hopping away, her delicate stem clicking on the stone floor. She glanced back. “At least you have a choice.”

Over the following days or weeks—there was no way to measure time—we were forced to play whenever the notes commanded. The old man often fainted in the middle of playing, his limbs curling up like a dead spider’s. Whenever this happened I would sprint to the piano to keep the music going, as failing to do so would have sent them into a rage.

From time to time, I tried to strike up conversations with him, hoping to learn what lay behind the shutters of his mind. But he remained mute, for the most part, propped against the piano with his chin on his chest.

On one occasion, however, his eyes opened wide and he cast me an imploring look. “Where’s my tea and bickie?” he asked, and his bottom lip began to quiver.

Another time, he lay still as a corpse. I was leaning over him, about to check his breathing, when he sprang to his feet. “Laverna!” he cried, digging his bony fingers into my shoulder and shaking me violently. “Do you know Laverna? Do you?” And then he crumpled to the floor again with a sigh.

This outburst left me wondering about the old man’s life. Did he have children? Grandchildren? A wife who, even now, kept his slippers by his chair and a bowl of fresh fruit on the table? Then I thought of my Toronto penthouse and my studio Steinway where I would practice through endless afternoons until my forearms ached. The apartment smells of the maid’s cleaning solvents mixed with the sweet scent of potpourri. After practicing, I often pour a scotch and sit by the window, swilling the glass to make the ice cubes fill the silence. I look down on people with bags and parcels as they bustle in and out of shops. Sitting there, I always have the thought that I live in another world entirely—one that tries, but fails, to mimic the real world below.

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How vain and self-absorbed the notes were! I once caught them poring over a tattered score and I shuddered to imagine the fate of its owner.

“Look at me!” each one cried, pointing to the music written there. “Look at me. And me. And me!”

“Where am I?” asked Grace, tilting her head as she leaned over the page.

“You’re not here,” said a half note as he bumped her aside. “And even if you were, you’d need a microscope to see yourself.” His comment drew giggles from the others.

It was Grace who told me about the old man. He'd confided in her before he'd grown weak and forgetful. He had always dreamed of being a concert pianist but had failed miserably at Julliard because his stubby fingers couldn't span large chords. Thwarted by his handicap, he'd resigned himself to making his living playing in a small-town orchestra in Oshawa.

I looked down at Grace. "But why did the notes want him? And why in God's name did they want me?"

Grace sighed and shook her head. "Why are humans so dim?"

"We haven't quite evolved," I said, trying to humour her.

She sat down beside my right leg and looked up at me. "They go after the unhappy ones. They're the easiest prey."

I squared my shoulders. "Well, that's ridiculously unfair."

"Fair has nothing to do with it," Grace said. She got up and rearranged her tail before sitting down again. "Did you ever wonder why you became a concert pianist?"

"People think it's glamorous but it isn't at all. Those stifling concert halls, inferior pianos, the performance anxiety that crops up from time to time for no reason—"

"But the passion, did you ever have a passion for it?"

Her question took me aback. I pondered it, not wanting to find the answer, my mind flitting about like a frenzied butterfly. "I thought I did, but I guess it wasn't my passion," I finally said, thinking of my dear, dead mother. "But what about all of the other pianists? Why are they spared?"

Grace rose and brushed off her stem. "You probably know by now, Mr. Blunt, that most musicians like what they're doing."

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On one occasion, after the notes had crept away behind boulders, I took up a taper and tiptoed into one of the tunnels, finding myself in a labyrinth of such utter blackness that I feared I'd become lost. Turning to retrace my steps, I felt a cold hand on my shoulder. I whirled around and raised the taper—there were dozens of severed hands nailed to the wall and piles of human bones on the floor. Terrified, I stumbled back to the cavern.

“It was ghastly,” I said to the old man as I leaned, panting, against the piano. “They eat human flesh!”

A hiccup and a weak sigh was his only response.

I then felt the full weight of my responsibility. I needed to plan our escape before it was too late.

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It was Grace who kept us alive, bringing sweet water in stone cups. She beamed with pleasure when the old man flicked out his tongue to lap up a few drops. When I asked her where she'd found the water, she put a finger to her lips. “The great black lake and waterfall. Second tunnel to the right.”

A waterfall, I thought, fed by a surface river? It could be our means of escape. That's when I made my plan.

I'd play Rach 3 for the notes. As for the orchestral parts, I had them all in my head—violin, clarinet, French horn—perfectly formed so that when I placed my hands on the keys, it was as if the orchestra accompanied me.

At the sound of the first theme, the notes began to sway. They linked tails and danced in a circle. My fingers slid over the keys with just the right touch to express the pathos in the music and I saw their eyes beginning to mist.

Strangely, I then started to improvise which surprised me, as extemporization had never been one of my skills. The music was no longer Rachmaninoff's but rather a blend of new themes and rhythms that sprang to life under my fingers. It spoke of grassy savannas and moonlight and primeval drums. Of torture and war and

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death and purgatorial fires. Of chivalry and love and romance and breaking hearts. And the notes danced and whirled and cried with each changing mood.

Then I picked up the pace.

I introduced screeching wheels, roars of jets, claps of thunder, and wild, raging winds in a cacophony that throbbed like the worst migraine. The notes winced and screamed and covered their ears.

I, too, felt the living pulse of the music, and though my arms ached and my throat stung and drops of perspiration fell onto the keys, I played on.

And I played even faster.

There was a blasting of cannons, booming of rockets, whining of missiles, and crashing of great molten spheres falling to earth, and I watched as the notes covered their heads and screamed and, one by one, fell senseless.

Gasping for breath, I hoisted the old man onto my shoulders. I seized a taper and raced into the tunnel, sensing the notes would soon recover. With my burden, I groped my way, stabbed by jagged rocks and tripped by unseen boulders, while the old man snuffled and drooled down my back.

Deeper and deeper into the tunnel I fled, until at last I came to the black lake. I could hear the welcome rush of water on the opposite side.

Should I swim for it? No. The chain on the old man would surely drown us. I had to think fast. Already, the shrill cries of the notes were echoing in the tunnel.

Covering his face with his hands and shaking his head, the old man said, "Leave me here. I'm old and useless. Go, while you have the chance."

The notes were close now—their shouts rising from behind. I waded into the lake. I swam a few strokes and looked back to see the old man leaning against a rock with his fingers laced on his lap, his chin on his chest. Sighing, I swam back. "I

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guess we'll both drown," I muttered. But as I pulled on his legs to drag him into the lake, I was astonished to see the chain slip off his bony ankle.

Streaking through the water, holding up the old man's flopping head, I glanced back to see the notes leaping and shouting vile oaths on the shore. A few had tippy-toed into the water and were attempting to stay afloat, coughing and spluttering, while the whole note bobbed about like a child's plastic ball.

Notes can't swim, I realized, but I didn't know to whom I could pass on this insight.

The old man floated along like a dried leaf, and I swam with little effort. When I reached the waterfall, it was the most beautiful sight—clear water crashing on the rocks, sending up spray like millions of shattered jewels.

I climbed beside the waterfall, the radiance swirling around me, the old man on my shoulders now weighing no more than a newborn infant.

I clambered up the steep bank, seeking handholds and footholds, and the cracks and crannies seemed to welcome my fingers and toes. Through vertical fissures I climbed, until I could smell the damp earth and could grasp the living roots of trees.

Images of pianos and chandeliered concert halls and, yes, my mother's face, flashed before me and then fell away, and I felt a certain weight around my heart lift and lighten. Continuing this way, hand over hand, up toward the light, I could already see the world, shining and new.

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I suspect people think I'm a failure. "Why did you quit playing?" they ask.

Smiling my enigmatic smile, I hold up my hands and spread my fingers. "Arthritis," I say, because I know the truth is not always the wisest response.

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It's a shame, though, what happened to the old man. Soon after our return, he was diagnosed with dementia.

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I now visit him in the long-term care facility, but the old man doesn't recognize me. Nor does he recognize the lovely face of his daughter, Laverna.

My dearest Laverna, what would I do without her? Each evening, after I return home from my new job at the library—where it's blessedly quiet—we share a candlelit dinner. Later, she leans over me in our bed and kisses the scar on my forehead. She says not to worry, it will eventually fade.

On my last visit to see the old man, I wheeled him to the window so he could look out at the new buds on the maples and the great, sloping lawn fringed with tulips and daffodils. He was even more frail, as if his body might collapse under the weight of the ordinary air.

I remember the uncomfortable silence and how I tried to fill it by speaking at great length, and with much detail, about our shared ordeal, about the notes and Grace and how we'd escaped. After I had finished, he turned from the window and stared up at me with the strangest, questioning look. As if I was the man in the room who had lost his mind.

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# GINGER

ANISA KHALIFA

My mother sat before me with her knees drawn up, feet on the chair, her black hair long and straight and wet from the shower.

“Tell me the story about the cat you used to have,” I said. I had seen the cat in pictures of her and her siblings, but I had never heard its story.

She clasps her hands and begins. “When we were in England—I must have been about eleven years old, because this happened right before we moved to Canada—we lived in a little semi-detached house in Warley, in Worcestershire. 153 Station Road. This was in 1973. And we had this cat, it was a beautiful ginger tabby cat. I don’t remember now where we got it or what its name was, but we had it for a while. My older brother, your Bareh Mamoo, he was the one who would pet it and give it the most attention.”

She pauses, searching for details in her memory. “He used to go to grammar school at, what was the name... Holly Lodge Grammar School. He had a uniform, a black blazer with a crest on the breast pocket and gray pants, and a little cap as well. And he used to go by train, and every afternoon when he came back from the train he would walk up the street in front of the house, and the cat would be waiting right there for him, at the exact right time.”

“Huh.” I imagined it, the cat sitting in the window waiting for the boy to come home, tail twitching and eyes intent. And then my uncle, looking smart in his uniform, with a big smile to see the cat in its usual place. “What happened?” A cat lover, I had been wanting to hear this story for ages, but my mother is not usually a storyteller, and I must wait for the occasional bout of nostalgia to strike.

“Your grandfather had moved to Canada already. So then we started getting ready to also move to Canada, and we started selling our things and arranging to sell the house.”

I crossed my legs, trying to imagine my mother as a child, her long hair in a braid to her waist, caught up in the flurry of moving preparations all too familiar to me, the eternal New Kid. “How did you sell your things? A garage sale?”

She shook her head, lowering her feet to the ground. “We didn’t have that much stuff, and there was no concept of garage sales at that time. People knew we were moving by word of mouth, so they would get the stuff that way. And we didn’t have that much furniture, nothing fancy that needed special arrangements. Just one trunk that we brought with us, and that was it.

“And we were thinking, what are we going to do with this cat? We were all attached to it because we’d had it for a while and it was a very...it had a lot of character and a lot of attitude, and it was finicky. Chote Mamoo used to always tease it.

“Whenever it would want to come in, he would just love to hear it squeak, ‘cause he would close the door slightly on it, and it would go ‘Wraow!’ and then he would let it in a little bit and then ‘Wraow!’ and then he’d close the door on it, and it would go ‘Wraow!’”

“Was it a sliding door?” I marveled that my youngest uncle’s mischievous, teasing nature had been apparent at such a young age.

“No, it was a door just like this.” She gestured to my bedroom door. “So that was his little game, and he wasn’t even a year old at that time. Just a couple of days before we left England, he carried it into the house. And it was a big cat. He was only like fifteen months old and he was a real hefty chubby little thing.”

“Chote Mamoo, or the cat?”

“Chote Mamoo. Though the cat was pretty chubby too.” I laughed. Her dark eyes crinkled at the corners, then became intent. “Now I remember—the cat’s name was Billi. Chote Mamoo had picked him up from outside. From the street, and carried him all the way inside, and he wasn’t moving. So we put him in front of the fireplace and tried to keep him warm, and then we—some blood started coming out of his mouth... We tried to revive him, but he didn’t survive.”

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I hunched my shoulders. “Poor thing.”

She shrugged. “In a way it kind of solved the dilemma of what to do with Billi when we left. Because we didn’t have the money to get a special container for him and ship it and everything. But—it was sad. Bareh Mamoo was pretty sad. But he knew that, you know, this probably made things easier for us.”

“How long after that did you leave England?” I asked.

“Just two or three days. Your grandfather had some business partners, and they had used his house as collateral for the business without telling him. So even though he had put so much money into the house, when we left for Canada we basically left with what we carried with us. We didn’t have any savings because the bank took the house.”

“Holy.” I looked at my mother and pondered, not for the first time, my own childhood in comparison. We never had to do without extras so that our parents could pay off the mortgage. My grandfather worked eighteen hours a day for decades, doing manual labour, and sent all of his five kids to university. “What about your trip over?” I asked.

My mother laughed. “I remember we drank Canadian ginger ale—Canada Dry—for the first time. Whenever I drink Canada Dry, I remember sitting in that airplane. “I was in Girl Guides in England and my friends had said to me, When you go to Canada—they knew it was close to the States—say hi to Michael Jackson. He was really big at that time, in the early seventies. And they said, Oh, you’re going to the North Pole, it’s so cold there, what will you do? So when we were up in the airplane and we saw all these clouds out the window we thought, Whoa, look at all the snow!” I burst out laughing. Her eyes lit with amusement.

She told me about her exhilarating first weeks in Toronto. “When we went to school at Glenhaven, everything was huge. The ceiling of the gymnasium seemed miles high and everything was so new, and the lighting was fluorescent and really bright and modern. We had gone to schools that were hundreds of years old with those wooden tables that had stuff carved in them for years and years. People’s names and their threats to enemies. The names of their cats, maybe.” Her eyes twinkled

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"And the wooden floors and the windowsills that had been painted over maybe fifty times, and old windowpanes with glass you could hardly see through.

"And in Canada, to cross the street seemed so wide; you had to walk and walk to get through the intersection." Nothing like the streets in England, which I knew to be ancient and narrow. I imagined the wonder on my mother's eleven-year-old face as she discovered all these things.

"And then...it snowed." She took a deep breath as she remembered. "This was our first experience with that kind of snow. In England, when it snows it's slushy, and it's messy, and it's gone in a few days. But here it was cold, it was powdery, it was everywhere and it was thick. The kids back then were able to hang on to the back bumpers of cars and slide down the snowy hills."

"Now it's illegal," I smirked. "Too bad."

She smiled. "Yeah. It was a different life."



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# I SEE HER

NIKTA HAZERI

Ding! Ding! Ding! There it is again. The same irritating sound I've been waking up to for as long as I can remember. I wait for her to stop it, but she doesn't, so the alarm goes to snooze, as always.

I'm awake but haven't opened my eyes yet. I can hear the raindrops hitting the rooftop, one after another. The window is open; I feel a soft breeze running through the white silk curtains, making them dance with its slow melody.

My eyelids feel so heavy—like I haven't slept in a thousand years. So, I decide to keep my eyes shut until my girl is up too. I've had a long night.

I feel a movement. I think she is about to wake up. I open my eyes, and her face is the first thing I see. I like the round face, rosy lips, big brown eyes, high cheeks, bold eyebrows, and long, straight brunette hair. Every part of her face fills me up with happiness.

Though now that I'm paying more attention to her face, her skin still seems pale and as cold as last night. I can see the swollen half-moons under her eyes—she calls them “bags.” Her hair is tangled together, and a part of it is huddled by her lips, waiting for her to touch it with her fingers and place it back where it belongs.

She also had a long night. She looks exhausted even with her eyes closed. Yet, she's so pretty. She moves again, placing her left arm on her forehead.

She slowly opens her eyes and stares at the ceiling. I can see the broken red lines in her eyeballs. She is wide awake now, and I'm waiting for my most favourite smile to appear on her lips. But something tells me that there is no hope. Her smile won't come today.

She gets up and takes a look at the window, the pretty raindrops sliding down the glass, the cool breeze blowing kisses on her cheeks. But it seems like nothing can make her smile today. She takes a look at me and starts walking towards the door, taking me with her. She didn't even smile at me. God, I hate this morning.

We're walking in the hallway that connects the rooms to the living room. It is decorated with my girl's most beautiful memories. I can see her and him everywhere—one of her in the most beautiful, long white dress, dancing with him in a tuxedo; one of him blowing candles on a huge chocolate-raspberry cake as she stands beside him, smiling at him; and one of them kissing under the Eiffel Tower. There are memories of her parents holding her when she was just a baby, smiling at the camera, and of her wearing her graduation gown, looking so proud. It goes on and on. This hallway is her favourite part of the condo, and it's mine too.

We pass the hallway and go directly to the kitchen. That's what we do every morning. As the coffee machine is busy making hot liquid out of the beans inside it, she goes to the bathroom. I can hear her brushing her teeth. I'm hoping that her mood changes after she washes her face.

She's back. Her face is still blank and pale. What if she's sick? What should I do? Should I call for him? But he's always busy... Her mom! Yes, she'll come here and stay with her as soon as I tell her my girl isn't feeling well. Wait...but how...how do I do that?

She grabs the phone, sits behind the counter, and starts dialing random numbers. Who is she calling?

"Hello...Mom? Hey, yeah, it's me. Listen, can you come over? I need to talk to you about something." Oh, thank God! She called her mom. She did the same thing I was going to do. We understand each other so well that we can read each other's thoughts. Sometimes I swear we are the same person.

"No, I'm okay. I just want to talk to you about something... Okay. By the way, don't tell Dad anything yet. Don't tell him that you're visiting me today. No, Mom, everything is fine. Okay. See you. Bye."

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Why doesn't she want her dad to know about her mom's visit? She loves her dad and her dad loves her even more. What is going on?

She looks down at me and says, "Can you believe? So much has changed in a year. Do I look like the same girl you met a year ago? I'm asking because I can't recognize myself when I look in the mirror..." I want to tell her that I do recognize her! That I think she is still as beautiful as the first day we met, but she goes on before I can say anything. "You were the only witness for our big fight last night. The same old thing over and over again, am I right?" She smirks. "I tell him that he's always busy and doesn't spend enough time with me, then he gets mad and says that I don't understand him and his job requirements. And then we start arguing about the same things for hours and finally go to bed, separately, without saying a word." The bitterness in her smile is poison to my heart.

I've seen her cry sometimes. Never in front of him, though. She always does that when she makes sure he is asleep. She goes to the kitchen, makes some dark and hot liquid, sits in front of the tall and wide window in the living room, drinks the liquid, and wipes away her tears with the ends of her sleeves, in silence.

Those moments are the saddest moments of my existence. Her smile is my favourite thing in this world, and it breaks my heart when she uses the water in her eyes more than the smile on her lips.

Last night was different. I was sitting in the kitchen watching them have dinner in silence. The sound of their forks and knives touching their plates had a strange rhythm to it.

She had made his favourite meal, chili beef cornbread casserole. She learned it from his mom. When we all had enough silence, she started the conversation by asking him about his day at work. There was an obvious boredom in his voice. "We talk about the same thing every night," he said. Then she found a way to bring up their usual issue and that was when their argument started.

But last night, things got intense and he left the table, heading to the bedroom. This time, she didn't stay at the table, didn't leave him to go to sleep. This time, she

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followed him to the bedroom and closed the door behind her. I could hear their voices getting louder and louder, but the words that were coming out of their mouths were muffled. I wasn't able to hear what they were saying.

I was very nervous. I was worried about her. After what felt like years to me, their loud and high voices fell into silence. She came out of the room, went directly to the dining table, and started cleaning it up. She was silent, her face blank and pale. She put the dishes in the dishwasher but didn't turn it on. Then she walked to the coffee machine and hit "brew." When the hot liquid was ready, she took me to her rocking chair by the biggest bookshelf I've ever seen and watched the round moon, the brightly lit high-rise buildings, the twinkling street lights, and the small cars driving up and down the streets. She held me in her hands, giving them warmth. She did that for a long time last night.

She didn't speak a word, didn't shed a tear, but I knew thoughts were swirling inside her head.

We finally went to the bedroom. The clock on the side table glowed 4:32 a.m. He was sleeping with his back to her side of the bed. She slowly slipped under the sheets, trying not to wake him up, then placed her left arm on her forehead and closed her eyes.

She is getting up again and walks towards the window. She stares at the billboards surrounding the high-rise buildings for a few minutes, then dials more numbers. Who is she calling this time?

"Hey Em, how're you doing? Good. Umm, do you think you could come over, like, right now? Yeah, everything's fine. I just wanted to have a talk with you. Yeah. Okay, see you soon."

That's Emma! Her best friend—has been for more than a decade now. They finished high school, undergrad, and law school together. Emma has always been there for her, in good and bad times, and I like that about her.

But why does she want her mom and Emma to come over at the same time? What

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does she want to talk to them about? I've never been this curious, worried, and confused. What if this is all related to last night's fight? No. That can't be. She never shares the downsides of her marriage life with her family or friends. And she asks him to do the same. She always says, "If two people have got problems, they should solve them together, just the two of them. It's nobody else's problem."

She walks away from the window and goes to the kitchen. She grabs the coffee tin and pours the beans inside the coffee machine, then turns it on. She leaves me in the kitchen by myself and walks to her bedroom. The door is open, so I can see her changing her clothes and combing her hair. She takes her time in front of the mirror, touches the bags under her eyes, reaches out to her makeup case sitting by her perfume collection. She takes another look in the mirror, then puts the makeup case back to where she took it from without opening it.

She comes back from the bedroom and notices the dark-hot liquid is ready, so she sits on her rocking chair and drinks some. She's waiting for her guests. What is she going to tell them?

I can feel the silence choking us both, leaving us breathless in the moment. This happens a lot. We've experienced this silence, nothingness, loneliness many times. She always tells him that this condo is too big for two people, that they should move to a smaller place. But what she really means is that this place is too big for one person: her. He is never home to fill the emptiness. It's just her, living the seconds, minutes, and days here, alone.

I don't know a lot about their relationship before their marriage. We met on their honeymoon, and that's how I came to their life. At first, everything seemed perfect. Two good-looking people in a happy, healthy relationship, living in a beautiful condo in the best part of the city, both extremely successful at their jobs. It seemed like happiness had embraced them tightly.

After a while, I didn't really see them together as much as before. They were both busy with their own things. He, the owner and manager of his company, had signed new contracts with a couple foreign companies, which kept him very busy all the time. She was also working on a number of cases. She barely had time to go and visit her parents.

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The difference that I saw between the two of them was that she was actually trying to save their relationship from their careers. After long hours at the office, she would come home and cook his favourite meals for dinner. She would always make sure that his clothes were washed and ironed, that there were fresh flowers on the dining table. She would stay up late, waiting for him so they could have dinner together and chat. But it would never happen. He would either come at midnight when she had fallen asleep at the table or say that he had already had dinner.

After a while, she noticed her efforts weren't being seen, and she was heartbroken. That was when she decided to bring it up to him. That ignited the flame of their arguments, and it hasn't been extinguished since. I could feel them growing farther and farther apart, day by day, and it's been almost a month since they have laughed, gone out, or made love.

Seeing her heartbroken was upsetting. She was no longer the joyful, energetic girl I first met. She lost weight, dropped all the important cases she was working on, and took time off to stay home. Her parents and close friends noticed a significant change in her mood, but every time they brought it up, she would laugh, assuring them she was doing fine, everything was going great, and she couldn't be happier with him.

Everyone believed her but me. I was the only one she shared her loneliness with. Oh, how I wish I could do something for her to remedy the pain.

Ding-dong! That's the doorbell. She leaves me in the living room and walks towards the door. It's her mom and Emma.

"Hey! Did you guys plan to get here at the same time?" She giggles and hugs them both.

"Actually, you told neither of us the other was coming, so we were surprised when we saw each other in the lobby." Emma takes off her coat and hands it to my girl. She then comes back to the kitchen, takes two mugs from the cupboard and pours coffee in them. Her mom walks into the kitchen and gives her a kiss.

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“It’s raining crazy outside! How are you feeling, my darling?” My girl smiles and says she’s okay. Another lie and it seems everyone believes her. They all sit at the dining table and start drinking their coffee. She makes small talk, but Emma is having none of it.

“So, are we here to chat or are you going to tell us a secret? Like you’re pregnant or something exciting like that?” My girl and her mom both laugh.

“You’re right. I should get to the point,” my girl agrees.

Everyone is quiet. She is holding me in both her hands, staring down at me like she’s waiting for me to say what she wants to say.

She takes a long breath.

“Dan and I are getting divorced.” She doesn’t look anyone in the eye. No one says anything. Only the sound of the rain can be heard pounding on the windows. I feel like I have shattered into a million pieces. Is this reality or just a nightmare? I take a look around. Emma and her mom are staring at my girl, but she’s looking down at me.

“Honey, what are you... What are you talking about?” Her mom puts her hand on my girl’s hand and waits for an answer.

“Is this a joke? What’s this? Are you out of your mind?” Emma asks with a smirk.

My girl finally looks up, smiling reassuringly. “It’s not as awful as you think. Dan and I have been talking about this for a while and we finally came to a peaceful conclusion. We believe that this is going to be best for the both of us.”

Emma gets up and starts pacing across the window. “You guys have both lost your minds! What do you mean this is going to be best for you! You can’t just burn down years of friendship and a year of marriage to ashes like this!”

“Sit down and stop being so dramatic! You’re a lawyer, not an actor. Pull yourself together!” my girl says.

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“This is not a good time to make a joke, Keren.” Her mom takes her hand off my girl’s hand.

“All right, no more jokes.” My girl gets up and folds her arms. “I asked you to come here so you could do me a favour. Mom, I want you to talk to Dad about this. You know that I have a soft spot for him, and I just can’t give him this news. Emma, I want you to become my lawyer and help me with my case.”

“Wait a second. You can’t just...” Emma’s voice is shaking. Her face has turned red.

“I can do what I want with my life. I can make my own decisions. I trust you and know that you can help me, and I want you to support me,” my girl says sternly. She’s always been a strong and determined girl. I remember her dad telling her she is the true definition of her name: brave and strong. That’s what makes her such a successful lawyer. Though she’s harsher than usual today. She’s made up her mind.

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She is drinking the dark-hot liquid again, moving back and forth on her rocking chair. The clock reads 12:30 a.m. We’re sitting in the dark. She walks towards the window, taking me with her. The pavement is shiny in the rain, painted by the reflection of misty street lights. The high-rise buildings are embraced by heavy fog. I know her head is clouded by thoughts.

I hear him entering his key in the small hole on the door, and he goes to unlock the door, only to discover it’s already unlocked. She doesn’t turn away from the window. She waits for him to see her. I’m counting the seconds.

“Keren! What are you doing in the dark? Are you okay?” He turns on the light. She is still facing the window, unmoving. There is silence everywhere. I can feel his presence behind her, waiting for her to respond.

“I’ve asked Emma to take care of the legalities, and I’ve asked her to make it a priority. My parents know, and it’s your job to let yours know. We’ll have a few months until it’s official. Until then, I’ll be living with my parents. You can stay

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here.” She doesn’t seem to care about this luxurious place if she doesn’t have a companion to share it with.

She’s holding me tight in her hands and I’m shaking because her hands are shaking, but she isn’t crying. Her words were her tears, falling out of her mouth, pouring into his ears.

“Keren...I’m sorry. I really am. I’m sorry I’ve caused you so much pain. I appreciate your patience and whatever you’ve done to save our relationship. But we’ve been done for a long time now. I know this wound will not heal. We’ve got to move on. I’m sorry.”

She’s smiling sadly, her eyes glistening with tears. She finally turns to him, meeting his eyes for the first time tonight. They’re both staring at each other. I can hear them breathing. Fast. She puts me on the dining table and takes a few steps towards him.

“You see this?” She’s pointing at me. “The first thing I received from you as my husband. I loved it with all my heart, kept it close to me every day, and promised myself that I would hold on to it forever. You know why?” He is looking her in the eyes, silently. “Because every time that I felt sad and lonely, every time that I thought we’d reached the end, this would remind me why I loved you and decided to build a life with you in the first place.” I can’t believe what I’m hearing. I never knew how much I meant to her...

She takes a couple more steps towards him, leaving no space between the two of them. “Don’t be sorry now. You’ll feel sorry when our child asks me about their dad and I’ll have nothing to say but the truth. You’ll feel sorry when I tell our child that their father left us for another woman. Oh, Dan... Be happy right now. Celebrate. Enjoy every second of your life. Because one day, tables will turn and all this glamorous life will be gone. One day, it’ll be you trying to survive in an ocean of guilt and shame.”

She passes right by him and goes to the suitcases she’s already packed, moving them towards the door. He is looking pale, sick. He leans on the wall and sits down on the floor slowly, watching her move the suitcases.

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I don't want to think about the child she just talked about. The child in her belly that she's been hiding from all of us. Right now, I just want to think about her. Will she take me with her or leave me here by myself? It's hard for me to know the answer because I never knew she loved me until a few seconds ago. No one knew about the special relationship between me and her. She never talked to anyone about it, like she never talked to anyone about the baby in her belly.

I've never been able to talk to her, and I never will. But one day I hope she understands I see her. I always have and I always will. Through all those times when she would pour her favourite dark, bitter, and hot liquid in me, hold me in her cold hands to give them warmth, touch my round head with her lips, and draw me close to her heart when she was deep in thoughts. Her tears, her loneliness, her pain. I hope one day she'll realize that she's never been alone. That I've always been by her side, crying with her, for her.

She opens the door, stops, turns to me. Her shiny eyes fixed on me.

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# 300 SOULS ON THE LINE

DAVE WICKENDEN

I sat across from Jack MacDonald. The warm glow of the firebox showed where Albert McLeod stood leaning on his shovel, swaying to the motion of the train. I had met the two men just yesterday when I finally caught some luck and landed this job. They seemed like good fellas. Jack was married and a father of four while Albert boasted having ten offspring. I had already been invited for supper by both men, and they hinted that there might be room on the Capreol softball team.

“Jack says you used to be a brakeman?” McLeod asked, offering a plug of chewing tobbaça.

“Before the war,” I said, shoving the wad up inside my cheek. “Not many jobs left over by the time my regiment sailed home.” What I didn’t say was that I missed my ride because I was put into a work party for having been drunk on duty. The bottle helped me sleep without seeing my buddies ripped apart over and over again. At least being broke and out of work cured me of that vice and helped me make peace with my ghosts.

“And you’ve not done it since?”

“I’ve spent the last few years hobbing back and forth across Canada and the States following the harvest season and trying to survive, like everyone else. As luck would have it, when I had inquired about work at the rail yard I found that the previous brakeman, a Frenchman named Jean-Guy, had knifed another fella over a bottle of hooch and was on the lam. Thirty minutes later, after a ton of questions, I had my first full-time job since I was cashiered from the army.”

McLeod chuckled. "If you call riding the top of a train to apply the brakes lucky, I hate to see what you consider bad luck."

"Where did you serve during the war, Clifford?" asked MacDonald.

I hesitated, because I'd tried putting that chapter of my life behind me. "I was with the 21st Battalion and fought at Passchendaele where I—"

Without warning, the click-clack of the rails disappeared and the locomotive tilted downward and plummeted into nothingness. All three of us were flung forward, smashing together in a heap of arms, legs, and metal. We were falling into hell. My head exploded in a blossom of stars as it struck the boiler plate, followed by a distinctive snap of a rib as a body barrelled into me. There was no hard collision, but it felt like we were being buried in slippery oatmeal. I felt cool wetness enter the compartment and tasted the grit of mud.

As our descent slowed, the cars behind slammed into the rear of the engine with a mad metal screeching that pitched from high to low like a band of demons. Logs from a cargo car rained timber, and tree trunks crashed and thundered around us, matching the storm above. The nightmare ended with an unholy hiss of steam, and it felt like my arm was on fire. It took seconds before I realized that the piercing scream was my own.

"Clifford!"

MacDonald's plea pulled me from the pain. I could hear the fear. I focused on his voice in the dark.

"Here," I said in a voice that didn't seem to be my own.

"Can you move?"

Testing my limbs, I was surprised to see them move. "Yes." I crawled towards the sound, favouring my arm.

"I'm pinned by a chunk of steel. McLeod is under me and not moving."

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Reaching with my good hand, I searched until I found MacDonald in the dark.  
“Give me a minute to figure what we’re up against.”

“No! There’s no time. We’re just past Spaidal Siding. You have to get there and signal the CPR passenger train behind us. They won’t know about this washout!”

“No! I won’t leave you.” Memories of my buddies lying in mud, their blood and excrement everywhere, and having to leave them alone in the dark almost bowed me over.

“It can’t be helped. You must stop them.”

“But...”

“That’s an order, Clifford!”

The command galvanized me; old lessons took over.

The horror of what might be hammered home and I climbed towards the door of the engine compartment. Stepping out into the rain, I struggled to make sense of the surroundings through the pitch black of night. Thick cloying mud sucked at my boots as I used the engine’s handrail to climb higher.

The rain, darkness, and mud transported me back to the horrors of Passchendaele, where I had served and been injured years before. Overhead, rumbles of thunder echoed through the hole, reminding me of the artillery barrage that routinely peppered me and my fellow Canadian soldiers and caused all of us to burrow like rodents in the earth. Three of us had promised to protect each other, to ensure we all made it back home. We had spoken about getting back together and tying one on.

The flash of lightning lit up the huge sinkhole, showing the crushed railcars and the distant rim.

Wasting no time, I began to climb for the top of the washout, using any handhold

I could find and fighting the slippery surface made slick by the mud. The rain pelted my scalded arm, intensifying the pain and making it feel like it was on fire once again. I focused on the pain and used it to keep myself moving higher and higher.

Another flash of light lit the sky and showed one of the last visible railcars teetering on the lip of the sinkhole. Terrified it would plunge downward, I threw myself at the last six feet of the manhole and climbed frantically as the water-saturated earth collapsed beneath my feet. Using my hands like talons, I clawed forward. I felt like a young eagle with a lame wing trying to escape the nest. With a scream of defiance and pain, I threw myself over the lip of the cavity and rolled away to more solid ground.

*The bugle blasted, we surged over the lip, slipping and sliding as a swarm of gunfire from the enemy's machine guns searched for fresh meat. Bullets found the company, and I heard the wet slap of metal hitting flesh. Grunts and screams added to the cacophony. There—there in the mud. Pete Anderson's lifeless eyes stared back at me as if blaming me for the shrapnel that tore a hole in his throat.*

I clenched my eyes and pushed forward, waiting for the impact of the bullet that would inevitably cut through my shoulder. I hadn't seen those ghosts for years. Why would they surface now? I raised my trembling hand to wipe the mud from my face.

I had no idea how long I'd been climbing and couldn't estimate how close the other train sped to disaster but didn't waste time trying to catch my breath. Stumbling through mud that seemed to grab at my legs, I followed the remainder of No. 401's cars, which were twisted and bent like the bellows of an accordion.

I moved around a broken branch that the train had severed in its mad plunge.

*The leaves suddenly turned to barbed wire with Ian Woods twisted in its clutches. I stood helpless as bullets ripped through his body for the thousandth time. And for as many times, I stood helpless as it happened. Once again, I let them down. I saved no one. I failed again and again.*

Tears and rain mingled and rolled down my face, and that familiar, mean thirst was upon me. No! I wouldn't fail yet again. I had a chance to make a difference, and by God, I would not—could not—give up. Passing the last car, I climbed onto the railbed, which allowed more solid footing, and used the two rails as a guide in the darkness. Staggering and tripping across the ties, I pushed forward with one obsessive thought—to signal the train to stop.

My breath tore at my throat and my stomach cramped trying to hold me back, but I swallowed the pain with a mouthful of rainwater that streamed off me in sheets. I could feel their accusing eyes as I ran, but I refused to quit.

Left. Right. Left. Right. One foot in front of the other, just as we'd been taught: the mantra blocking out all other thoughts. I would show them. How far I ran or for how long, I had no way of knowing, but suddenly the station was there, a light pushing back the blackness. I grabbed the hurricane lamp from its hook and banged on the door.

I didn't wait for the men inside but lunged back towards the mainline. I started swinging the lamp in the direction of the oncoming train. I heard the confused cries of the station's men as they ventured out into the storm to witness my frantic efforts to avert disaster.

Please, God. Let the train see my light!

I sensed rather than saw the men setting up torpedo signals and extra signal lamps around me.

Like a flaming meteor that grew brighter at its approach, the CPR train rushed out of the trees. I swung my lamp like a madman, screaming my pain and fear into the night. One after the other, the torpedoes detonated in a staccato of thunder that rivalled the storm.

*The bright flash of an enemy's flare and the distant sound of thunder was the only warning we got before the descending scream of the shells. I dove to the ground as the artillery barrage zeroed in on our attack.*

But there were no screams coming from overhead and the light was from the locomotive that barrelled towards me. The squeal of brakes was the sweetest sound I would ever hear. Overwhelmed in pain, I collapsed to my knees. The fourteen passenger coaches carrying three hundred souls ground safely to a halt, but my thoughts were with the two men I had left behind.

Dedicated to the souls of Jack MacDonald and Albert McLeod of CN Freight Train  
No. 401, Thursday, June 26, 1930, Capreol, Ontario.

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# PLAYTIME

SHULLY SAPPPIRE

I think I was a playful child. Before everything.

We used to play teacher and student games of all sorts but you were always the teacher and I, the student. That comes with the territory of being the younger sibling. So when you started to ask me to lie down when no one was home, it was a new type of game. It was always in the playroom, our special room filled with toys and books that also doubled as our closet room. The entire room, like the rest of our house, was covered in red carpet so that after each of our episodes I would always have a red burn on my leg. We would always lie at the farthest end of the room, away from the door, but close to the windows from where we spied on the hotel next door. I must admit I did not always know what was happening and sometimes you would have to kiss me on the neck throughout to convince me.

One day, at church, I started to hurt down there. It was children's day service which meant you would get up on the big stage and sing. You were always the singer, always the one destined to do great things according to the pastors who paraded our lives. They would tell you this while smiling at me saying, "don't worry, you will help your sister". And so I had relegated my position to being your helper, your assistant, in whatever you may need.

"Does it hurt there? Is it because of what we do?"

Your eyes full of fear and shifting from me to the stage where your performance was coming up. I did not want you to mess up your performance. I did not want you to be afraid, I did not want to scare you or disappoint you. But I also did not know what was happening. We stopped not long after that, although often when I wanted you to play with me, I would negotiate by saying we could do it. I am not sure if it was that scare that prompted you to stop or if you simply grew bored of me, either way it ended abruptly with no explanation or fuss. But sometimes

when I walked into your room without knocking, I would see you scrambling off your teddy bear.

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The day it all came to a head, it was a sticky Saturday afternoon. The generator wasn't on because, as usual, we saved fuel for the night time. Sitting outside the master bedroom, my mother was deciding what our Sunday meal would be. Sunday meals were important. As children who went to church four times a week and woke up at six in the morning on Sundays so our mother could make all her pre-service meetings, the meal afterwards was our reward. Our mother was sitting in the middle of us, placing her back against the cool railings of the stairs. You had emerged from your teenage sullenness; a rare occasion at this point. You were sitting to mother's right moving between being sprawled on the carpet and sitting upright. I was resting against the door leading to the room, my short legs barely meeting our mother's thighs. Both of us had our hair tied up, although the frizziness of my blondish hair made it stick out in places where your dark brown hair lay smooth. Mother had already brushed it down twice with a wet brush and would probably do so again within the next hour.

The decision to be made was between fried rice and jollof rice. You always wanted the jollof, and I, the fried. Our mother, impartial to either was letting us convince her who should win this round. We were each throwing out naughty acts the other had done and good things we had done so as to prove why we deserved to win. I teased that I would report our little secret so that I would get my fried rice. Immediately, your brown eyes dilated and your lips curled tighter. You shook your head minimally so as not to draw our mother's attention but it was too late. I knew I had made a mistake. The series of events that would unfold from this one moment started with the decision over rice.

Our mother, still blissfully unaware of what had just transpired between her two daughters prodded me for information. Maybe, if I had been older I would have thought to lie, but at that point I was still very much under the illusion that I had to be truthful. I stammered my way into revealing bits of information. Telling her how you laid on me and rubbed against me but that only when we were alone. Her face contorted into a mixed display of anger, disbelief, and confusion. "Show me,"

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she said, very quietly at first and then shouting it when neither you nor I moved. She pulled both of us up and marched us into your room.

“Show me,” she repeated, as if she could not believe the thought to be true until seeing it. As if the visual would somehow be different from what she had heard. I laid down first on the bed, my legs dangling off the edge as if that would somehow make a difference in the act. In all this time, you had not said a word. It was like you knew there was no way out. You climbed on me half-heartedly and when mother asked if that was it, you had to perform the motions and I had to turn my neck so you could kiss it.

Our mother pulled you off me with such vigour I thought she might snap your hand. Without letting you go, she yelled in your face about how you were practicing lesbianism. She continued to yell, asking you which one of your white school friends had showed you this. Which one had you tried it with. I was not sure what your school had to do with the issue but back then every change she saw in you was blamed on the new school and the people there. She let go of you, parading the room in circles while shouting in disbelief, asking you to explain but never giving you the chance to utter more than two words. She told you to get dressed and you dared not ask why. As you were getting dressed we overheard her on the phone.

“Pastor, good evening. Sorry, ehn, emabinu please we are coming, are you in church? It is serious.”

Our mother left me on the steps of our duplex, red carpet surrounding me, me doing what I had spent most of my childhood doing: bargaining with a God.

You both came back somber. You didn't talk to me and I was concerned about your feelings towards me. I wanted to follow you and apologize. I wanted you to know, it was not intentional. That I had not known it would get you in so much trouble. But our mother pulled me back and questioned me. God forbid bad thing and we have prayed, said over and over. Two days later, while we were in school, she went into the playroom and your room. Gathered all our teddy bears and locked them in the big metal box that the television stood on in the master room.

I stopped cuddling teddy bears to sleep that week. I had often wondered why she did not just throw them out, but my mother rationalized things to herself. She could give it to somebody else's child—just because her own children had used it for “bad” did not mean another would—but she never did. And like that, the teddy bears remained locked away, hidden, a secret reminder of what had happened.

\*

Years later, living away from our mother, different countries, different lives. The thought of those incidents cross my mind and I joke that technically you abused me. You were standing in the dimly lit kitchen, trying to put together some late night snack. I hear the clanging of things against the surface stop and when I look up, you have turned to stare at me. You said in a hurried way, as if trying to convince me but really more yourself, that nobody taught you anything. You were confused and trying to navigate your way through that. I suddenly think about how our mother failed you, you failed me and I failed you. It was a fleeting moment for me; I never considered the impact upon you.

Looking back on it, I suppose quite some time had passed before we talked about it again. There were many things that happened to us, between us, around us that we never fully took in. That we still hadn't taken in. Some time had passed since that initial conversation but I remember you randomly walking into my room, sitting down for some odd seconds of silence before speaking. You said you were sorry for what you did to me when we were younger. You told me that you didn't get how it didn't fuck me up, and you were sorry. In that moment, I was more surprised at the idea that it should have fucked me up than I was by the apology. It should have affected me.

I would also look back on that point to reflect on the things that should or could have possibly affected me without my consent or acknowledgment. I would always wonder whether my mother's religiosity turned youthful inquisition into sinful acts. If her refusal to address the main issues in our family with something other than religion had become a running theme in our own lives. If my sister had other explorations that had affected her. If the realization of those effects on herself made her feel I was affected.

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The way things affect you are not always how you think they will, it's different all the time. It's strange.

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# THE STORM ROOM

ANGJELIN HILA

The latitudinal gradient reclines in ecstatic turbulence toward infinity. There, the physiognomy of vegetation slackens and form cedes to transformation. Tall, thick canopies enclose underneath the dark cavities; sparse, cold terrains whose fauna curse their celestial ceiling. Bizarre forms wander in undefined environments, frozen in artificial homeostasis, unaware that above the opaque foliage crust simmering populations swell in rapid convulsions, fizzing and bubbling forth in fatal ebullience, victims of prodigious numbers.

The convex glass roof, a shallow curve in perspective, like the exoskeleton of a crustacean, hugged an inactive yet metabolizing torso. From certain oblique angles incident, this hibernating muscle betrayed its internal composition and suggested the gaunt spine of a critter in repose or a freshly slain carcass.

The young man merged with the swarm.

His left arm outstretched behind holding a young woman by the hand, taut like a thinning thread. The woman took uneven steps, not with the young man's eagerness, but neither resisting his gratuitous haste.

The other couple lagged behind. They walked in parallel, unhurried gait. The man in the second couple was taller. Much taller. Or perhaps the woman was shorter. She had a ponytail. Their arms swung. The woman had her head turned. A group of tourists swarmed the steps at the entrance. The sidewalks, likewise, teemed with people.

The rotating doors swung in convulsing crescendos.

Here they came. A man stood near the door and searched through an overstuffed bag. As the first couple went to enter, the woman glanced at him, whose head simultaneously rose and revealed a lachrymose expression.

With an abrupt swoosh, the door swung and curtly disconnected the outside whirl. The man's face persisted in her mind, stark against the vestibular silence.

It was quieter inside. The hubbub of assembly hovered on a lower gradient, isolated from the miscellaneous racket of the outdoors. It bore a homogenous quality, as though the similarity of the sounds drew them to each other, forming a continuous fabric. They proceeded as though unsure, confronted by a sinuous path of rich, unvarnished wood. She slid her hand along the smooth, beveled parapet. He continued to walk ahead. The wooden passage curved, slithered. She saw him at the end by the ticket counter.

The second couple drew near.

"The Francis Bacon is upstairs," Leonard said to company. The other man had his hands in his pockets. The girl's ponytail was draped over her small breast.

"But first let's visit everything else," contributed the other man.

"Maybe we should do that after," said Leonard. "Fewer people will be doing it in this order."

Two sets of stairs on each side and between them an opening. The opening into a spacious, empty hall. Stone columns. The rectangular geometry offset by a curved, wooden stair suspended above the entryway at the other end. But sideways, ahead, doors, rooms. Their egress into one made the empty hall whole again. Their steps echoed.

Soon, it would be flooded, an emulsion.

The other room was anything but spare. The paintings overburdened by heavily ornamented frames.

The occasional sculpture compelled her to vary the angle of her gaze. Sideways, upside down, ant's eye view. She circled it. She confronted it. Suspended in eternal somnolence, in muteness, they heeded her.

Leonard strayed. The other two moved in tandem, exchanged looks, ridiculed. She observed people shuffling, rushing, taken by some detail, not taken at all. A girl dragged along by her mother. A husband and wife. In the stylish benches, respite was sought. Figures sat or reclined, mute sculptures. Between them and the adorned walls an unannounced procession. Influx, efflux, osmosis.

An older man caught her attention as she heard her name called. His lively, discriminating eyes balanced a dispassion in his bearing. He awarded his gaze to each object, but moved along with a sense of perfect familiarity. His finger brushed the surface of a canvas and felt its texture. The security woman approached with a disapproving gaze. "Do not touch the paintings," she admonished.

How his face shrunk, recoiled, from stately to apologetic. His hands locked at the back, unclenched, and she saw an elderly lady glide to his side to hold his arm.

Around her, the faces were unfamiliar. The flow had carried them further. She remembered her name being called.

Through the wide margins of the entryway at the end of the hall she caught a glimpse of a large canvas. Outstretched, muscular limbs, and an awkwardly twisted torso made faint by a brilliant gloss banded diagonally. A female pelvis poised in front of another canvas was visible at the border. Legs switched positions, the subtle contours of the bones enlivened as if embossed upon the filmy dress.

She turned away. The stiff figure of a middle-aged male moved away from a canvas. Applied sparingly, the painted shapes were only suggested. It was an interior: a room with couches, part of the kitchen entered the margin, an arched doorway led to an indistinct room. Pale grey-blues, dull-greens, and a washed-out orange. There were no people.

This small painting was part of a set whose members displayed the same colour scheme. Her eye skimmed past, receded to a kneeling figure. Was this man praying?



Her cold palms fell on her warm belly. The brow of the figure rested on his clasped hands. His nose protruded. The nostrils flared.

He went unnoticed and she didn't interfere.

Hues shifted along a messy, muddy gradient and a string of voices oscillated between clear and fuzzy. Out of focus went the images in her motion, as did the voices.

She caught, "This way. Toward the Turnbull blue wall."

"The wall that absorbs. Or repels?"

"Blues can only repel."

She wandered into a valley of tepees, rough, grainy rocks strewn over the immaculate pavement. The voices receded and the rattle of leaves, nowhere to be seen, interposed. The swoosh of waves of some unapparent dimension. Foliage rustlings. Figures emerged from the tepees. A light, Indigenous chant issued from an adjacent room.

"You seem lost." She thought she heard this. Someone had brushed against her elbow protruding from the arm softly coiled to her womb. "Walk in, go inside and see." A short elderly woman peered at her amused.

"You seem surprised by it all," she said.

"I'm looking for...someone," was all she could say.

"No, no," the elderly woman seemed to disapprove. "There can be no mistake. You came here out of your own volition, did you not?" Her profusely wrinkled mouth gave a smile. She smiled so easily, she thought. Not her. She noticed the tag coiled around her neck. Her frizzy hair like a bouquet of thin-petaled dahlias. Her head tipped to one side. But she demurred, not knowing why. Another time, she wanted to say. Not now, later perhaps.

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“I need to sit awhile,” she managed to say. And then qualified, “I feel dizzy.”

There were no benches here. The space did not allow for any. The sound of wind gave her goosebumps.

Then the little girl caught her attention. She pulled her mother by the hand, and the tall, solicitous father trailed close behind.

“Mom. What’s over there?”

“I don’t know sweetie. Let’s go find out.” The mother’s tone was distracted.

Upstairs the speech of strangers converged upon a dark entryway, the blank wall bearing the sign: ‘Storm Room’.

The line was long and curved around curious objects. Unknown objects that invited groping: hands and fingers probed into their shapes, and the shadows they cast.

A vitrine of bipedal mammals in crisp clothing and sportive hats. The beasts bore blank expressions. Equipped with semi-wild environments: shrubby flora, rocks and silt on glass, glassy stools, the pristine ruggedness amplified by mirrors. The animals assumed human poses. They stood or sat in civilized fashion.

Civilized but down-trodden, despondent.

A boar hung suspended from a staircase. Round the neck wound the rope.

A fortnight had lapsed.

She flocked from corner to corner, bouncing without volition, prisoner to a trajectory preordained by exact, though veiled, initial conditions.

Whispers and bouts of laughter drifted by. A laugh at first suppressed, a trail of distant snickers, which erupted into bursts, contended guffaws. Were they directed at her?

As she looked around, a kind of frantic eagerness manifest in her countenance, she was struck by the seriousness of others' expressions, a contrast with the fleeting auditory gaieties.

The guffaws gave way to a tension in the air: a tautness that stifles expression.

The contours of the space appeared no longer rectangular; the angles steepened and contracted in places, morphing against her rhythm, and created sharp, tenebrous corners. In others they widened, or the walls morphed into polyhedral forms, and at times the straight angles were eschewed altogether and supplanted by curvilinear surfaces.

People's bodies exhibited against fluctuating forms. The manifold creases in their attire neutralized the monolithic, lustrous walls.

She saw a tall couple bend in tandem as they entered the dark entryway. Two security guards paced within vicinity. One of them, a young woman, endeavoured to convey alertness with little success.

She could not decipher cryptic bits of conversation that wafted her way.

"There is no there-ness there," she heard.

Who would say such a thing? Maybe Leonard. But the voice was feminine, albeit low-pitched.

"And what are we meant to do?" This time the voice issued from a short girl, whose face hid behind an immovable male shoulder, an immense, rigid slab of stone.

"To do?"

"How ordinary."

"Walk in, walk out, reflect afterwards."

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“Aha, you said reflect.”

“In fact, you are meant to do no such thing.”

“Most folk expect as much.”

The conversation seemed to her a series of unrelated utterances. All meaning distilled into a hollow syntax. In a syntactical space. In this impending fixture, congested algorithm.

Sooner than she had anticipated the procession carried her inside. A cold, dark room of uncertain dimensions with a vaguely lit cabin tentatively in the center.

The cabin was a single-chambered shed heaved on a lone plane of scaffolding. Two wooden steps led to the metallic exterior shutter and announced...lost in the placid darkness of a space-less dwelling.

Through the quasi-opaque windows dark silhouettes shone against the pale, orange glow of electric light. Two queues proceeded parallel in opposing directions: those going in and those coming out. Otherwise, indistinguishable.

Those leaving seemed just as blithe and unaffected.

Was it, as she suspected, an almost non-occurrence? The invisible processes going on inside did not seem to yield any discernible effect on the exiting queue. The algorithm means to elude, she thought, for the output is, at the very least, superficially identical to the input.

She played this game in her head because she was a mere inspector. A technician interested only in the wiry inner workings.

No sooner had these thoughts occurred then she was mounting the wooden steps.

An older man exiting appeared to uncannily resemble the one whom she had witnessed being reprimanded earlier. She thought she detected a kind of haste in his step, as though what he had seen or witnessed inside had thoroughly repelled him. His expression betrayed neither disconcertedness nor any degree of revulsion, merely mild agitation. She was tempted to gently grab his arm as the wife had done earlier, and deliver a sympathetic look without pretext of inquiring verbally.

She saw him off in his confusion and, not being certain it was him, thought this was just as well.

She directed her attention rather to what awaited her. Inside, against the spare contours of the skeletal room, people stood or sat idly. Some, ecstatic and animated, paced about. Others, more solemnly perched, yielded to the mystique of the room.

As she ventured further, she heard the patter of the rain outside.

It poured in a steady, comforting manner. The windows vibrated with its splatter. A sibilant wind smacked it onto the dull plastic of the windows.

The rate of the downpour fluctuated. Presently, it increased. You could hear it in the sound. Clouds rumbled. The peal of thunder resounded across unknown dimensions.

She pictured clouds splitting, lightning branching in manifold creases. In her mind, the dark, billowing sky momentarily lit up and disclosed a majestic accumulation of clouds.

She situated herself against the left window.

She let the nape of her neck arch back and her head touch the glass, which was in fact plastic. The rain seemed to gather more and more strength: torrents thrashed and battered street and sidewalk, the wind directing the downpour in conflicting directions.

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A figure beside her shifted as though in discomfort. She could not imagine what was going through his head.

A couple at the other end seemed frozen in embrace.

As the rumble of thunder scattered, their embrace tightened.

The bare light bulb dangling from the ceiling remained artificially still. But amidst the couple's motion the light intervened to reveal their faces. She was certain now they were Ed and Ann. And the man shifting beside her? His face turned toward her and peered with sapient mildness. In the gap of warm breath between them his voice resuscitated an unfamiliar incantation.

"Here you are," he said, as though he'd known all along.

But Leonard's voice seemed to her, even in its serious delivery, to mock the situation.

This was just as well, for the storm room mocked them too. The smirk on his face mocked also their embracing friends. But something about the storm room seemed strangely inured to mockery. It seemed, in fact, to luxuriantly welcome it.

Without, lemures hissed in concerted frenzy, their litanies drowned in the seasonal torrents.

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# BRICK BY BRICK

JARRETT MAZZA

From 39,000 feet above, the landscape below resembles a primitive circuit board or Tibetan mandala, conjured by the hands of monks who were both patient and meticulous in the construction of their glorious tapestry. I built these kinds of crafts during my recovery. I was told it helped with the trauma, the regret, and the hatred that bustled from within.

“You can’t rebuild purely because you want to. Everything takes time, and you need to be willing to give it.”

This is the advice given by my counsellor, who told me that every step to recovery is incremental, and if you push, if you force, you run the risk of building yourself up too quickly, and if you do this, you will inevitably crash.

I crashed, and that’s why I’m flying back home. It’s the last step I have to complete, and I have time to spend—as much time as is needed, according to my mother.

I am seated beside the window. My hand is open as I stare down to the city below. The coach section of the jetliner is comparatively quiet. The passengers are mostly asleep. There is a man sitting next to me. His leg is jutting into the aisle, and he is raising his hand to gesture to one of the flight attendants.

“Something to drink, please, will you, ma’am?”

The female attendant smiles before she proceeds to complete his order. Her voice is flinty and sweet, and I can hear her as she interacts with some of the other passengers, all of whom are asking her for something different. She doesn’t linger. She completes the order and moves on. I request a water. The last time I had a drink on an airplane I ended up sleeping through the entire trip.

I haven't slept a wink and, as I try to close my eyes, I am reminded of the reason why I am here, in this plane. My house burned to the ground, and it was I who started the fire.

I was in the living room to my house, and my father was in the other room. I remember the pungent smell that filled the air. It burned my nostrils and forced me to close my eyes and gasp. What is the true meaning of pain if not an overwhelming fear of the future and a burdening conscience that lets you know that there's no way to truly make up for your mistakes?

I thought I knew the meaning of such things. As I think back, I see the tendrils of smoke rising and the flames scorching our aluminum siding, spreading thick scents of sulphur into the air as my mother cried, as my father screamed.

"Why? For God's sake, why?"

The strain in his voice could pain a mule and my mother's sobs were powerful enough to send pinches into anyone's heart. My body quivers even now as the plane lands and I walk through the terminal, alone.

"I want you to tell me the last thing you remember before the fire started."

The officer said this as I sat in the detainment cell at the police station. No one was there except for my father and me. My mother was outside, in the car. My aunt was with her. She was crying too.

"Don't. Don't."

I tried touching her face, but she flinched away from me.

Back at the airport, I grab my carry-on and wait. I am not in a hurry to get to where I need to go. No one knows that I'm coming, and I didn't bring any baggage with me. What I do have is light and easy to hold. I rent a car and drive down a desolate country road, thinking of nothing but the distant sun, which is now just starting to rise.



It doesn't take long to find home.

The house was colonial. It once sat at the end of a dirt road and down a protruding side street, in a lot with three bushes and a tree that once grew apples but does no longer. It is the same route that I would take when I walked home as a kid, before the service, when I was considered a better man.

It was my mother who had asked me to come home. She told me that I had overcome so much, and I could overcome even more. I went through the twelve-step program with AA. I hated the first and the third steps, the same old horseshit, or so I thought, about saying what you feel, being straightforward and honest, and speaking from the fucking heart. I hated it, at first, the same as I hated myself. I didn't think I could, but I did, and my mother told me I was ready. She said that my father needed me and that I could help him rebuild the house if I wanted to. I didn't know what I wanted. I was afraid. I never liked to wait. Being patient is so new to me and, since my time at the facility, I've been advised to wait. I refused to tell anyone that I would come.

Why pursue an opportunity if you're unsure about whether you'll succeed?

My mother is fragile while my father is strong. Most of the time he is strong because he is the one who's needed to be. I had to be strong too. When my mother fell to her knees and sobbed, it was my father and I who stood beside her and tried to help her back to her feet. She is still fragile. She told me that I could help, and I want her to know that I am going to give it an honest try.

The second step towards recovery is giving all things an honest try.

Back at the airport, I wanted to drink, but then I remembered step one: admit your faults. The final step is to right those wrongs any way you can.

The bar was filled with people. Their drinks were familiar, but it was their faces that were foreign. I saw them; they didn't see me. I looked away and thought about my steps. They're one of the few things keeping me controlled, reserved, at bay.

I can see my father standing on the lawn. His truck is parked near the square outline of what was once our garage. I head up the gravelly path and into the yard. It is mowed, and the grass is as green as grass can be in the spring. My father is rolling a wheelbarrow filled with bricks. Not far from where the porch once stood are two buckets brimming with cement and cloudy water. I walk with my knapsack and listen to my boots crackling against the rocks and sticks.

My father steps up after he finishes bringing the barrow to the buckets.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

My shoulders are hunched and my head is down.

“Here to hold up our end of the deal.”

“Our deal?”

“Yes.”

My father’s lips are curled. He sucks back some saliva and spits a few centimetres from my boot. I know he saw my fucking rental car approaching the house. No one travels down this road unless they live here, and there are no neighbours living close by.

“You remember it, don’t you?”

“Of course, I remember. I just didn’t think you would...”

“You didn’t think I would...what, keep my word?”

My father shakes his head.

“No,” he says. “I didn’t think you would. You rush, and you don’t think.”

I bow my head again. My father is a man who prides himself on being honest, and I am a man who prides myself on staying true to my word.

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“Well, I’m here now, so give me a shot, and I’ll help.”

My father glances over my shoulder to the makeshift desk sitting outside the ruins of what was once his—*our*—home.

“Go ahead and grab yourself a shovel, then.”

I turn and look for where the shovels are stashed. My father doesn’t tell me that they are assembled in a heap not far from where he is working. Along the way, I unbutton my shirt, toss it aside, and retrieve the shovel with the longest handle. I am tall, taller than my dad, which is, oddly, the only thing that I think sets me apart from him.

I pass by a window resting against the porch. My father places it against the side of the house. I recognize it from its crossed trellis. I notice this, and then I remember the feeling of my father’s hand slapping my face.

“What the hell were you thinking?” He raised his hand and smacked my jaw.

“You son of a bitch!”

He hit me again before he stomped down the hallway. I was in the hospital, in a room where my mother was being held. There was an oxygen mask covering her face, and she didn’t move or say anything, not when she was awake, and not even after she opened her eyes and saw my father hitting me in the face again.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry?” he screamed. “You’re sorry? You’re sorry?”

He whacked my nose. It was a direct shot and hard enough to crack the bone. I started to bleed. The nurse saw and stepped in.

“Is everything okay?”

My father was in front of the window when the nurse came in to check.

“Sir?” I glared, waiting sternly for my father to hit me again so I could take it like the man that he taught me to be.

“Fine,” I said, and I looked away.

I didn't have anything to say. It had been a while since I had spent time with people like me. When you salute a flag, you don't do it alone. Five were buried since I returned home, and I needed to be in the company of those who understood me. At the time, what I wanted was reassurance and hope, hope that everything would improve over time. I thought if you hoped for certain outcomes, they would come. On the front line, you can't afford to wait. In my life, I thought I couldn't afford to wait just the same. What I wanted, I wanted, and I didn't care to think. I thought too quickly and forgot too easily. To make it easier, I drank and didn't consider the reasons. During the step program, my counsellor told me it was because I was searching for something I would never have; the past had drifted and couldn't be recovered. I thought this and that's what I toasted to at the bar, but after I saluted, there was no one to toast back. I was holding my drink with a stoic look on my face.

Not even the bartender acknowledged my salute.

I drove home the night the house burned down and thought about the long list of things that needed to be fixed. My mother said when your life is difficult, it helps to make a list. You review each item and cross it off when you're done. I believed in gathering every piece, and the first one that needed to be reassembled was the one that was deemed the most difficult: forgetting about what's been done and trying to look ahead, towards something, and taking your time to do what's needed. I wondered if I had enough time. I hoped that I did.

I close my eyes and the memories continue to invade my mind.

“Danny!”

My mother had called me from the second floor.

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“Yeah, yeah.” I slammed the door and awakened my father. I cackled and stumbled into the kitchen, pillaging the pantry for snacks to munch on. “Oh, well, how much did you have to drink? You sound drunk.” “I’m fine, Ma. Fine.” “Are you sure?” “Yes! Fine! Now go back to sleep!” When my father hammered me in the jaw, I thought I was going to fall face-first onto the floor. I could’ve fought back, but I was too damn drunk. My vision blurred, and I didn’t resist or try to defend myself. My father was broken.

I didn’t miss my family because I thought I would never see them again. I thought I couldn’t trust things like love. There were so many who I loved, so many I called my brothers. The people I cared about disappeared. I thought family was the most important. They are, and that’s why I turned away from them. It hurt so much saluting the flag, and I distanced myself to avoid feeling the same pain. It was best just to move on and build new relationships instead of working on, or focusing on, the old ones. This was a mistake. You cannot rebuild if you’re already thinking about finishing. You can’t salute a flag once you realize what it stands for.

“What’s the last thing that you remember?”

Before I went to the hospital, after the fire, the police brought me into a secluded room and sat me down in front of the only officer not in uniform.

“I remember,” I answered, sweaty and still hazy from the accident. “I remember...I came home after spending a few hours at the Purple Lady, a bar down east.”

“And were you drunk, were you drunk when you left?”

The officer glared, and I gave him a respectable nod. My eyes weren’t raging, and my lips weren’t curled to the point where, when I looked, I would seem infuriated and displeased. I didn’t think now was the time to get angry, not when there were a few people ready to give me sympathy for what I did or did not do.

“I was.”

The officer looked at another cop, a woman who was standing poised near the door and who was watching me as I tried to reform the story that I was telling.

It was a bad story.

“So, I came home, couldn’t see much, and I wanted to do something that would get me to sober up a little bit.” I paused, took a deep breath, and then continued.

“The best way for me to get sober has always been for me to smoke.”

I exhaled, making a sound that I thought was turning the officers off. They were giving me looks. I needed to breathe so I chose to do so loudly. If I didn’t, I thought I would break apart, and I couldn’t break.

“I lit a cigarette next to the window, smoked it for a while, and tossed it out the window. I guess I thought it was far, but somehow it must have bounced back. I think it fell into the living room and, though I was asleep, it must have lit and then it got to the point where it became out of control. And, after that, I think it got worse, worse because the whole house burned down.”

The officer nodded. He stood from his chair and walked to the door.

“So...is that all? You’re just going to let me go?”

The officer glanced at the female officer. She wasn’t far from the doorway.

“Kid, you just burned your house to the ground. If I wanted to come up with cleverer ways to make you learn your lesson, even I would come up empty-handed.”

“You mean...I’m done, just like that?”

“Not yet,” the officer said, shaking his head.

I didn't know why his head was turned and then I saw where he was turning to.

"Your father's waiting outside."

My father was near the door window, glowering.

I can still feel the strength of his hand as I push the wheelbarrow across the lawn, trekking bricks and mortar, watching my father as he watches me. I know that, peripherally, he isn't going to let me out of his sight. He isn't going to turn away from me. I am here to rebuild the same as he is.

"Where do you want this?"

My father raises his hand and points to a heap near the porch, which he has only just started to rebuild. I bring the pieces to where he told me, and I unload the bricks and await my father's instructions.

"What are you doing?"

I am loading the last brick when I hear him.

"What?"

"Why are you stacking them that way?"

I shake my head and my cheeks flutter.

"What do you mean?"

He sighs, stops, and then steps up to me. He nudges me with his shoulder, and I feel a slight pinch in my deltoid. I back off. Challenging him now would only make things worse, and I am not here to open wounds that are opened already.

"Here. Stack them like this, one over the other. See?"

My father then shows me how to do it.

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“You must spread a thick layer of cement above the brick. This keeps the brick in place and makes sure it’s secured.”

My father is attentive. He doesn’t break eye contact the entire time.

“These are bricks, you know, and each brick needs to be properly placed or else the wall will come down. See?”

“I do.”

“I know it seems easy, but it’s not. If you don’t lay down each one properly, the wall won’t hold, and you’ll have to start all over again.”

“Okay. I will.”

“Let me know when you’re done with the first one because then I’ll show you how to do the next. I’m going to go back to work on the porch.”

“Okay.”

After the fire, and after my mother was given permission to leave the hospital, my father consulted the insurance company to see when they could rebuild. My mother was sitting with me in the motel room, where we were forced to stay.

“I need to know when we can clear out the debris, so I can start rebuilding as quickly as possible.”

My father paced back and forth, holding the dial phone by its box and dragging the cord.

“And I don’t need any help,” my father snapped. “I can do all the labour myself.”

I blink, still hearing my father’s voice echoing in my ear before I am back to building the wall. My father moves away, and I am left to do the work on my own. I format the bricks in the way he outlined. I hope the wall won’t take long



to complete. With every new layer, I am ready to move onto the next. Each time I think I'm ready, I can hear my father's voice:

"Rush. Hurry," says my father. "You *must* take your time."

I inspect the first wall. I heed my father's advice.

Could rush, I think. New things take time.

I know we won't get to the second floor until later. When the wall is completed, I raise my hand to signal. The first brick is the hardest one. If it is out of place, then all the others are much more difficult to secure. You have to be careful—patient.

"Finished."

My father is shovelling on the other side of the lawn. I don't know why. Maybe he is fixing a divot or expanding the plot. Then, he slams the shovel into the ground before stepping away. There is a heap of bricks next to the wall. There are so many that it seems almost impossible to get through all of them.

"What did you say?"

I rub my hands. They are sore from all the lifting. I am not much for exercising. One of the main jabs that people would take at me were those that involved my weight and lack of physical finesse. My parents never taunted me, not until I made a comment or said something cruel. I know they didn't approve of my drinking and the two went hand in hand, yet no one knows this better than my father.

"I said that I am finished with the wall."

My father rubs his nose and walks towards me. He stops next to my shoulder, crosses his arms, and stares. He is inspecting the wall to see if I did in fact do a good job. I know that he is going to say something he shouldn't, something that will make me feel shitty or incompetent, but when he finally does speak, his reaction is different than I thought it would be.

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“Fine. Move onto the next.”

My head jerks, and I find myself feeling dimwitted and obtuse. I was assembling the wall for so long it was hard to imagine moving onto something else. It was like recovering. Many steps: step one, step two, and the others that followed. You didn't think you could live without the pain of not having what you depended on, and then one day you could. Taking your time pays off, but it's never quick like you want it to be. You have to wait and wait. You have to close your eyes and look inside. It's not about forgetting the past, but enduring it, surviving it, and seeing your progress manifest into something that can hold and sustain all the other parts of yourself. I thought I was only building a wall.

My father has moved on, and I am neatly stacking the bricks. Later, my father comes by to give me his ladder. I am finished with the lower half of the wall. It is time to climb higher.

“This will help you.”

I take the ladder and move it to the wall. I am not a builder. My father is a builder. He built this house with his brothers when I was a baby, and now I am standing next to him, assisting as he builds the house from the bottom-up again. Later, I stop and sit on a cooler. I raise my hand and rub the sweat from my forehead. Building houses is difficult. I struggle every step of the way. I thought it was too great a task to rebuild a house from rubble. Anything can be done, if you're willing to take the time.

“Thirsty?” my father asks me.

“Yeah,” I say, barely.

“Go and grab yourself a drink.”

My father points to the cooler. I stand and open the lid. Inside are jugs, each one hugged by misshapen ice cubes, and buried beneath are cans of beer. I kneel down, clasp my hands around the edge of one of the containers, and continue to look at what's scattered throughout the bin.

“Hand me a beer.”

I reach into the cooler and snag one of the cans. It is cold against my palm and enough for me to reminisce about the times that came before this. Six months have passed since I gobbled one of these bad boys. Six months of drinking nothing except juice and water. I can only imagine how good this one would taste. I can imagine its bubbling suds, its cool texture, and the way it would trickle down my throat and awaken every one of my senses. One taste won't hurt. And yet, as I gaze at the drink, I can see my father's hand cut in front of my face and swipe the can from my grip as if I'm not even holding it.

“Thanks.”

I look up. He is standing over me.

“You're welcome.”

My father is terse. There was a time when he would talk to me. Now, I can barely hear him. It is not impossible to get him to speak. It might take a while, but then, so did the wall, and I finished that quicker than I thought. He yanks on the pin, opens the can, and guzzles. I can hear every drop as it hits his mouth. He gasps after each gulp before he crunches the can and tosses it away.

“You get something to drink?”

I am still holding the top of the cooler when I hear him speak.

“Yeah,” I say.

I hold the water, twist off the cap, and stand beside my father, drinking and not saying a word. I want to say something. After the fire, I tried to talk, but each time I did, it was another unsuccessful attempt at apologizing. Of course, he told me the truth. He said that I was a fucked-up kid and someone who would never amount to anything. He yelled this into my face, told me that my drinking, and my lifestyle, were the reasons for my faires. He also said that I was a selfish, irresponsible

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prick who deserved to get his ass kicked. I had stolen everything. Starting from the ground up is one of the most difficult tasks that any one person can accomplish, and yet, here is my dad, starting from the bottom and doing whatever he can to reach the top.

“Are you hungry?”

My father says this as I finish the last of my water.

“Yeah.”

“You eat anything today?”

“No.”

“I got half a sandwich left over from lunch. It’s yours if you want it.”

“I do.”

“Go on and get it, then. There’s still a lot of work to be done, and I need you at full strength if it’s going to be done right.”

“Okay.”

I eat the sandwich and return to work the second I am done. I build and organize each and every brick, gathering and assembling until my father tells me our day is done.

“Go on now. Time’s up. You can leave.”

He hops into his truck and opens the passenger door. He has yet to invite me inside, but I know that he would rather me drive with him than the rental car that I used to get here. He takes me to my apartment, one I share with roommates, and the next day, he comes by to pick me up and take me back to the house.

“Today, we’re going to be rebuilding the floor. It’s a two-man job, so don’t fall behind.”

“I won’t.”

My father treks along, dragging his feet and holding planks of wood over his head while wearing nothing but a pair of crinkled pants, long socks, and laced boots.

“What’s wrong?”

I shake my head. I am thinking about the walls.

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong.”

“Good. Then let’s get going, huh?”

I have never repaired a floor before, but when you start anything new, don’t think about the end, always the beginning, one of the many realities that I was taught to embrace attending the AA meetings. You have to acknowledge your past, deal with the present, and find new ways of preparing for the future. The most difficult challenge, I think, was finding redemption. This part, I learned, takes the most time. After the fire, there were instructions. I had to find all the people I harmed, stand in front of them, and apologize. I said sorry so often I didn’t know how to stop. I said it almost all the time.

The hardest part about making a floor is sanding it, making it smooth. My father and I sand for hours. In my mind, I can hear my voice, telling him what he wanted to hear the night after the fire.

“I fucked up and I will do whatever I have to do to fix it.”

My father didn’t speak. He left the room and I stayed with my mother. She forgave me, but then again, she was my mother. She told me that I would find a way to rebuild, and I hugged her, and she hugged me back. She touched my shoulder and kissed me on the cheek.

I always knew my father would find a way to forgive too. Parents always find ways to forgive their children. The good ones do, anyways. I remind myself every day of the day when I drove drunk, when I wobbled into the house and smoked a cigarette without dousing the flame. I remember all of this, and my parents remember it too. My father knows that there will never be a day in which he doesn't see his house on fire, when he doesn't expect me to come home in the same shitty condition that I did on the day that everything changed. He will never forget, and I won't either.

There was a time when I did, but I don't now.

We finish the floor in two weeks and the second level requires as much time, dedication, and manpower. I don't have much of any of them. My father has so much more.

"Why did you do that? That's not the way it's supposed to be done! It's shit! Fix it! Fix it now!"

I fix what I have to and move on to the next job. I can't believe I've rebuilt a house, my house. Four months later, it is done, and we are free to go back. Everyone's room stays the same, and the locks don't change. It is as surreal as it is scary and thrilling. Everything is the same, but not quite so, but this is what's to be expected.

It's what I was prepared for.

I touch the walls and drag my feet along the floor, feeling it against my shoes and trying to remember how it felt. I am always trying to envision the house, how it used to look, and what kind of emotions it aroused whenever I was inside. I am obsessed with turning the clocks back. I tried so hard for so long that, after a while, I stopped thinking. It was then that I started to see.

"Well..." my father said to my mother, "what do you all think?"

She stands in the foyer, her hands folded against her chest while her gaze is

listless and empty. She doesn't look that different from how she did in the hospital, but she is changing, and she's smiling.

"Do you like it?"

She turns to my father.

"I love it."

I am standing too far to see my father's face. I hope that he's smiling too. We christen the house with dinner. My mother cooks a turkey with mashed potatoes, gravy, and steaming vegetables. It's my father's favourite meal, but I would be lying if I said that it wasn't my favourite too.

"Wait, before we actually eat," my mother says, "I think Danny should give the blessing."

My head shoots up and I look at my father. Since when are we a praying family?

"Yes," says my father. "Let's do that."

My father holds his gaze, and we fold our hands and bow our heads.

"All right. I guess I can give it a try."

"Wouldn't be the first time," says my father before he smirks and takes my hand.

We pray and we eat. The meal is perfect and on the table are three candles. Their flames dance and then they're still. It's cold, and then it's hot, and even when the fire dissipates, it continues to stay warm, the warmest it has ever been since we lived in this house. The bricks are laid and all that is left to do is see if the walls are strong enough to stand.

I have faith that they will. I was careful. I couldn't break them even if I tried.

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# SOLOMON MOSEBY

KEN LELAND

1837, Niagara-on-the-Lake, Upper Canada.

“Jeremiah! Come up here and stop plaguing Amelia.”

Reverend Hubbard Holmes, our Black school teacher, stands with arms crossed. As Jeri dances past me, twenty Black boys and nearly as many girls yell at him. With a mean grin, he spins my satchel, around and around, and sails it halfway up a redbud tree. When Jeri finally does get into line, Walter Martin punches him in the arm. Then everyone quiets down so they can march off to the pastry shop. I go to the tree and stare up at my lunch bag, stomp my foot and scowl.

“Jeremiah,” Reverend Holmes asks, “is Amelia ready to go?”

“No, sir.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t know, sir.”

“Then we’ll all stand here until you figure it out.”

Shouts and insults fly until Walter lifts Jeri into the redbud and he begins to climb. My bag drops down and Walter hands it to me.

We walk to the bakery for bulls eyes and shortbread, then over the creek bridge to the Commons for lunch. Afterwards, Walter comes to sit beside me in the grass. He’s sixteen, only a year older than me.



“I go for a carpentry apprentice next Monday,” Walter says as he looks down to my light brown hands.

“You won’t be back at school in September?”

“No, Amelia. But I’ll come see you on Sundays. If that’s alright?”

\*

My Momma is a white woman. Years ago, her mother came north with Colonel Butler’s Regiment fleeing the Yankee Revolution. So that makes us Loyalists. My Daddy is Jacob Green. He escaped when his foolish master brought him along to look at Niagara Falls in Upper Canada. Momma works cleaning St. Mark’s Anglican Church and Daddy is a teamster. We live in the Coloured Village here in Niagara on the Lake.

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In the searing August sky, a wall of dark clouds forms on the horizon. Three Black men and the white farmer who hires them pitch hay into a wagon. The farmer’s son clicks his tongue and the horses lean forward for a few more paces. When the men stop to wipe their brows, one points east over the tree line to the wide Niagara River Gorge.

“Gonna rain, Mr. McFarland.”

The farmer calls to his son on the wagon bench. “First raindrop, you head for the barn. We’ll do what we can till then.”

\*

Four policemen ride into the hay field, pulling a fifth riderless mount. Deputy Sheriff Alexander McLeod carries a short musket. Ash batons hang from his constables’ belts.

“George McFarland,” Sheriff McLeod barks when he dismounts, “which of these boys is Solomon Moseby?”

"I'm Solomon Moseby," says one tall Black man.

"What's this all about?" McFarland asks.

"Boy, you're under arrest. For horse stealing." The constables run to seize Moseby's arms. They trip him onto the ground and cuff his hands behind his back. From the wagon bench, young McFarland blinks as the first raindrop hits his eyelid.

The farmer scoffs. "Sheriff, he ain't got a horse. I know cause he's been workin' for me since he crossed over."

"Don't you get on the wrong side of this, George. This boy's a runner."

"He's a free man in Upper Canada, Sheriff. Same as anyone."

"A true bill come from a Kentucky jury. His master's over in Lewiston, waitin' to take him."

"No! No! I'm free," Solomon Moseby protests with his face ground into the dirt. "I won't go back."

The constables pull Moseby to his feet, then try to force him up onto a horse.

"Ride, or we'll drag you behind."

The other two Black men sprint for Niagara town. Scattered raindrops fall, fat as young grapes, as the posse rides away.

"Saddle the pony," McFarland tells his son. "Tell the parson at St. Mark's what's happened."

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It's starting to rain. St. Mark's bells are ringing as I scurry to pull laundry from the clothes line behind our house. Then the bells at St. Andrew's Presbyterian join in.

"Amelia, do you see the fire?" my mother calls from the back porch.

I run inside with the wicker clothes basket. Someone in John Street is shouting. "Slave catchers! Slave catchers in Lewiston!"

Both the Baptist and Methodist steeples are tolling now.

\*

Word spreads, west to Virgil and south to St. David's town. Wherever people are, they gather to hear the news. Here in Niagara most Black folks head for Reverend Holmes' Baptist Church.

Gusts of rain sweep over the peaked roof as congregants arrive. Wet, bedraggled people fill the church to overflowing. In the tall wooden hall, they shout in fear and anger.

". . . no slavery on British soil."

". . . it's the law. Freedom's the law in all the Empire."

". . . could take any of us for stealing the clothes on our backs."

". . . we got to stop it."

Our school teacher, Reverend Holmes, sits alone in the choir stall beneath the rail fence cross. In the face of people's confusion and dismay, he pries his heavy body upright and walks slowly to the pulpit.

"My dear friends," his voice booms out. "The Lord wants to tell us what to do, but we can't hardly hear him for all this noise."

Quiet spreads from the front pew to the back doors, wide open to the storm.

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“Let us pray to hear God’s voice.”

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Walter is here. I can see him over by a window. Suddenly he turns and looks right at me. My heart does a little flip it ain’t never done before. But Reverend Holmes is speaking now.

“Seems to me the Lord is saying, horse stealing don’t matter so much agin breaking away to freedom. Every man, every woman, every child has got to find freedom.”

“Yes, Lord!”

“As the old slave dies, what does he say to his kin?”

“Tell us!”

“He says, ‘Some day in Canada!’”

“Glory!”

“My friends, we ain’t gonna let that dream die!”

“No, Lord!”

“Not for horse stealing. Not for nothing.”

\*

Momma told me three times to stay in the house before she ran for St. Mark’s. Daddy is out making deliveries. I just couldn’t stay home by myself so I came here.

All the Baptist folks are arguing. At the back door Walter, Jeri, and some other boys are looking out into the storm. The women are in a big circle by the altar.

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Sally Carter, a young mother who farms out Virgil way is in the middle, urging women to block the creek bridge leading from the town gaol.

I climb over grandfathers and squalling babies on my way to the back. Even as lightning flashes, the boys rush outside. But Walter comes to find me first. He grabs my shoulders and, as the hall trembles, I read his lips between waves of thunder.

“We’re goin’ to spread the word, from Fort Erie to Forty Mile Creek.”

He holds my shoulders tight. “Amelia!” Then Walter kisses my cheek, right there in front of God and everybody. And he is gone.

\*

Methodist ladies are standing with us now, filling the wooden bridge from one bank to the other. Sally Carter and an old grandmother who must weigh fifteen stone patrol the end closer to the town gaol.

When the rain stops, we worry that Sheriff McLeod might try a dash for the Queenston Ferry with his prisoner. As the sun sets, it’s wet and cold. We all know the same hymns and drape arms around each other to keep warm. A little later, ladies from St. Andrew and St. Mark’s come with chairs and hot meals. That’s how Momma and Daddy find me. I ain’t never seen Daddy so angry; they didn’t know I wasn’t at home.

Momma paces the bridge with me until moonrise. Daddy talks with Niagara men at the courthouse and in taverns. When he comes back, he says people are getting up a petition to the Lieutenant Governor in Toronto. Everyone thinks the government’s been bamboozled by slavery lawyers.

Then Daddy says it’s time to go home. I’m a little afraid about what’s going to happen, but I make him promise I can come back in the morning.

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School should have started a week ago, but Reverend Holmes is too busy with the blockade and the hundreds of Black folks who have come from far and near. Lots of Niagara people have opened their homes to them. Walter spends the week on the Commons putting up tents and building camp tables.

In shifts, women stand on the bridge, day and night. We knit and sew and tend babies, anything to pass the time. A petition has gone to Toronto with a thousand names, but there's no word yet.

"No violence," Sally Carter preaches. "If there be harm, let it come to women singing hymns on a bridge." We pray Sheriff McLeod will have no stomach for that.

Daddy and all the Black men stay nearby, but out of sight. Reverend Holmes talks to them and pleads for calm. Now whenever a man comes to the bridge, Sally Carter chases him away, even her own husband. Every few hours, Walter waves to me from up the creek bank. Truly, I'd be proud to have him standing here beside me.

There are feints and alarms. Whispers through the gaol window say Sheriff McLeod will try to take Solomon Moseby back across the river tomorrow morning. At dawn, all the townspeople climb trees and rooftops as three hundred of us pack the bridge wedge-tight. We sing for all we're worth, but nothing happens.

By the end of the second week, we're getting tired. How long can we keep this up?

\*

Now it's early September and a decision has come from the Lieutenant Governor. Solomon Moseby stole a horse to escape slavery and must go back. Canada is not a refuge for criminals the Governor says.

We look to the stone building where Moseby is held. He is newly escaped to Canada and hardly anyone knows him, or has even seen his face, but we vow to live or die defending this stranger.

Guards who are our friends inside the gaol whisper that it will be soon, that armed militia and Redcoats will force a path across the bridge. Sheriff McLeod sends for the captain of the Queenston Ferry to arrange quick passage. Afterwards, the ferry captain emerges to stand on the gaol house steps.

“Never! Never upon my Salvation will I take a man into slavery!”

We cheer, our hearts leaping with hope and joy, but that afternoon four British regulars arrive with dray horses pulling a heavy wagon. Eight militiamen, all carrying bayonet-tipped rifles, trot beside the wagon. The Sheriff must have found other passage across to Lewiston. After weeks of waiting, things are happening too quickly.

Sally Carter orders all the white women away from the bridge. Momma will not leave without me. Momma screams and cries and pulls at my arm.

“Go now, Amelia,” Sally Carter tells me. “You’ve done enough.”

Momma drags me onto the Commons bank where I collapse in tears. Daddy and Walter break from the line of waiting men to help Momma. I see Reverend Holmes. He is pleading with Black men, all Niagara’s men, to stay back, so that there will be no violence. Again, trees and rooftops are filled with townspeople, watching, pointing. When they begin to jeer, I twist round in Daddy’s arms to see.

With sword drawn, Sheriff McLeod is leading a procession from the gaol. Militiamen march on both sides of the wagon. On the wagon bench is a driver and a constable holding a coiled whip. Behind them stand two more deputies with batons. In the middle of the wagon, two gaol guards hold the handcuffed and shackled prisoner. Four Grenadiers, resplendent in red coats, surround him.

The wagon rolls forward. Women on the bridge begin to sing.

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From fifty paces, McLeod holds up his hand. The hymn dies and he shouts into silence.

“I declare this is an unlawful assembly. Anyone who does not leave immediately will be shot.”

“Stay here,” Holmes orders the Black men who line the far bank. He bulls his way over the crowded bridge, breaks past Sally Carter and lunges towards the wagon horses.

“No killing!” Holmes shouts.

“Fire!” McLeod orders the militiamen. From the bridge women surge forward to surround the wagon. Now there can be no stopping our men. I break from Daddy’s grasp as hundreds run to the bridge.

Militiamen level their bayonets and yell when women loom close. “Back! Back!”

But no one has fired.

I see an old grandmother at the tip of one bayonet. She smiles at the pasty-faced boy holding it and says, “Darlin’, you don’t want to do this.” She lifts the keen-edged knife with her palm and enfolds the young militiaman in her arms. He bows his head and slumps into her embrace.

“Don’t hurt the poor soldiers,” she calls loudly.

McLeod swings his blood-tipped sword as men pour across the bridge and dodge past him. “Fire! Blast you. Fire!”

Reverend Holmes has a firm grip on the lead horse. A man carrying a length of rail fence jams it between the rear wagon wheels. The prisoner jumps to the ground.

Everyone sees it—Solomon Moseby is free! Of a wonder, someone has removed his cuffs and shackles and he disappears into the crowd.

“Fire! The prisoner’s escaping!”



Three British soldiers discharge their muskets, straight up into the air, but the fourth does not. Reverend Holmes crumples to the ground and I scream his name. Beside me, a militiaman plunges his bayonet into the man who has blocked the wheels. The soldiers retreat to the gaol. I beat the ground and wail as the dying men are carried away.

\*

Solomon Moseby had to run for freedom in Canada, too. But with lots of help, he got away to Montreal and then to England. Afterwards, a new Lieutenant Governor helped change the laws to make them plain and clear.

That's what men died for in 1837—the right to stay free.

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# DYE

MARINA KLIMENKO

In high school I was considered normal. This came as a surprise since I'd done everything not to be. Gen, short for Geneviève and pronounced Jen, helped me dye my hair in my bathtub the week before we started. I bought a box of dye, acidic pink, and a container of bleach at the drugstore for \$12.99 each. This was before pastel hair became popular, otherwise I might have chosen something softer, maybe a ballerina pink or a lavender.

It was summer so we were off school. Gen told me to sit in the bathtub and lay my forehead on the edge. The tub was cool against my head but I was worried that she'd notice how sweaty my neck was. If she did she didn't say anything. She slathered the bleach on first and we waited twenty minutes before she poured on the dye. It smelled like antiseptic but didn't sting like I thought it would. I realized later that was because Gen had not gone close enough to the scalp, leaving a strip of honey blond right above my roots.

My mom cried when she saw it. My dad said hair would always grow back, but had looked so glum I almost didn't believe him. They knew Gen had done it, technically speaking, but could not really imagine it and therefore did not blame her. They liked Gen. Her neat small talk and easy grace had a charm, intensified by the fact that these were qualities their own daughter didn't seem to possess. Maybe they would have believed it if I'd chosen a lighter pink, something like Gen's pointe shoes.

Gen was a ballerina and I was not. That's how we met. We had been put into interdisciplinary groups during our high school audition. We both got in.

I didn't know any of the visual art majors in my class so I was glad to know Gen because we could sit together at lunch time. We sat in the cafeteria every day that

first week until we learned that no one from the program ate in the cafeteria. From then on, we ate in the large hallway by the auditorium. Even when Gen hurt her foot in Grade 12, I helped her up the three steps to the auditorium rather than eat in the cafeteria again.

Not everyone from the program ate by the auditorium. Philip didn't. He and a couple of the other art majors ate by the art lockers which were as wide as a normal locker and more than twice as tall to fit portfolios and some bigger pieces. Philip was an art major, like me, focusing on painting. In Grade 9, he let his hair grow long and wore it in a ponytail. In Grade 10, he came back after summer with it short again but dyed black. He missed school for three weeks that December; some people started to wonder and Ms. McDougal told us, in strict confidence, that he had run away. Run away. Runaway. When I couldn't sleep I would repeat the word to myself.

When we came back after Christmas break he came back with us. I think some people asked him about what happened but I wasn't one of them.

In Grade 11, we were on a portraiture unit first semester, and I guess that was when I really noticed him. We'd been paired up to sketch each other. You could draw your partner as they were drawing you but that meant their eyes always came out looking closed. After we'd been practicing for a week we were told to stop and instead draw each other looking forward. I was paired with Philip again and volunteered to draw him first. I had been careful not to shade his eyes in too darkly, to leave them feeling green in the pencil drawing. His lashes and eyebrows were dark and so was his hair. I didn't know yet that his eyes were what he disliked most about his appearance.

In his drawing of me he had ignored instructions and so my eyes looked closed. I didn't want to stare at him too long as he drew and had mostly looked at the floor. He shaded in my hair carefully so the blond roots showed. There was something indecent about them, like seeing someone's bare feet in the winter.

Most days, I met Gen at the auditorium after school so we could subway home together. Usually, for several months before any performance, I would arrive

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straight after class and find her running her solo. I didn't mind waiting, most of the time. Sometimes she even asked me for advice about a move or sequence, which was nice even when she didn't take it.

The day after Philip and I drew each other, I didn't watch Gen dance. Instead, I stayed in the art studio to help wash brushes, a job Philip usually volunteered to do alone. Gen was working on a new solo for the spring showcase. It was supposed to be an ethereal number but was coming out looking too happy, too much like a fairy dance. Gen was light enough to be a ghost but not transparent enough. I had suggested she pull her hair back in a bun like the other girls but Gen said no. She always wore her hair, kinks and all, out during solos.

Anyway, I knew I wasn't missing anything when I stayed back to wash brushes. I was worried that Philip would be annoyed at having someone else there, but he seemed to like my presence. Like most shy people he enjoyed talking if encouraged. That day, he told me he was adopted.

"It must be interesting," I said, "not knowing where you come from."

"It's scary, though. Sometimes, I wonder if I'd understand more if I knew."

"About yourself?"

"About anything," he paused. "What are your parents like?"

"Sometimes I wish I didn't know them."

I think he smiled a little then but it was hard to tell. We were standing side by side at the sink and even when I turned to face him he kept his profile towards me. Later, I learned that he had lied. He wasn't adopted. Actually, he looked just like his father who was a biology professor at the University of Toronto. I didn't mind the lie though; sometimes you have to lie a little bit.

I was going around the room one day collecting cups of water and bringing them to the sink. He was saying something about his father buying a new lawnmower.

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He came up so close to me that I felt the air move as he paced, but he didn't seem to notice. I tried to turn and face him without making more space between us and bumped my hip against the table, dropping the water cups.

Philip stopped talking. He looked at me as if he had no idea who I was. A plastic cup rolled under the next table.

"I'll—I'll get paper towels."

He nodded.

I went into the supply room and got a roll. He was still standing in the puddle when I came back. I wrapped some paper towel around my hands and got on my knees to mop up. Philip picked up the roll and did the same. Crouched on the floor, his head was so close to mine, but he wouldn't look at me.

"Go on," I said, "your dad's buying a lawnmower."

"Forget it. You weren't listening anyway."

He wouldn't speak to me the rest of the day and for half of the next afternoon. It was whenever he brought up his parents that I had to be on pointe, that I had to move around him lightly and carefully. It was hard, I had never been particularly graceful.

When he was in a good mood, on days he didn't mention his parents, Philip and I could really talk. He was pleased when I agreed with him about voter turnout rates and even sat next to, not across from, me on the train going home. I liked his earnestness, when he talked politics, and tried not to correct him.

Mom had gotten used to my pink hair by then and didn't say much when I dyed it black. It came out looking flat, almost matte, but I was happy. She didn't seem upset, but a few days later she gave me a book about a girl who was a dancer at the Bolshoi ballet. I was ready to pounce on her, for resenting me and trying to put me in a box, but she said she had gotten the book for Gen, to congratulate her on the solo, so I never got the chance.

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Philip must have liked my hair. He never said anything but we started hanging out more after that. I'd help him wash brushes usually and we'd leave school together and walk around to the mall or the park, never saying very much but not usually silent.

His commitment to being alternative made it difficult for me to be around him during school. It's not like I was embarrassed or anything. It was just that he refused to go have lunch by the auditorium and I didn't have the willpower to leave Gen and the rest of our friends. It did make it easier for me to bring his name up in conversations, and since none of my friends really knew him it was not likely they'd suspect how infatuated I had become.

Gen was always tactful—it was why people liked her—but the rest of our friends were not.

“Dude, it makes you look goth,” one girl snickered when she first saw me.

“I like it, it makes your eyes brighter,” said Gen. She patted a seat next to her but I sat down on the floor instead. Gen slipped off her bench and sat down next to me.

“What are you doing after?”

“After what?”

“After school. I need your help with the solo. All the bunheads have watched it and Mr. Gregor and Mom and Dad and they say it's fine. But there's something off about it.”

“You're too hard on yourself.”

“Could you come watch it? After school sometime? I just really need fresh eyes.”

“Maybe, I don't know. Mom's been kind of bugging me about being home on time.”

“Is that why you haven't come to watch me? You haven't been to a rehearsal in weeks.”

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That was the thing with Gen. Maybe if she'd just said she missed me and wanted to hang out I would have agreed, but Gen never really noticed anyone when she was dancing. She saw everything through her solo and everyone as an audience member.

"Maybe," I said. "I'll try."

In the end, I didn't.

A few days later she brought it up again. I was about to think of an excuse but she cut me off.

"It's all fixed, don't worry. I had an idea. It's way better now."

We were standing in the bathroom, the nice one which was usually reserved for evenings when the auditorium was officially in use. The janitor had opened it early in preparation for the showcase that night. Gen had her purse open. I could see three lip glosses all in different shades of pink. She leaned against the counter and brushed mascara on. I sat on the counter and bit my nails.

"It's almost better," she licked her lips, "that you haven't seen it in a while. You'll get to see it with everyone else. You know, get the full effect."

"Yeah, Gen ... I don't know if I can come tonight, my mom—"

"She can't possibly not want you to come if she's going."

"She's what?"

"Coming to the show. She texted me last week to get her tickets. She knew I got you and Mom and Dad one so she wanted me to see if she and your Dad could come. That's not weird for you, is it?"

"No," I said, "of course it's not."

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“It’ll be good. Your parents haven’t seen me dance in a while. I’ve gotten tons better since last semester.”

She put the mascara wand back in the tube and dropped it in her purse. I followed her out the door.

I skipped math that day and stood in the bathroom practicing asking Philip to come with me to the showcase. I bought a ticket for him during lunch but decided to wait until we were washing brushes to give it to him. He was in a good mood that day. I complimented him on his black t-shirt and jeans and was careful not to spill anything when we cleaned up. I knew it bugged him when I was clumsy. Cool goths aren’t supposed to be clumsy.

Asking him was easier than I thought. I think the practice helped.

“Okay,” he said. Then, when I handed him the ticket, “Keep it with yours. We’ll go in together.”

The afternoon before the performance was a warm one. Everyone that was staying bought hot dogs from the stand across the park and sat outside eating them. I sat with Philip and no one seemed to care. My friends came up and we talked, Philip not saying much but not being sullen either. I knew he didn’t like the girls I was friends with— “too perky” he had once called them—but he was trying. The wind was warm and after we finished our hot dogs Philip and I went and got ice cream. He held his cone out to me so I could try it. I licked it and held out my own. He bit into it and made a face. He didn’t like chocolate.

By the time Gen’s show started I was referring to him, in my mind at least, as my boyfriend.

When the curtains went up and she stood there, the ghostly robes abandoned, replaced with a pink tutu and fairy wings, I realized I should have gone and watched her when she’d asked. The dance had not really changed since I last saw it, but the presentation had. She was no longer pretending to be dead and haunting. She smiled, her hair moving with her body. She sparkled. She was everything he claimed

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to mistrust if not actively hate, and yet I could see—I always checked his reactions to things we saw—that he did not hate her. I looked at him again and again during the rest of the show, hoping that was the expression he had for all the dancers, but the look never returned. Afterwards, before going to meet my parents, I asked him how he had liked the show.

“I liked your friend’s thing. The pink one,” he said. “She’s your friend, right?”

I told him that she was.

Over the summer I realized that I had two lives. There was the social one with Gen and the rest of our friends. In this life we went out to eat, took the ferry to the Toronto Islands to sunbathe, and went to concerts in the park. Then there was my other life. My intellectual one, I called it. In it I was with Philip. We went to protests together; at the beginning of summer it was animal rights but towards the end he picked up on senate reforms. We discussed the problems of American capitalism, always American, and read books with ideas but no plots. The fact that my two selves were distinct pleased me. It was only when they seemed close to overlapping that I became uncomfortable.

When school started again, prom was the main topic of conversation during lunch by the auditorium. Gen was on the planning committee dealing with the question of theme.

“We were thinking Wonderland, like Alice?”

I wanted to suggest Alice Cooper as a theme but refrained.

“Do you really want at least three assholes a day asking if the prom is really going to be held at Wonderland?”

“I guess not.” She took a bite of her sandwich. I popped my gum.

“What do you think?”

I said I had no opinions.

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In the art studio, after class, prom was also talked about, though mockingly and with long sighs by those whose parents would make them go. Philip, like the others, was happy to have such a blatant statement of the status quo to rebel against. I remember a teacher saying once, in a class Philip and I had together, that most theorists define themselves in relation to some other major theorist. In high school, I realized, it was the same. Everyone defines themselves in relation to prom. If they tell you otherwise they're lying.

I was happy that fall. I was doing well in school. I was cautiously optimistic about university. I could keep Philip from getting gloomy by shifting the subject to prom which always made him snarky and satisfied. Things were even okay between Gen and me. She was busy a lot with prom committee but we still hung out. I even volunteered to help her put up posters for the first prom fundraiser. We raised three thousand dollars.

Then one day I saw posters for the fall dance showcase replace the ones I had helped put up. Gen was busier than ever which didn't bother me. I helped take down the sign-up sheets for volunteers. I went over each one and entered the names into Excel. His name was on the last sheet, towards the bottom. He'd used one of the black soft tip markers I got him for sketching to sign up as a volunteer for her show. A week later, Gen put him on the set design committee.

At first, he said it was because he'd be able to show his work to the whole school. That art for the masses was the thing now. I kept pressing.

"Besides," he looked over my shoulder, "your friend asked me, the one we saw dance."

Gen had asked me to help too, but I told her I was busy. She was happy when I revealed I was suddenly free.

As a senior dancer, Gen wasn't just performing in the fall showcase, she was directing parts of it as well. I knew she was buttering me up when she put me in charge of set design, but I didn't mind.

It worked for me. As head of set design, I got to assign tasks to my committee. Philip was the only other Grade 12 art major in the group so I had us working together on the important jobs. We spread foolscap on the art studio tables and sketched the backdrops we would need. We made life-sized mock-ups of the plants and boats in the art studio after class then brought them to the woodshop room next door and made plywood versions. We brought these back into the art room and painted them. Gen spent most of her time downstairs in the auditorium. It wasn't hard to keep them separate.

But they wouldn't stop. He would come down and show her paint chips asking which colour she thought would be best even after I told him cerulean and cobalt were both just blue to normal people. She would come up and hold out two black leotards asking which one we thought would look better with which set. They never touched each other, not even a punch on the shoulder, and they never talked for long, but her face softened when he said the leotard on the right was better for the schoolroom dance and he smiled when she said she preferred cerulean.

After Gen left, Philip was always extra sweet to me, asking if I wanted something when he went for coffee and bringing me a blueberry scone, my favourite, even when I told him I was okay. Gen was trying, too. Every time a teacher came to check up on the show she raved about me as the head of set design, claiming I singlehandedly elevated the whole show.

I kept expecting Gen to show up at school with her hair permed straight and dyed matte but she never did. If anything, she became even shinier and more colourful. She started wearing her tutu to class, claiming she hadn't had time to change after rehearsal. Even her winter coat was a pink faux fur.

When dress rehearsals started for the fall show, all of us crew were told to sit in the audience and watch, to give the younger dancers a chance to get used to an audience. I watched Philip as the groups performed, and the duets, and then, one by one, the soloists. There it was again, when the Turkish March played and Gen came out with her hair like a halo, that expression. The smile.

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I never gave Gen the book on the Bolshoi ballet that Mom bought. Accidentally, I read it myself that summer while Philip thought I was reading Marx. It wasn't really about the Bolshoi ballet. It was about a girl from a Russian village who ends up becoming a prima ballerina. When she first gets to the Bolshoi school everyone hates her. They torture her because she'd come out of nowhere and gotten a solo. There was one scene, when she is still new to the ballet and an older girl tries to stop her from dancing, that I found especially moving.

The night of the fall showcase I was part of the backstage crew. I had meant to bring a bottle from home but couldn't find one. We had a sponsor for that show: a grocery store that had donated some cupcakes and several cases of Coke. They were the fancy glass bottles. We were supposed to take pictures and post them so people would know where to buy them. Gen and I took one. She's holding a glass bottle with "Jen" on it—we decided it was close enough—and smiling. I'm smiling too but without a glass bottle. We couldn't find one with my name. Gen didn't drink the Coke, though. She said it would make her bloated for the dance and I offered to recycle it for her.

All the dancers were stretching in the studio so the bathroom upstairs was empty. I poured the Coke out and found a towel someone had brought to rehearsal. It smelled like sweat but I wrapped the bottle in it anyway and put it on the floor. Then I stepped on it several times.

Gen was supposed to go on after intermission. I sat in the auditorium next to Philip but I felt as if I was backstage next to Gen. I could see her pick up the shoe. She was smiling, laughing even, talking to one of the other girls. She put it on. Then—

I thought I could hear her scream but of course that was just my imagination. The sounds of Tchaikovsky would have drowned her out.

When Gen didn't come on the audience shifted a little. Some coughed or stretched their arms. Then another girl came out and they were all quiet again. Philip didn't seem to notice.

I went to visit Gen in the hospital that night. The cuts on her foot were not too bad, but it was bandaged up tightly and looked swollen. She was crying and I hugged her and told her it would be alright.

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She had some trouble walking for the next few weeks. I tried to be with her as much as I could. I helped her around school and gave her my seat on the subway. Gen didn't get a cast so there was nothing for people to sign. I bought a big card and passed it around in class. We gave it to her a few days before she got her bandages off. The dancers got a lecture but no one was ever punished.

I hadn't thought about any of this in a long time.

I first remembered because I was going through old photos of us trying to put together a slideshow for the rehearsal dinner. I found one of Philip and me at prom. I am wearing a black dress and my hair is still matte and dark. His hair is spiked and he'd been experimenting with eyeliner. We didn't last very long after school ended. He started to seem too gloomy to me, like a black hole, or rather like a black vacuum cleaner. I lost the photo of Gen and me with the Coke bottle when I changed phones, but I still have the Bolshoi ballet book. I never did give it to her. We have kept in touch, Gen and me. We're friends. I had a lot of good pictures of us for the slideshow. I remembered it all again at the wedding and I've been thinking about it since.

Genevieve and Philip were married on a spring afternoon in a church, a big gothic one; I guess it was a compromise. She seems a little subdued in the photographs. She not so much sparkles as shines and Philip is smiling. He is dressed all in black but without the eye liner.

I am in the pictures too. I was maid of honor and wearing a silvery dress with straps and smiling serenely. My hair is dark honey blonde but still dyed; if it wasn't it would have matched my dress. Not in the photographs is Mark, my fiancé. He is a good man and knows how to behave in public. When he shook Gen's hand at the wedding he complimented her enough but not too much.

Then again, he's never seen her dance.

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# TRUE BELIEVERS KNOW

DYLAN BOYKO

First there is a fight, then a police report, and then an investigation left purposely unfinished. Arriving in three parts, the story repeats itself. With children, one must always consider the underlying cost of actions and words. Telling a child they're destined for trouble does not inspire confidence. Telling a child the same thing over and over ingrains the message. It is the start of a pattern.

Just remember, there are no secrets. A girl who was tethered finally learns how to fly. No hiding, as even the most foolish observer finds the truth. Only the ending is ambiguous: whether she'll decide to return, and what she'll do if she comes back.

## I – The Fight

It is between mother and daughter. They live in a house near the top of the Hill, the poor part of town. The daughter is an ordinary girl with a difficult home life. Their family, the Kents, is notorious. The first problem: a family with roots that may be poisonous. Stuck on one side of the tracks, people say. So, the Kents keep to themselves, multiply, and expand. The family business may be disreputable. No direct claims are made. The Kents own a few farms along the county line and several properties in town. The mother and the daughter have one such property, the ancestral home as it were. The first house of the family.

It starts in the kitchen. The mother is often inclined towards direct, if not cruel, demonstrations of feeling. In turn, when the daughter, now seventeen, tells the mother to die in a fire, the forthcoming conversation will not end amicably. All their cereal bowls are plastic. Only two ceramic coffee mugs remain.

It does not start over a flashpoint or an infinite crisis. The conflict is much older, more primordial. The daughter finishes the coffee at an inopportune time, as the mother has just woken up. The mother may have a hangover. The daughter may know this, and act spitefully. The fight is not sui generis—it is predictable and avoidable. The origin is uninteresting. What happens during the fight is superlative.

It is the beginning of a rebellion. The mother believes the daughter will live and die in the house, much in the same way the mother knows she is living and dying. There is no escaping certain fates, supposedly. The mother, then, chooses to meet expectations of wildness rather than fail at loftier pursuits. She sees the daughter aiming for a higher station. So, the mother will act naturally, like gravity. While not intelligent, the mother understands the contradiction inherent to being predictably unpredictable. They will always be poor, always in poor taste. The house on the Hill will always carry implicit baggage. Acceptance of such facts, the mother knows, is freedom.

It should be noted that the daughter does not agree with the mother.

It begins with the daughter refusing. Having no specific alternative, she searches for a way out. She believes the mother's prophecies to be false. The poison has not yet reached the daughter's veins. There is still time to change. So, the fight starts.

The daughter finishes the coffee.

Under her breath, the mother utters a claim of filial incompetence: a slur against the daughter's sexual honour.

The daughter, in response, accuses the mother of being a lazy drunk.

The first projectile, the second-last ceramic mug, hits the cupboard above the fridge and shatters.

The daughter, leaning back against the fridge, references the mother's poor aim.

The daughter smiles at the mother.

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Chuckling, the mother picks up the empty coffee pot from the table and crosses the kitchen towards the fridge.

The mother takes another step in the direction of the daughter.

There is nothing new to this dance, yet.

The daughter throws a plastic bowl, a box of cereal, and, finally, a carton of orange juice at the mother, imploring her to act rationally.

The daughter is no longer making jokes.

Rather than explode upon hitting the floor, the carton balances strangely, even impossibly, on the point of one corner—a sign.

The mother advances with the coffee pot, a single-use weapon.

Out of options, the daughter screams stop.

And it works. The rhythm of the fight stutters. The daughter shifts registers to an inaudible hum. She now hears multiple notes rather than a terse singularity.

The mother is immobile and floating. There is a current in the room, the clipped nature of the space expanding. Every atom is palpable to the daughter. She knows the countertop, the coffee pot, the house, entirely.

You won't do this again, the daughter says without saying. The kitchen is a vacuum chamber. It is obvious the mother hears the daughter. The message is clear. The mission statement for their family has changed, changes, and will continue to change. There is much work to be done.

It ends like that, superlatively.



## II &amp; III – The Police Report/The Investigation

*On 29-06 at approximately 17:42, this officer responded to a domestic disturbance call at 134 Heath Crescent. PO Breckenridge accompanied in a separate cruiser. Upon arrival, this officer and PO Breckenridge were met by a white female in the front yard of the home. The distressed female made the initial call, and both PO Breckenridge and this officer noted the strong odour of alcohol coming from the complainant. She proceeded to make multiple references to the assailant, her daughter, who was still somewhere inside the home. PO Breckenridge asked the woman to remain calm and sit on the front steps. She appeared to agree and stated, "I ain't gonna follow her rules anymore." When questioned what she meant, the complainant did not respond. PO Breckenridge asked if anyone else was home and received no response. When asked about the nature of the disturbance, the complainant told this officer to "fuck off." She was no longer cooperative with either officer.*

*PO Breckenridge took point entering the home, as he had been the primary officer on two past calls, both regarding domestic altercations between the complainant and the daughter. Please note that the complainant non-verbally consented to PO Breckenridge and this officer entering the home.*

Constable Cloteau stops reading. In two more pages, Breckenridge is dead and the kid is gone. Cloteau wanders towards the crime scene, now just an empty house. Samantha's mother, Marsha, put a lot of pressure on the girl.

These reports rarely offer new details. Nothing the whole town doesn't already know, and definitely nothing new about two Kent women stuck together on the top of the Hill. Still, it's important to give the story room. Put pen to paper and make the tale true for all involved parties. The reports are written with a dry style and peculiar grammar—"this officer" did that, "this officer" saw that. IOs are bound to be bad stories with unhappy endings. Cloteau rarely finishes a report. His rereading paperwork won't change anything, more the start of the usual gossip around town: "And then I went down to the station, but you know those useless assholes—couldn't find sand on a goddamn beach."

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Death, however, necessitates change. Doubly important for the death of an officer. The Belisle RCMP cannot appear completely incompetent. So Cloteau finds himself at the Kent property with the dogged purpose of piecing together whether a seventeen-year-old girl murdered Officer Breckenridge or he fell to his death.

The problem is Cloteau considers himself a detective. He thinks he is good at his job. The bigger, better versions—the real cops with genuine experience—have already surveyed the scene and found nothing. They are dismissive of Officer Calle's original report. They say it is unbelievable, like cop performance art. Cloteau makes his trip to the Kent house as a courtesy to Officer Breckenridge's distraught mother.

The inspector will drown in the details of the case.

Behind him, Mrs. Kent pulls into the driveway. The house is a crime scene, so she stays with family out in the hills. This problem brings Mrs. Kent to the station daily. Another example of those useless assholes doing nothing.

"Why am I here, Micky?" she asks, exiting her car.

"You called us, Marsha. I need to know why, or at least why you stopped talking once the cavalry arrived."

He tries to look generous. Instead, distracted, he misses a step walking up the veranda's short staircase and stumbles. Authority is not the constable's strongest guise. Regaining his footing, Cloteau turns to Mrs. Kent.

Marsha, cigarette in tow, hates cops. Most are bullies, but this one might just be stupid. Climbing onto the porch and pushing past Micky, Marsha hunkers down on the old couch stationed near the front door. She'll be here awhile, repeating her part of the story again. They never listen—that night isn't so complicated. They'll just ask again in a few days. She made a mistake calling, should have stuck to it. Never ask for help.

Didn't work before, with Sam. Wouldn't have worked with Samantha; all those shitheels down at the station knew was the old lie. They didn't come to a Kent house with anything but a tight grip on the pistol and baton. She'd seen the reports. Difficult was a word that forgot the relationship Marsha had with her daughter.

If you pushed hard enough and long enough, Marsha always thought, you could make a diamond. That's all she did, applied pressure and time.

But that night, there was tyranny in her daughter's possibility. Marsha couldn't abide by that pressure and cracked.

"You want it all again?" she asks.

"No, that's okay," Cloteau says. "I'm more interested in where Sam might be."

Micky is stupid. She's sure of it now. Sam hasn't seen their daughter in two years. Sam misses birthdays; Marsha's husband is just a whisper in her daughter's ear. The family has no shortage of such legends, men who hide in the hills, false outlaws. The Kent sign along the driveway might as well mark the borders of a toxic waste dump. Samantha bears Sam's curse too, Marsha guesses, among others.

"I couldn't tell you, Micky. Surprised you boys haven't found him already. Aren't you always looking for people with open warrants?"

She lights a second cigarette.

"You think Samantha would do that, go looking for him?" Cloteau asks.

Marsha pauses.

"Only for the same reason I might."

"Which is?"

"To shoot the fucker."

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Now Cloteau pauses. The doomed Sam Kent and poor tortured Marsha Bruce, ill-fated from the beginning, a true opus of local romantic dysfunction. High school sweethearts who never considered leaving town, both their families backwoods royalty. The fights are canonical reading at the police station, sacred texts for building hillbilly hatred. Sam slipped into the countryside before receiving his divorce papers. Marsha is still a Kent, legally. Rumor around town goes that Marsha's lawyer was sleeping with one of Sam's cousins, extramarital of course, and had to alert the Kent family to the proceedings or worry about his own marriage dissolving. Marsha kept the house and turned it into a fortress. The boys at the station weren't too excited about storming the castle, were the Kent family proper ever so inclined to evict Marsha. The previous trips went from domestics between the mister and missus to concerned neighbours calling the boys about a raving mother and a trapped girl. No one said the words, took a stab at what happened beyond the threshold. Communal piety called the cops, but privacy washed away any real care for the girl. The callers, they just heard things is all.

Everyone is afraid of Marsha. Her daughter Samantha, by all accounts, kept her head above water amidst a sea of troubles. She hadn't been infected until this mess with Breckenridge.

The entire police force thinks Sam is hiding out a couple miles from town. The man would lose his power if he strayed too far from town. Cloteau assumes Sam wasn't involved, but the unwanted shadow of a husband is a useful ghost story considering the impossible nature of Samantha's escape. He's trying to scare out a confession, or at least a lead.

"She mention anything going wrong at school?" Cloteau asks. "A boyfriend? The teachers over at the school didn't mention much."

"I'd have some words if she was making that same mistake I did."

"Nothing strange in the last few weeks?"

"Nope," Marsha says. "Normal teenage shit, nothing I didn't do to my ma."

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Why not tell Micky? Stupid idea, really. The cops in Belisle don't give a shit about the people they chase. Just stare at Micky with hard eyes. There isn't some elastic code of honour stretching for missing daughters. You don't start cheering for the other team when you're down on the scoreboard. Sam has avoided jail his whole life because the Kents dig their heels in when the cops come around. It would be the same for Samantha. Micky is just the newest version of an old enemy—the affable, oafish type, but still an ancient foe. With him staring dumb across the porch, Marsha feels an elemental pride in her daughter.

Samantha is a diamond. Or a winter thunderstorm. Unbelievable, considering what Marsha did, and what Samantha could do.

Marsha smirks, looking back out over the cul-de-sac.

“Well then, you mind if I head inside?” Cloteau asks.

“Not like I got a choice.”

Marsha wishes Micky were walking into a trap.

The house cuts a menacing figure. Only Tudor on the block, big bay windows on each side. Rooms and halls that carry sound, especially crying. Creaks and groans that give away hiding spots. Not like any of the police have x-ray vision, though. Marsha has defiant pride about what constitutes parenting. The town, let alone the world, won't be kind. She's placed her bet, and now the collectors are coming for their chits. Samantha will undo the entire marvel.

So Marsha's purpose isn't to remove the poison from her body. If she could just squeeze Samantha's wrist hard enough, her daughter would make a successful gardener. She'd take the whole plant out, from root to leaf.

Cloteau, losing his line of interrogation, smiles blithely and moves towards the front door. As he enters the house, he flips back to the police report contained within his blank notepad.

*PO Breckenridge progressed towards the stairs directly adjacent to the main entrance of the home, and this officer followed. The house appeared to have lost power. Both PO Breckenridge and this officer proceeded to climb the stairs, with PO Breckenridge leading the ascent. It should be noted that neither PO Breckenridge nor this officer had service weapons drawn.*

An ordinary girl with a difficult home life makes a terrible mistake or fulfills expectations. The town paper already wrote about Samantha. The cops hate coming to this side of town. When you live on the Hill, something like this is bound to happen. Just usually not so severe. Cloteau imagines the crime without any evidence. The story writes itself.

Cloteau has never investigated a potential homicide, but he's watched enough TV to mimic the appropriate behavior. Murder is serious business, obviously, and dead officers require reverence with actions punctuated by grief and rage. Serving the shield with dignity. Remarks about brotherhood. He will have to mutter, under his breath of course, "We'll get the sonofabitch who did this." All old hat; he knows without knowing. As he trudges up the stairs, Cloteau aims for stoicism but trips, again, on the third step.

No one sees the mistake. Yet with his hands out catching his fall, Cloteau's belief in the power of routine vanishes. He knows that expected motions will not carry the day. Someone isn't willing to play their part.

Cloteau avoids the pictures tacked along his ascent. They would only affect his tenuous objectivity. Despite the need to pay attention, he begins to fault Marsha and Sam for the whole affair. Hanging in a scattered fashion, the images possibly depict happier times that didn't actually happen. Samantha's school pictures probably splice together a mélange of Bruce and Kent family gatherings. Soccer pictures, pretended moments of normalcy amidst a sea of troubles, perhaps pop like lifeboats along the wall. Which one of those earlier calls, Cloteau wonders, offered local law enforcement a chance to save the daughter? In which bizarro world did Samantha murder her mother? A Christmas card photo might be present, mother and daughter wearing matching sweaters. Samantha probably smiles because she's been told to.

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Cloteau doesn't look at the pictures.

At the top of the stairs, a long hallway leads to a broken window. From the wainscoting into the gable of the roof, a taut and milky plastic sheet covers the evacuated pane of glass. The space is large enough for a man to jump through. Or be pushed. All manner of motions and acts really, both habitual and extraordinary.

Cloteau turns back to the report.

*The upstairs hallways contained three rooms. This officer checked the two rooms on the left. This officer entered an empty bathroom and cleared the room verbally to alert PO Breckenridge. This officer then proceeded to the next room but can neither confirm nor deny whether PO Breckenridge responded to the call. The state of the second room, later known as the master suite, indicated that the inciting incident might have occurred here and not on the main floor. The bedding was disturbed and there appeared to be a broken glass object against the back wall. The assailant was not present. This officer cleared the room verbally and definitively received no confirmation from PO Breckenridge. This officer made the call again, with no response.*

*Turning back to the master suite door, this officer observed PO Breckenridge walking down the hallway in a calm manner with a normal pace. This officer made a third call to PO Breckenridge and did not receive a response. The door to the bedroom then slammed as this officer approached PO Breckenridge and the hallway. PO Breckenridge did not appear to close the door. This officer could not exit the room, as the door was jammed. This officer heard muffled and unclear noises, including a crash, in the hallway and proceeded to kick down the door. Upon exiting, this officer noticed that the window at the end of the hallway was broken and PO Breckenridge was missing. The assailant was present outside the door to the third room.*

The appearance of an ordinary girl with a difficult home life. Rote family drama starting with a bedroom argument, sans husband, ends with a dead officer. The report is only interesting because it introduces Samantha.

The Kent household thematic: bombastic crashes, slammed doors, and muffled screams. A pattern that returns, again and again. Only the cast changes.

“Hey Marsha, what were you fighting about that night?” Cloteau asks.

Not getting an answer, he moves to the stairwell and repeats himself. The door to the house is still open.

“I don’t know, Micky, maybe we ran out of coffee.”

“I’m trying to help here, Marsha.”

“Nothing could be further from the truth, Constable. Besides, it’s her world now, not mine.”

Marsha thinks Micky is just a different kind of poison, but poison all the same. Spread so thick on that hill that it must glow like blue-green radiation on a clear night.

She answers from outside the house. Despite that daily trip to the station, she can’t go back inside, even with a cop’s blessing. Samantha has to allow it. So Marsha waits on the precipice, like everyone else, for Samantha’s return.

Tyranny or benevolence. Even the most avid gardener occasionally tramples a plant. Some even choose to raze their plots and start anew after a cataclysmic event. Pressure and time. Characters are reset in continuity but never really lose their original motivations. A pattern that forks, near the end. With that pride in her daughter’s freedom, Marsha also clutches the veranda hard enough to chip the paint.

“Officer Calle was pretty hysterical that night. He didn’t talk about the door?” Cloteau asks from the stairwell.

He thinks he hears an echo.

“Whatever he wrote, he isn’t half right,” Marsha says.



Best answer to give a cop: you don't know shit. Besides, if Micky is this clueless, all the better he stays out of Samantha's way.

Cloteau gives up on Marsha. The air upstairs is electric and draws his attention away from the uncooperative witness. He gets goosebumps. Samantha's room needs investigating. Cloteau marches forward, suddenly alive.

Our own Capulets and Montagues, he dramatizes. Myths like Samantha's borrow from all kinds of failed small-town fables. The Kents and the Bruces are inconsequential Robin Hoods. Fate points each family's unfortunate genealogical kin towards, in the worst cases, jail or unwed teenage motherhood. At best, a Kent or Bruce could be an unsavoury mechanic taking advantage of customers like Cloteau. It isn't so surprising that one of them finally killed a cop.

The environment encourages spurious thought free from any presumption of innocence. While Cloteau might be stupid, he isn't usually so closed-minded. Samantha poses a problem to his reductive narrative. The school maintains she was a wonderful student. The paper describes her, at first, as an ordinary girl with a difficult home life. Marsha was the dragon that kept a princess locked up, away from the town's sight and her family's corruptive influence. Why should Cloteau suddenly follow the script and play the dumb cop?

He is at the beginning of something, not the end. The whole investigation is an origin story, but not his.

The bedroom is unspectacular. There is a light on and a notebook open. He wanders over, hoping to read the last words Samantha jotted down before Breckenridge interrupted her. Instead, Samantha returns.

*Dear Inspector Cloteau: All I did was tell that cop to go straight home to his mother. He wasn't even running when he went through the window, it's in the other cop's report. I could do a lot worse than add a little levity to my situation. There aren't a lot of rules I have to follow anymore. Be easy on Mom, she's just a creature of habit.*

She signs her name quickly and sideways like a late assignment. An afterthought, a warning, or a grocery list left on the countertop. Samantha has things to do. But, a confession—definitely not what he expects from a Kent.

She could do a lot worse. She knew that Officer Calle noticed Breckenridge's gait, the calm demeanour. Jumped from a two-storey window and broke his neck. Cloteau should probably leave, talk to Calle, and check whether the girl could have broken into the station. Review the security camera footage, fight off the unknown, the feeling of drowning.

He returns to the hallway. She's there.

Samantha is peering out the broken glass, examining the edge of the wainscoting where the window meets the wall. Her feet don't touch the floor. The scuff she rubs has probably been there for years.

She is opaque and says nothing. Turns her head to see Cloteau.

He doesn't have his weapon. He doesn't even have his badge.

"Hey Samantha, I was looking for you."

Samantha stares, doesn't speak, floats higher.

She exhales slowly, pushing herself backwards towards the window. Such a gesture does not appear to tax her abilities. The hallway freezes, the hardwood covered in a thin layer of ice. Cloteau's breath rises in white clouds, his skin tingling and the floor slippery under his feet. Nothing makes sense except that the electricity wasn't confined to his mind. Samantha had just arrived.

She smiles, shears the plastic covering, and escapes again through the large window. Samantha brushes the tops of the pine trees behind the backyard garden shed, disappearing off to some better horizon. The hum is gone.

The ice is just a show, made to demonstrate the unnecessary qualities of the investigation. Cloteau understands now.

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Knowing the potential for surveillance by an omnipotent observer, he gives Samantha her story back. Cloteau thinks of hollering down to Marsha and babbling like an idiot, but she already knows. She's had her incoherent response, brought the cops to the home of a family with more than a few criminals and abusers. Invited us in like vampires, Cloteau thinks. No wonder there was an exorcism. He scans the report frantically for that telling paragraph, the description of much discussion at the station:

*This officer began to call for backup and requested that the assailant stop. While radioing support, the assailant ignored this officer's commands and ran down the hallway towards the broken window. This officer drew his service weapon and again commanded for the assailant to stop. This officer then fired his weapon and appeared to hit the assailant. However, the assailant jumped from the window, landing somewhere near the outbuildings situated approximately twenty-five metres behind the home. To this officer, the jump seemed impossible. The shot that struck the assailant also appeared to have no visible effect.*

No visible effect. She could have done a lot worse. First you try and jump over the building, but you realize you can fly. Then, you just destroy the building. Breathe fire, shoot lasers from your eyes, control hearts and minds, transmute bone into gold. Origin stories stop here usually, only scratching the surface of a new world. But one that Samantha could make and remake. An ordinary girl with a difficult home life. Looking out the broken window, Cloteau knows that Breckenridge's mother lives down the Hill, maybe seven blocks away.

The boys at the station all think that Calle missed the shot, that he panicked. It makes sense, then, to sit on the sill of the broken window and wait for her return. Checking for any shards of glass, Cloteau glances at the mark Samantha was rubbing. Not a scuff, but a hole. There had probably been a bullet too, five minutes earlier. But the bullet isn't his. Hopefully Samantha returns wearing a cape instead of a mask.

