Sunday Saudade

John Matias

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sunday saudade

by

John Matias

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts at the
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Abstract

Sunday *Saudade* is a novel and critical essay that together approach the process of remembering and retelling, particularly in the performative aspect of writing one’s self via the guise of a fictitious narrator. The novel considers the ways in which relationships, work, and emigration impact identity construction.
Dedication

para mãe e pai
&
dylan
Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Susan Holbrook and André Narbonne.

&
Kali
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I was disguising a sprained ankle on the day I told my mother and father I was leaving Leamington. The night before there had been the final visit to Sturgeon Meadows, where I was forced out of Morgan Coolidge’s townhouse with a push that landed me on the cement. She was holding the handset and ready to phone the police. Joey was at the top of the stairs and his sister had her thin older arms around his shoulders. That Saturday was the slow culmination of having tried for over two months to muster the gall to knock on Morgan Coolidge’s door.

It was the beginning of spring and I had been stopping by and standing across the street under a white maple most weekends, her incandescent windows glowing in the darkened cul-de-sac. I was still smoking then and leaning up against the tree, catching glimpses of their three silhouettes. Joey and Andrea were often in the living room getting up, sitting back down. Up. Down. The bedroom light would come on, then off. Bathroom. Bedroom again. And there’d she finally be. Morgan. Morgan Coolidge, pacing about the house, talking on the cordless, and I wondering with whom? Probably braless too. She hated them. She’d disappear again into the kitchen. Probably to sip from something iced on the kitchen counter. She might be okay with my knocking on her door, maybe softened, if sipping from something iced on the kitchen counter. So that Saturday I did, and my hands were steady and legs in sudden spasms…. knocking.

Morgan’s hair was damp and caramel brown, pulled back tightly. She was shocked to see me, her forehead and brows uncertain. She said, *What?* Her face tough. That rasp of her voice, the scrape of her words. *What?* Over and over. It wasn’t even a question, and the soapy smell of her damp skin surrounded us.
I said, I’m moving out of town and just wanted to stop by. Can we talk for a little?

You can’t be serious, James. Her grey irises, slivered with greens and browns.

You’ve been drinking.

This is when I heard the Joey’s footsteps, walking from the living room and stopping at the top of the stairs. He looked down at me with memory. He said, Mommy.

You have to leave, James. They haven’t forgotten you. This isn’t right any longer.

*Please.*

I’m moving and wanted to see you one last time.

We’ve done this, James. How many last times must there be? This is what we did at the park. That was the last time for me. And it has to be for you. It does.

She held the door. She meant the beginning of March.

It was an afternoon when the wind was balmy and the low warm sky in a type of pumpkin skin. The weather could have belonged to late summer. We faced each other at Eastside Park, the rusted rattle that was her ’86 Cavalier growling from the curb. The driver door was open and a Chopin nocturne insisted from the car’s one functioning speaker. Classical music had started becoming a distraction for Morgan. She was wearing a grey cardigan and a denim dress with high-top sneakers. She looked at the spiralling crack on the road that was plugged with asphalt. She traced its length with the tip of her shoelaced foot.

I said, Morgan, We tried. Those were the words I came up with earlier in the day. But Morgan knew better and looked at me with impatient irises. The eyelids were mascaraless and in a light flutter. She parted her wind-chapped lips but stopped herself
from saying something she might regret. She started. She paused again. I shrugged
emphatically, but it was for no reason, really.

Both of my hands were tucked into my back pockets. I had whispered into the
phone when we last spoke that I agreed, we both needed to move on with our lives. She
needed to focus on raising her children, perhaps even finding a new job, instead of
wasting entire weeks on the insecure impermanence that had somehow formed into a
three year relationship. But the truth is, I wasn’t agreeing with anything. She had never
suggested partings of the sort. At least not with words. Words. I’d assumed with her
silences, staring off into distant places, she had been thinking it all along. Perhaps as long
as I had been. I said, I could still come by for a friendly dinner and chat. We could at
least try. A light gust caught her hair and kept it in straggly wisps. Its highlighted
thinness. Let’s not lose it all, Morgan.

Morgan feigned preoccupation with the moustached driver of a passing van,
then looked across the street at two Mexican Mennonite boys wearing plaid shirts and
green overalls. They were sharing a tricycle on their gravel driveway, giving what
sounded like precocious instruction to one another in low German.

She wasn’t looking at me when she said, The way you’ve always used that word
try, James, I’ve never really got it. I’m going. It’s really time I went. And understand
what that word means. Learn it, James.

She rubbed the back of her neck, looking down again and shaking her head in the
same matronly disappointment I had seen from her when surprised by poor reactions
from her children. When Andrea would yell fucko at her brother, when Joey would tell
me I wasn’t his father. The muffler’s dry growl continued to drown out the Chopin
nocturnes. Her nostrils were in a tender flare and I had learned with the years to interpret this as her suppressed need to express something larger than circumstances allowed. A flock of seagulls bantered and hovered above the thawed remnants of a late Essex County harvest.

In a sudden flurry of gestures and maybe even hesitation, Morgan stepped backward. She turned to look at me one last time, then faced the Cavalier. And there it was. She hurried into her car and didn’t look back, driving herself away without closing the door. I waved for her to stop, to come back. I threw my hands up into the air and somehow managed to shuffle myself around in a complete circle. You could still hear that bizarre tired sound of her muffler rising brokenly into the ending afternoon, as the daylight gasped above the tree-lined horizon and gave a rusty sheen to Eastside park.

Now, back at her doorstep, her hand clutched the fibreglass door, 2A in inexpensive plastic. Her face was tight and resolute and silent. But I wasn’t expecting Morgan to drop the phone and curl her lip. She had an enviably straight set of teeth; how her face could change when she laughed. But she wasn’t here. With a violent grunt she pushed me with both hands onto the driveway and looked at me with disappointed rage. She closed the door and turned the deadbolt.

My foot was twisted underneath me on the driveway, next to her Cavalier, and I could see her children poking their heads through the vertical blinds. Joey’s blond buzzed hair and his quick eyes, and Andrea hiding behind his small back. I saw her hand on her brother’s shoulder, the outline of her head behind him. I could hear Morgan telling them to get away from the window.
This happened when I'd just turned twenty-eight, and the next day I sat at my mother and father's table after dinner. We were stirring sugar into our espressos and I had just divulged my need to move on and leave Leamington, to secretly put an end to what I thought they, and the rest of my family, had been accepting as my delayed, possibly missed, manhood. There was silence.

I had said things in rehearsed Portuguese, *Estou com ideias de me mudar para um apartamento em Windsor. É tempo de começar uma vida nova.*

There was that familiar half gape of my mother’s mouth as she stared at me. It was a meshing of relief and worry, a type of undecided lull, she had turned throughout her life into a reaction to unexpected news. It’d last for a minute or two, then resolve itself with a: *What?* But not this time. That Sunday evening things lasted longer with her. She watched me, every careful word. I felt the need to say more, to break her stare and stop her from nipping away at my resolve. My father had managed in no longer than the ten seconds it had taken me to speak those two sentences to refill his mini *Benfica* chalice with more Port and swig the contents into his dentured mouth. He cleared his throat. He followed the pattern on the tablecloth with his index finger, and I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

Finally, their eyes locked and it was a familiar pause, a method of communication between the two I was wrong at least half of the times in discerning the intricacies of, especially lately. They were in their sixties and their bodies were changing. The hair was thickening into an innocuous grey and both were developing a penchant for the unspoken. Sometimes mãe would drop an opened can of tuna or olives on the kitchen rug and both
would pause and exchange long silent stares. Words, it seemed, now accepted by both as no longer serving much of a purpose during such post-events.

But what idea is that? my father said to me in quick Nazareno dialect, in his showered, tracksuit docility.

The early spring evening was framed by the kitchen window behind him, and the fig trees he’d brought out from their winter hibernation were now on the deck. A chatty group of robins were on a few of the branches, ready to take flight from the unexpected sounds my mother would be making with dishes at the sink. My father’s question was perfunctory. The strained necessity in his having asked made a response not seem particularly required. So I waited.

He must have been relieved. In fact, I knew he was. By the time he’d turned twenty-eight there’d been accomplishments and experiences I would never in my own life know. He had been a professional footballer for a year in Lisbon until it ended with a badly broken leg, from a flight of stairs in a tavern. He then spent five years on the cod ship voyages, baiting hooks with sperm whales rolling and spouting alongside his dory. He shipped crude oil to almost every continent when on the merchant marine ships, bringing home Marushka dolls and Egyptian coffee sets. He had married and fathered three children, burying my oldest sister, who died of a brain haemorrhage before her first birthday. In the late seventies he had considered Paris a city to move us to, but instead purchased and captained what he named the Maria Adelaide, after my sister.

I was a bearded man still living in his parents’ home. My bedroom door was regularly closed when I wasn’t at work and the beer in the fridge unreplenished, the wine in the clay jug often at unexpected low levels. I was Jaime, just Jaime. The Jaime who
had given them reasons enough over the years to wonder if I would ever announce what I just had. My circumstance at the beginning of that week had also been emphasized by the visit paid by my primary and high school best friend’s mother. We were invited to Nelson Marques’s wedding. He was marrying Alicia Saramago, whom everybody had expected to one day leave town and become somehow famous, if but for her disarming Iberian face and wealth. Her father owned at least a quarter of the tugs at the harbour in Wheatley. I heard Nelson’s mother say, And, Jaime? How’s he? I went up the stairs and answered her questions for as long as I could. I stayed awake that night, long enough to hear my father brush his dentures and pad his gums before heading off to the harbour.

I replied to my father’s question. I said, It’s an idea that it’s time I had. By then mãe had poured herself a second glass of orange juice. She gulped it down and folded and unfolded a napkin, shooting quick stares at my father, then me.

You just asked your father for money and you want to move to an apartment?

I have enough to get started. The money I asked for is to give me enough for two months. It’s how they do things. They want the first and last.

Do you know what you’re doing? You’ve already found an apartment?

Sim. This week.

And only now you’re telling me and your father? Sinceremento!

My father in his mild, undecided way rose from the table. He said, Only you know what you’re doing. The moment had reached a point where he’d have to take sides, where he’d either emphasize my mother’s concerns or imply she was overreacting by asking further questions of me. I need to put ferialize in the figuiera, he said, and walked out to the deck, bringing the kitchen door to a soft close behind him.
When I first brought my mother to my apartment on Argyle Road in Windsor, two weeks after I’d signed the lease, she remained as uncomfortable and silent as she’d been during the drive from Leamington. We arrived in my new neighbourhood at the east end of the city. It’s a neighbourhood where a sophisticated segment of the city’s population inhabit small Edwardian Tudors and manicured terrace housing. The streets are tidy and sun dappled and hundred-year-old trees and perfect lawns dab the day with their green tones. Riding through, she twisted her back sometimes in her silence, and took second glances at the magnificent, streakless windows and their showcased baby grands. She praised the large red and black doors with polished brass kick plates, the tulips reaching for the sun alongside. A few pure bred dogs were tethered to wrought iron railings, convalescing from their morning walk.

My apartment building was at the end of all of this, buffering the city noises rising out of Wyandotte Street, where Oriental restaurants and refaced diners huddled shoulder to shoulder with satellite and dollar stores, antique shops, middle eastern bakeries, and small cafés with their blinds drawn. There was the soft murmur of Lebanese men smoking around parking meters, their heavy cologne. My building was a steroidal version of the terrace housing on Monmouth Street, though it lacked any of that refinement and care. The harsh seasons had chipped away at the battleship green of the window frames and darkened the once red brick. We arrived on Argyle Road and I pulled the car over to the curb and said, Nice neighbourhood isn’t it? On the way home I’ll drive by the house where the primeiro-ministro grew up.

We spent the week getting the apartment ready. She liked the hardwood floors
and paned kitchen door, though I shouldn’t be using it as a main entrance. That’s what
the suite door was for. You don’t want shoes and dirt in the place where you cook and
eat, she said. We worked together, cleaning. We’d arrive in Windsor early enough for
breakfasts of coffee and buttered bagels, and would carry straight through until spinach
pie lunches and more coffee, which I’d get for us from the Lebanese bakery a block from
my door. We ate on the hardwood and talked of cupboards and walls, the bathtub and
sink, and how all of it could only be scrubbed to a limited potential. But they were just
words thrown over the still unfamiliar reality that I was leaving home. She said,
Nothing’s gonna make that rust go away, mas pourra, it looks a lot better from what it
did this morning.

I re-stained the scuffed oak trim lining the entire apartment and gave thick layers
of white to the sky-blue shell of the claw-foot tub. By the end of the week she’d resigned
herself to the rust in the bathtub and sink not going away. Mas pourra, she said again, It
looks a lot better from when we first got here. It’s a new apartamento from what it was.
She was facing the bathroom sink, older than her sixty-three years, and said, Did you see
what was underneath there? Look at the pile in the hallway. I’m afraid to think of what
the water will look like after I get through mopping. You won’t find a cleaner house than
uma casa Portuguesa.

We finished on Friday, and on Saturday morning my brother-in-law, Don, drove
the U-Haul. My father rode with him, I followed with my mother in the Renault, my
sister and two nieces following us. It was a three car procession. The move was efficient
and had been planned by Don during the drive. He directed everyone: which boxes to
pick up first and why, and what furniture to leave until the end, taking quick cigarette
breaks outside and giving the building an assessment of its aesthetics and structural vulnerabilities. He joked about the window in my living room not surviving a gust of wind, that it would likely get yanked right out, laughing in his overzealous manner. My sister, Isabel, asked him to help. He said he was. He patted her bum, called her hun. She rolled her dark eyes at me, then walked with her daughters to the nearby park. We were taking a break and Don asked if there was beer in the fridge.

I’ll get some.

Jamie, you gotta fuel the army. He laughed again. I’m just joking, brother-in-law, it’s not even noon yet. Is it?

My father did not stop, working as though on the tug in Wheatley, quietly going about the processes of lifting and lowering, walking in and walking out. He had taken me to buy some furniture a few weeks before. A sofa, kitchen table and four chairs. He charged it to his store card, opting for the deferred payment plan. I promised I’d pay it back and he gave me a shrug, leaving things this way. At the apartment he was in a reflective mood, you could see it in his swift walk, his head lowered, his mind away.

By late afternoon everybody was gone and banana boxes lined the hallway. Don had put together two bookshelves and left an unopened beer next to the carpenter's glue and hammer. It was still cold and I twisted it open. The smell of the butter my nieces had melted over the popcorn still hung in the kitchen. There was a restraint about the whole day. The same kind of controlled, measured happiness which had been in our lives after my nephew, Adam, died. Almost a year had passed and it was his birthday that weekend.

The old smells my mother and I had tried to mop and scrub away from the hardwood floors and plaster walls had started returning. There were footsteps above, the
evening voices and televisions. I heard my neighbour check the mailbox, then pull the front door shut to the night.
two

I had been hired at the Family Help Centre as a research assistant in the early fall, before moving to the city. But after three months in my new apartment the mood at work had taken on the whiff of what would be the end. A languor was settling over the daily run of things. By the first snowfall in late November, Marnie Stewart was laid off. I walked in late with a cold nose and toothpaste breath, a new hemp satchel slung over my snow-wet shoulder. Marnie was tearful behind the desk. She said, They gave me my notice today. You’re probably next.

I walked into the staff kitchen for coffee, and the smell of old celery and onions wafted out of the fridge when I opened it for cream. Someone’s forgotten lunch was collapsed in the corner under the bulb. Marnie had followed me.

But I’ll find something, she said, standing under the doorframe. I always do. It may not look it, but there’s still a lot of spunk left in me. How old do you think I am, James? She stepped back so I could have a good look at what I knew was the body of a woman in her late forties. She denied it well. Her expensive cardigans and sharply cut skirts gave her an elegance I was attracted to. She was a recent divorcee, and I had fantasized things a few times. She gave a quick fun twirl, her eyes still wet.

I said I didn’t like those type of questions, and wished her phone would ring.

Do you think I like asking them? Come on, James. A little guess. Tell me. How old do you think?

She poured herself water from the Las Vegas jug on the counter. Small non-profits like the Family Help Centre rely on donated water jugs, discounted coffee, and anything else offered to help stretch shoestring budgets. Some Saturday mornings we had
I worked from came with sunflowers inked onto the top drawer. Love, Lindsay was signed underneath the stem. Marnie wasn’t drinking the water. She left it on the counter next to my coffee.

You don’t have to answer me, James. I just like to ask sometimes.

The fabric of Marnie’s skirts made crisp sexy sounds when she walked, and she wore patchouli on her neck. I thought of her when I cooked dinner. I almost wanted to tell her this. There was nothing to lose now. But I wouldn’t, and Harry Chapman entered the kitchen with his scuffed brief case, demanding from us with patient eyes the sort of optimism he had based his second marriage and new job as executive director on. He said, Marnie and James.

He’d been arriving at work on a sporadic basis, sometimes not showing up at all. Most of his efforts were being spent on rallying local charities together and trying to convince them to pool all of their resources. Or he’d be away three days at a time lobbying municipal and provincial governments to come to the aid of the non profits in the city, half of which were teetering on imminent insolvency.

How’s the research, James? When are we doing the outreach?

Harry had a pockmarked, warm face. He was the type of man who was a father to the sons I’d had transient friendships with in high school. They lived in large three storey homes and cut lawns with riding lawnmowers, and the Pontiacs and Chryslers in the driveways were traded for fresh models every three years. Harry asked that I try to get somebody from the public library for the upcoming meeting. And every charity you can think of, he said.
I’d assumed my research contract was the safest because it was funded by a federal grant. But Marnie getting her notice in November was certain to have me jobless before the end of winter. The signs of expected unemployment for all were everywhere. For one, Alex Abercrombie, the office manager, wouldn’t walk in wearing his black leather jacket and pinstriped pants until noon, a fast-food bag gripped by his swinging left hand. He’d claim to have stayed late until eight or nine the night before, giving me his don’t-worry-about-it wink. We’re on the same side, he had said to me once as we both waited for a fax to come in. And there was Harry’s personal assistant and volunteer coordinator, Sheilagh Harper. Every morning or afternoon she’d be off to run some errand in her Smartcar, calling from her mobile a few hours later to see if all was under control, if Harold had arrived from his meeting yet. He might not even be back today, she’d say, with a little hope.

So after that Monday, I lost interest in the job I was from the beginning unqualified for. I’d started to spend more time seeking distraction from what was becoming the purposelessness of putting together a self-help library for the city’s beleaguered west end. There’d be a FOR LEASE sign by spring. I started to spend chunks of my morning opening email attachments and laughing at unfunny things. I’d search the internet on how to raise the two kittens I had gone out with my neighbour Lucas to adopt from his grandfather, whose Alzheimer’s was now at the stage of post-it notes. Most of my afternoons were spent leaning on the window ledge, looking out through the dirtied glass at Ottawa Street, my face camouflaged by the vinyl lettering on the window: MEN’S AND WOMEN’S SUPPORT GROUPS—PERSONAL COACHING—ANGER MANAGEMENT. I watched the cars line up for a block, idling in the early winter for a turn at the drive-thru.
speaker and a double-double. Underdressed teenagers smoked and waited for the city buses, their after school chatter amid the snow.

By the end of that week, Marnie had wrapped her Precious Moments figurines and lay them into the Xerox box she had purposely emptied. She went around to each desk and left two packs of printer paper. It was a parting gift of sorts. On her last day she was tearful again. She walked into my office and hugged me. Her arms were wrapped tightly around my back and she was gripping my shoulders. I could feel her body shudder with her muffled sobs, and my own body started to shudder along with hers. She felt physically smaller than I had imagined her to feel, and by the end of it I was in tears as well, and Marnie Stewart pulled back, surprised.

Work was in walking distance from my apartment on Argyle Road, and I would take Monmouth Street to get home. The walk was a straight half kilometre under the naked maples. In the summer their growth intertwined with the leaves from the opposing boulevard and formed a shady canopy over the length of the entire stretch of parked cars and running squirrels. In the winter the branches supported the weight of the snow and the cars were coated in frost along the curbs, their engines turned on with remotes from living rooms. Monmouth had multi-coloured front doors and matching shutters, its terrace houses combined in sections of four, and was initially laid out as rental housing for the nearby industries of the late nineteenth century's second wave of the industrial revolution. The street buffered the industrial east from the posh management residences of west. In the 1930s the homes were offered up for sale. Over the decades they were
turned into slick, groomed properties with awning windows and secluded pools in the
backyard, and real estate companies became eager to market them as sophisticated living.

Lucas Wright was my neighbour and was walking his dog, Naomi. She was an
aging mutt with a limp he and his wife Wendy had saved from the Humane Society.
Lucas was reading a folded magazine and wearing wool mittens and snow boots. He
lived in apartment 1A and we shared a front entrance and a deck.

You're home early, he said. It sounded the way his wife might have sounded. He
was wearing red and wrinkled jogging pants.

I said it was a slow day. I petted Naomi, who was a panoply of breeds, happy to
see just about anyone.

Slow days are good for that. What are you doing tonight? Come for dinner.

Wendy’s working until the morning at the hospital.

And I did.

Between us, two bottles of white wine and a few pilsner helped lubricate the still
awkward newness of our budding neighbourship. But we wanted to be friends. I
complimented his pasta primavera and sesame seed vinaigrette. Lucas wasn’t working
and instead had been writing stories from the corner of his living room on a refurbished
Underwood No.5. He had screwed a strip of plywood so the typewriter sat on the radiator
next to the window, where a dwarf umbrella tree and empty coffee mugs rested on its sill.
The sun was setting and the evening outside was but a whimper of pink light. I had heard
Lucas slam the door a few times since moving in and watched him walk the
neighbourhood alone.

Lucas said, I plan to have a collection finished—a first draft anyway, by spring.
He poured himself a fresh dose of Fontana Di Papa. Don’t ask me what it’s about. I kind of fear the answer. Lucas Wright had a smooth long face and his eyes moved slowly. He said, Wendy and I have come to an agreement. I work on the stories until spring without having to work elsewhere. And then we conceive.

I returned home with a good stumble in my step and the two unnamed kittens avenged my having forgotten to feed them. They had knocked over anything that was light enough to be affected by their grey and white fluff. The phone was ringing. It was 10:30. Mãe.

Where’ve you been all this time? Her voice was thin with worry.

Next door at my neighbour’s. He invited me for dinner.

And you couldn’t have called? I’ve been preocupada all day. Isso não pode ficar assim. Olha que não! Listen to your voice. You’re drunk. You don’t think I know your voice? You’ve gone to that city is to get drunk. How many times have I been on the phone with you and you can’t speak. Is this how it is now?

I’m not drunk, mãe, Just tired.

You know the one who’s tired?

My mother called regularly throughout the day. She’d call in the morning to ensure I hadn’t slept in, and in the afternoon would ask what I’d be cooking for dinner. She’d volunteer culinary tricks and truths and say parsley, onion, garlic and olive oil were foundations to anything I would ever need to cook in life. She’d call not quite an hour later and ask about the progress of the cod casserole or tomato rice I was making; If I’d remembered to use sál e pimenta, or a cube of vegetable broth, and to open a few windows and get the air circulating, saying, It only takes a couple of times to have your
curtains and furniture smelling like fried garlic and onion, para sempre.

It was left to me to call one last time, to see if all was well. My mother and father were in their sixties, and it was implied that this was my nightly duty. I knew she’d be waiting. Tô tudo bem? I’d ask, O pai? Okay, mãe. Até à manhã.

I thought about mãe before bed. I was feeling nostalgic. When I was in university and driving to and from the city from my evening classes, she’d wait by the window during winters. I’d enter the house in the late evening, with my knapsack stuffed with the borrowed textbooks I doubted being able to truthfully understand. She’d ask how the day went, if the roads were safe, and to not speak too loudly. My father needed to be on the tug by four most mornings. At the kitchen table, covered in foil wrap, would be a dinner of grilled stickleback or fried pork or caldeirada and bread from Ernesto’s European Bakery in a small basket. She’d monitor the amount of cold red wine I poured from the pitcher.

Although I was still living at home, these late stages of my young life were indicating a progression towards a future that was appeasing her old guilt for having plucked my sister and I from our burgeoning childhood in Nazaré. It had been in her small flushed face, as far back as when my sister and I received a phone call from the mayor of Leamington congratulating us for being outstanding young immigrants for having guided an elderly man away from the middle of traffic outside a seniors home. We had arrived in Canada two months before and relied on the translation from a Nazareno who lived nearby. When I was in the third grade I was named captain of the junior soccer team by the xenophobic Mr. Ledoux who knew me only as Le Portugais, and after dinner mãe pulled out sixty dollars from the rent drawer for my new cleats.
Even during adolescence, when I tried to draw a distance between us she found ways to never entirely renounce anything, despite my father’s opposition to my pot smoking and ear piercings. When I dated Linda Mastronardi in grade ten I pretended to live in a less modest bungalow and she cried, but somehow understood. She didn’t tell my father and only asked if I wasn’t being too inauthentic. My mother knew which words to choose and use. When I was eighteen she approved of my purchasing a three hundred dollar drum kit from Elias Youseeff. I set it up in the basement and gave my father reasons enough to spend those evenings at the Fishermen Café on Talbot Street. After the dishes she’d come down to the basement with her ears partly covered to listen, asking if I’d learned any of the year’s Carnaval marches played by the bands at O Clube dos Nazarenos, and if the noise wasn’t too loud for the neighbours. I remember being embarrassed having her down there witnessing my clumsy skill, and I’d complain of a sore wrist, saying I was getting ready for a break anyhow, my headphones pulled down around the neck and the thin tinny sound of Zeppelin in the room.

I tried reading two pages of the copy of Lolita Lucas gave me and fell asleep, but an hour later I was awake. I was warm with wine in bed and shed the T-shirt and shorts I had struggled into. I showered and shaved and went out to the front door of the building to check my mailbox. There was a handwritten letter from Morgan Coolidge. It was a reply to the emails I had been sending her since I’d moved to Windsor. She begged that I never write to her again. Please Please Please, James. Stop This.
three

I met Morgan Coolidge when I was twenty-four. We were manual labourers then and in the same room for an orientation at the bindery with which we had signed temporary contracts. I’d got the call the Friday past, Can you start on the fourteenth? I’ll be there, I said, and was up at five on a Monday. It was December and I walked under a heavy snowfall to Renaissance Label. My father had stopped fishing for the season and was watching a Brazilian *telenovela* before I left. He had offered to drive. You’re not going to walk in that snow, he said, his dentures still on the bathroom counter. But I insisted on walking and slung the knapsack over my back, the new pair of steel-toe shoes he paid for inside.

Cars passed with sleepy headlights, their windshield wipers beating a slow winter time. Front yard evergreens and young, naked maples held the tiny flicker of Christmas lights, as men, some in early retirement, shovelled snow from driveways with enthusiastic grips on their shovels. My father wouldn’t be out shovelling in his long-johned reluctance before lunch and an extra tumbler of wine. The idea of snow never normalized itself as the kind of weather he needed to contend with, and certainly not before having lunch.

Archie Sedgwick sprinkled salt over the cement of his front steps. He had driven school buses for most of his life and raised his hand without emphasis as he said good morning. He lived in an historical Victorian with green clapboard siding. His daughter Allison and I, in our final year of high school, collected tickets at the front door of the haunted house put on by the Chamber of Commerce in the old town hall. It was Halloween and our art class had designed the headstones and coffins. Allison Sedgwick
had a mickey of Absolut vodka and we kissed heavily in the dark to the sounds of howling winds on a tape recorder and schoolchildren screaming. The rest of our class were dressed as ghosts in white sheets, or zombies in ripped three piece suits and old bridesmaid dresses. Allison moved to Australia, Archie told me once when I asked how she was doing. She’s studying anthropology in Sydney, he had said. And that was the last time I really ever spoke to Archie. He became suspicious of my interest. We just waved now, sometimes even pretending to not see each other. You can tell sometimes.

Renaissance Label smelled of ink and fresh paper. There were vertical rows of fluorescent tubing in the factory that seemed kilometres long. The guillotine operators stared at me from their work stations with twisted torsos, their morning faces curious and gloomy under the factory lights. The blond kid who let me in had a crook in his stare. The left eye. There was a strange and incongruous tanning booth caramel about him. He shook my hand. James right? I was told to let you in. Just wait here. I’ll try to find someone.

I nodded, feigning coolness. I’ll wait here, I said.

Dave Klein, the supervisor who had interviewed me, ended up somehow behind my back, tapping my shoulder. He wore the same strange argyle turtleneck. A trimmed moustache with short squiggles of grey cleanly dressed his upper lip. His smile was broad and confident, made me think of a young Hemingway. We shook hands and stared, seemingly attempting to corroborate the opinions we had made of each other since the interview, where he struggled as much to ask the questions about why I should be hired as I did to answer them. He slapped my back and motioned with his hand that he was
leading me somewhere. Upstairs, to a conference room, for the next eight hours of my first day on the job.

There were two other hirees. One was an older Lebanese woman with dark receptive eyes and a tightly cropped hairstyle. I imagined an inspired daughter sitting her down in the bathroom after school with scissors and a few ideas on how to make a mother look younger: the bangs high, the sides jagged over the ears. At the end of the conference table, under the chalkboard and the words *Welcome! Theresa, James and Morgan*, was a young woman with a pale wistful face whose lips were glossed and stretching into a cautious smile. She was Morgan Coolidge.

That first day at Renaissance Label the three of us were coached on what employee behaviour the company’s mission statement encouraged, and what it didn’t particularly tolerate. Charles Waites was the name of the plant manager; we were warned he did not like to be called Charlie Watts. This was the first thing he said to us. Charles oversaw all of the orientations. He did not look at Theresa or Morgan or me in the eye when emphasizing how Renaissance Label did not have any room for slackers. We were to exceed customer expectations at every opportunity in the form of hard and fast work, weekly overtime, and an appreciation of the privilege we were given to be employed at one of North America’s top “aluminium-and-glass-glue-applied-label” companies. Charles said it as one word. He wrote *hard & fast work & weekly overtime!* under our names on the board, underlining this while repeating it. Then came the stapled, still warm packets of photocopied protocol, passed around the table. A list of what employee conduct wasn’t allowed, followed by an arsenal of acronyms and procedures for what
was. You should all be taking notes, Charles said pointing at a box of Bics, There’s going to be a quiz at the end of the day. There were videos and pamphlets. Lunch was provided.

Morgan spoke with Theresa and they dipped carrots and celery into ranch dressing. Ham sandwiches and 7 Up were on the way. I counted the snow covered cars in the lot from the window, sometimes checking if Morgan was watching me standing there, hands in my pockets. At the end of the orientation, after our multiple choice quiz, the health and safety supervisor made her appearance. It seemed the crowning moment. Her name was Anne and she asked our names individually. Anne’s healthy bright face was always looking for ways to improve a situation. She looked you deep in the eye and asked you to speak up. We look forward to having you work here, Anne said, shaking our hands one at a time. She was happy and smiling. But there were things on Anne’s mind and she could not stay. Even Charles was surprised by her quick exit. Oh, he said as she left, There she goes again. I wouldn’t recommend any of you become a health and safety supervisor. He smiled awkwardly.

The first week passed swiftly, in the way new jobs where there’s just too much to learn pass. I spent every minute of each shift alongside the tanned blond who had pulled open the door for me on Monday. Geoff Bauer. He’d been in a serious auto accident on Highway 3 with his motorcycle, coming home from evening massage therapy classes. Geoff’s parents received the call from the provincial police at two in the morning and were told he had been rushed to Western Hospital in Toronto. Geoff was in a coma for three weeks. His parents stopped drinking and were born again. Both of his eyes had popped out of their sockets. His skull was fractured. And there were back problems. The
job just wasn’t working out for him. Too demanding trying to keep up with all of the guillotine stations, keeping them stocked with labels and all of the plastic barrels erupting with trim waste, needing to be constantly emptied. And the small favours for everybody, that was an entirely separate story he wasn’t about to get into. Not yet, anyhow. And having to train you simultaneously to boot, he said.

But I’m a people person anyhow, you know, Geoff said, I need to be around people. Helping them. Not in a hen farm like this. I need to feel good about myself with the jobs I have. This job is doing the opposite.

And I knew he meant this the more I was becoming acquainted with his willingness to acquiesce to mood swings. When I’d fall behind on my still unknown responsibilities. When I had overlooked some aspect of everything else he had emphasized as integral components to being a good material handler. It was my first week on the job.

You have to make an excellent first impression, Geoff said. Remember that. Sometimes, he’d pace towards me in clumsy large steps, raising his voice and pointing his finger, swaying his arm in mid-air as though conducting the 5th. You’re gonna need to learn to multi-task with this job. And you always gotta expect to be behind no matter how ahead you think you are. D’you understand? Do you understand that?

Yeah.

Do you really understand that? It’s the best advice I can give you. ‘Cause at times you’re gonna be juggling ten things at once and think it won’t get any worse until it actually does. You get what I’m saying? I nodded. I got what he was saying, though I felt my ears redden. The cutters will get mad at you pretty quick if you show them you’re
slow, he said. It took me until the end of that first week to even realize there wasn’t any
difference between a cutter and the guillotine operators he kept referring to. They were
the same people. But I was picking it up. There was an efficiency about my ability to
scurry east to west, quick to fast, that I was pleased with. I was, it seemed, a good multi-
tasker.

On my second Monday I was invited to the Christmas party but declined. So did Morgan
Coolidge. Morgan was shuffled onto my shift rotation that day. We never spoke at first
but acknowledged each other’s presence in passing. The orientation was our shared
experience. Because of this we sometimes smiled to each other, and there were interested
looks on our faces. During breaks she sat alone on the small pile of skids behind her
guillotine station. Morgan was what Renaissance Label called a table person. She banded
labels together after they had been cut and sent them down the conveyer to get packed.
Morgan wore shorts in December. When she walked to the warehouse to reconcile the
inventory on an order I watched her calf muscles tighten with every step. Her arms swung
to and fro rapidly. You could depend on Morgan to get the job done. One day she was
taking small bites out of a Pink Lady apple during break when I cracked open a cola and
said, Hey.

Hey back.

Gets pretty warm in here doesn’t it?

Morgan Coolidge was chewing, nodding her head and raising her eyebrows in
agreement. She partly covered her mouth when she said, Yes, it does get pretty warm.
Her forearms were spotted with light birthmarks. There weren’t any rings on her fingers.
Morgan was a mother. During orientation she told Theresa she had been at home for a year raising her newborn, Joey. And there was another one, too: a five-year-old, Andrea. I heard all of this while counting the cars. And there was no mention of a man. How are you liking it here, James? Are you going to the Christmas party?

I like it here, I think. But I’m not going to the party. Her hair seemed to be thinning prematurely, and was pulled back to disguise this.

We spent breaks together after that day. It was easy to do. Unionized workers stuck together at Renaissance Label. They took turns hosting barbeques and basement parties. They car pooled into work. It was rumoured some of the couples were swingers. Contract employees were friends only with each other. This is how it was done until (and if) you were hired on full time. Morgan and I became friends, but we wanted to be more. Our silences spoke this. And soon afterward there were phone calls, lasting late into the night—or late into the morning, depending on what shift we had finished. It all started with Morgan telling me about life. Her life. Where and why it had, in her words, never amounted to anything. I was a good listener, Morgan said, and told me about Larry Wiper. She had asked him to leave her life—for good that time, or else she was going to call the police and get them involved. He broke some furniture, threw her around and never returned. Larry Wiper was Joey and Andrea’s father. I remembered him as a break-dancer from the eighties when we arrived from Toronto. He was older than I and hung around outside the Vegas arcade with Johnny James. Crowds gathered when they set up their cardboard and ghetto blaster in the alleyway on summer nights and did the worm and moonwalk. I remember Larry being good at the robot, the crowd clapping. He also used to perform stunts on his BMX, but nobody thought anything of that. This was all I
knew of Larry Wiper and his adolescence. As an adult he spent five years with Morgan, on and off. She had asked him to leave a few times before. He was selling coke out of the house. He had graduated from pot. He had girlfriends, and always found ways to work out deals with customers who could not pay in full.

Morgan had a tragic air about her I could not resist, seeing as how I found my life anchored to its own sense of secret gloom. But mine could not compare. Not even close. She had no relationship with her parents. Her father rode a Harley and had worked at the Windsor assembly plant dropping engines into minivans most of his life. Morgan was not planned and Roger Coolidge did not marry Elizabeth Pickens. He eventually started his own family, and each year Morgan received a Christmas card with a printed address label from Roger and Maggie Coolidge in Windsor. There was a snowman on the envelope sometimes. This was the relationship. Morgan’s mother’s asked Morgan to leave the house after she’d dropped out of high school in grade eleven and was smoking too much pot, shoplifting from Woolworth’s and the BiWay sometimes. Little things mostly. The police brought her home once.

It was a distraction that I needed, she said, But there were other things happening at the time, more important even than being kicked out of the house in Kingsville.

On the night Morgan’s ex-boyfriend committed suicide he called and asked to speak to her, but she did not see the point in talking to Chris Winter any longer. He was a depressing weight in her life, always accusing her of going around sucking off the rich greenhouse Italians from Highway18 at their parties. Morgan was done with Chris’s insecurities. The last straw was when he begged her for anal intercourse on his birthday and called her a slut for not letting him. But a week later Chris blew the top his head off.
with his father’s Remington 12-gauge Wingmaster. It was on ash Wednesday, and he left his parents and Morgan two separate letters. The Winters blamed Morgan and Morgan blamed the Winters—particularly Don’s penchant for disciplining his only son with punches to the head and insults targeting Chris’s effeminacy. Morgan was not allowed at the funeral home and was never given the letter. Elizabeth Pickens probably believed her daughter was responsible for Chris’s suicide, and they fought and argued and brought up old things until Elizabeth threw her daughter onto the living room floor and asked that Morgan be gone by the time she returned from her afternoon shift at A&P. Morgan left Kingsville to live with a cousin in Chatham and never saw her mother again.

So this is how Morgan Coolidge and I started our relationship. On the phone, where she talked and I listened, and where I fell for the tragic drama of her past, sitting on the edge of the bed with my bedroom door closed and a surreptitious bottle of something behind Will Durant’s *Story of Civilization*, which I had ordered from the Quality Paperback Book Club and had read up to the third chapter of the first volume. After three weeks of these daily, extended phone conversations, her children put to bed in the evening or dropped off at daycare after a midnight shift, Morgan Coolidge asked me if I wanted to come over for a beer. It was a Friday night.

My mother and father were asleep, their alarm set for six. They were driving to Toronto to visit my uncle who had finished the chemotherapy and was now onto radiation. Less than one percent of men get breast cancer, he told my mother on the phone, *These are the kinds of lotteries I win.* I pulled the screen from the bedroom window and exited the house this way. I hurried but was nervous. I was fearing that Larry Wiper would somehow storm through the front door asking for his marble chess set or his
Gary Fisher bike frame from the basement. He’d find me in the living room with Morgan Coolidge, the mother of his two children, and demand to know who the fuck I was while holding me by the collar of my ironed oxford.

She still had her boxer then, Ludwig, guarding the front door of the porch of the house she rented on Lukan Street. She was in the shower when I fiddled with the screen door and a thrust of dog leapt out of the darkness, barking at me. I hopped off the steps and ran. Eventually to a pay phone. When I came back a second time her hair was damp and she was wearing a grey T-shirt with the collar cut off. Black jeans and bare feet. In the living room, she asked me to sit in front of her on the floor, next to the speakers and the songs from the tape she had prepared for that very moment. I was hungry to use the word love on a woman. And she was four years older, almost twenty-nine, many of those hard years etched around her eyes.

Her music choices were careful ones, 70s acoustic introspection. When Neil Young came on I passed my hand behind her neck and under the dampness of her hair, bringing her slow breathing, perfumed face to mine. Her warm, hesitant tongue. The weeks on the phone with my eyes closed to her cautiously revealed life, the sentences abrupt and endless and paused, had arrived at a culmination. I removed her shirt, then the small warm breasts from her bra, and muttered brokenly, in the dark and into her ear, that I loved her. But the emotion, even the physicality of this moment with Morgan Coolidge, felt unmitigatedly irrational, even wrong. I didn’t attribute it then, but I can now, less to a fear of my mother and father’s stunned reaction to the circumstances of my romance, than to something more sinisterly inauthentic in me.
Lucas Wright and I were spending Friday nights as neighbours, our time together accruing into a bond. I was almost thirty and he was twenty-five, and we had both failed to maintain a friendship to keep with us for the rest of our lives, one that we would write billowing and wet eulogies over and take with us to the grassy grave. It was an unspoken desire, exalted by the 1.5 litre bottles of Italian table wine and the pre-dinner pints poured for each other at our kitchen counters in socked feet.

Lucas gave me *L'Étranger* and *Lolita* and stories by André Dubus with dog-eared pages and red asterisks next to paragraphs he asked that I read more than once. I reciprocated with recordings of fados and the banned albums my father listened to in Nazaré before the revolution, typing him up careful translations of lyrics by Zéca Afonso and Sérgio Godinho. Lucas and I roamed the neighbourhood together when it was already Saturday, Naomi on her leash and haphazardly leading the way. We both grew impressive beards and were surprised and watched bands from Toronto and Montreal in unlit pubs with no front door. Naomi was allowed to sleep in one of the rooms next to the potatoes. We drank dark ale and were sentimental and sometimes stumbled home. One Friday after last call we passed Camilo’s Pizzeria. There was a blue notice on its window. *Closed. Thank you for your patronage.* On the door was a three-foot face of a grinning real estate agent, Brian A. Cameron. Lucas said Cameron looked exactly like Adam Sleeman. Sleeman had played high school hockey and hung Lucas from the high coat hooks in the change room after gym class. Sleeman, he said, muttering small strange words I could not understand, then sprinting towards the door. He kicked Cameron’s white teeth and shattered the glass. We ran into the dark and Naomi barked behind us.
until we all stopped at Willistead, our breaths pounding out of us in the January night and
the park lights giving a buttery glow to our three silhouettes. Lucas turned to me and was
clumsy and picked me up and tossed me onto a snow bank. We laughed in the cold but
there was a warm wetness in our eyes. We heard sirens and rushed home. I relied on
Lucas Wright.

Lucas moved from Toronto to be with Wendy. They met at Stephanie Elliot’s
wedding one July. Wendy and Stephanie had been friends since the second grade and
swam in each other’s pools in the summers. Stephanie needed to be anonymous in a city
after high school. She accepted a scholarship at the College of Art and Design and lived
on Yonge street. Lucas worked for the groom writing insurance policy booklets, and
Ronald Findley invited everybody from the office to the wedding with a mass email. At
the reception, Lucas sat alone with champagne. He wore a white linen jacket and looked
out at Lake Ontario. It was a brand new century. Wendy Brown was single. She asked
Lucas to dance.

At the beginning of December of that year, Lucas quit his job and donated to the
Salvation Army used furniture and appliances he had accumulated as a bachelor. He was
leaving Toronto. Wendy found them a new apartment on Argyle Road. Her parents had
met Lucas twice and were pleased. Wendy’s mother helped decorate the bathroom and
her father paid for the surprise welcome party. Lucas changed the oil and rotated the tires
on his ‘84 Volvo wagon that morning. He had a slow, long lunch at Harbord Fish &
Chips, and with two suitcases and duck-taped boxes, took the 401 to Windsor, Ontario.

By the time I moved in and became their neighbour, Lucas and Wendy shared a
last name and wore matching bands. Wendy had gone back to school to complete a
nursing degree before meeting Lucas and graduated the year they married. She was
taking twelve-hour weekend shifts at one of the hospitals, working the PM/AM on Friday
nights and arriving home at six in the morning. Things were not ideal for Wendy Brown-
Wright, but it was thanks to her lack of seniority at work that Lucas and I became friends.
Every Friday he wedged the same note between the wood and glass on the window pane
of my kitchen door, and every Friday I expected seeing it there: that folded piece of white
paper delicate in the wind. *Wendy working tonight. Come for Dinner!*  

Before he started leaving the note and my schedule at work was less erratic, I was
meeting Lucas walking his dog in the afternoons on my way home. I’d see him on
Monmouth Street, Naomi melting yellow pockets of urine into fresh snow. We’d spot
each other from a distance and raise our hands. We were just getting to know each other
then, the silence of those white afternoons between us. You’re coming for dinner tonight,
he’d say, Wendy’s working again, and I’ve got a little something extra for an evening
stroll afterwards. He’d wink and pretend-puff with his hand. Are you coming? Yes, I’d
say, and he’d extend his linty Cookie-Monster mitten and we’d shake hands. Lucas liked
the ceremony in things.  

I had started leaving early from work as I became more anxious over the
imminence of my unemployment. Going home after lunch on Fridays or not bothering to
return is what I was happy to consider dissident behaviour. It was towards the sense of
pointlessness permeating the daily attitudes of my casually outfitted co-workers and the
reality of my career as a research assistant coming to its end. So by noon, I’d shut down
my computer and create tidy stacks of file folders on my desk, then put on a sick voice
for Sheilagh, who by that point in the day was in silent hysterics and forwarding emails
around the office and to her daughters. Or I’d tell her I was caught up, pretending to have completed my research for the week on immigrant populations in the city and teenage pregnancy rates, or whatever research Harry needed numbers on and had marked *important* in a memo left in my mailbox. Harry wanted to keep me busy, keep me from asking too many questions. The agency had been awarded a federal grant for my research project, complete with an operating budget and enough shades of grey for Harry to loosely interpret its parameters. The end was near.

Wendy was home one Friday. She ended up with the day off and I walked into their kitchen without knocking, holding a large bottle of white wine by the neck.

So what are the boys having for dinner, she asked, That?

Lucas was behind her and laughed in a large simulated way. We’re going to have a feast tonight! he said, kissing Wendy strongly on the cheek.

They pulled pans from cupboards and spoke with silky voices. I made jokes about my singledom and tried to win Wendy over.

Wendy was attractive. She had fine English features and full lips. She made two pizzas from scratch and after dinner casually removed her nylons and spread them over the chest they kept in the living room under the window. She had long toes and shapely feet. We watched *My Dinner With André* and Wendy drifted in and out of sleep, her legs swaying as her eyes opened and closed. Her plaid skirt had hiked up a little on the couch, and I was trying to not notice the lavender panties. Her mother called and she stretched her legs over the coffee table. She had a vibrant relationship with her mother, comfortable using *shit* and *bastard* on the phone.
I sensed Wendy’s burgeoning mistrust of my influence on Lucas. And I was beginning to think she might have a good case against me. Lucas and I were boys when together; sailors with good intentions, but frightened of the sea. Wendy knew. She told us that night, You two shit your pants with the thought of becoming men. She was not naïve. Lucas was loyal. He had a sensitivity she could depend on, and they seemed to rely on one another. But there was a restraint about Lucas and Wendy, a vague opposition I couldn’t understand that swelled with the silent awkwardness of my being around them, or when I was left alone with her in a room or knocked on the kitchen door asking to borrow pepper or coffee. It seemed my presence exacerbated the absence of something, and after that night I started avoiding interaction with Wendy Brown-Wright.

Lucas called me from the kitchen and asked that I bring my coat. We smoked from a bong in the downstairs storage room and I felt like I was in one of those police shows and uniforms were about to burst in through the door with guns and a film crew. There was a heaviness on Lucas’s face that evening and we took Naomi for a walk under the snow filled sky.

On Saturday mornings I was sometimes driving out of the city and staying overnight in my old bedroom. I packed laundry into a duffle bag, tied it firmly with a double knot and u-turned out of Argyle Road with my still unnamed cats watching from the living room window sill. My migration from home was in all ways a small one, and I was discovering I still needed to be around my mother and father. We had large dinners those Saturdays and were adults together, almost friends. They took care with their sentences and my father asked me for opinions on Canadian politics. I’d arrive in Leamington early
enough to help him clear the driveway of snow, cracking and clearing ice off of the cement with him sprinkling salt behind me, reluctantly, an SG Gigante burning from his lips. His eyes in a smoky squint. My aunt Maria João sent my father cartons from Nazaré throughout the year. This was all he smoked and it was easy to do. Immigrants returned to Nazaré from Leamington for months at a time. They went in the winters when Lake Erie froze over, or in the summers when the boats paused, staying in the same homes they grew up in until early March or late July, taking long walks in the afternoon along the seafront as Luso-Canadians. My parents did not like to return. My father flew twice to bury each of his parents, and my mother went once alone but old things resurfaced with Alzira da Batata, whose son drowned in my father’s boat wreck.

My old bedroom had been turned with Sunshine Yellow into my four-year-old niece’s recreation room. Some nights I hid a tumbler with ice and my father’s scotch behind the Fisher-Price oven door. I’d lay out a comforter and pillow over the carpet and say goodnight to my already pajamaed parents. There was a bedroom upstairs I could have slept in, but that is where my mother kept framed pictures of dead family members and Roman Catholic statues: Christ on his second fall; Saint Antonio, Patron Saint of fishermen; The Virgin Mary with a nose chipped off. And in the corner, on a table draped with a white crocheted cloth, was a shrine to my nephew, Adam.

When I left Leamington, a feigned normalcy had been weighing on our lives for close to a year. It was also a year after I had graduated from university with a degree in political science, comprised of semesters trying to take myself more seriously as an identity than a student, avoiding confrontation with the fact that I would be exactly where I started, the difference being a sixty-thousand dollar loan. But university got me out of
the factories. I would have been content enough with any degree had politics not been the
discipline my father and his cousin Palavras inadvertently instilled in the ‘80s with tape
recorded Zéca Afonso records and the union meetings they held at our kitchen table with
fishermen until morning. My mother assumed I was studying to become a teacher and
gleaned that I was popular with my professors and taking after my intellectual
grandfather. Nazaré closed all of its civic buildings the day he died, she often said. His
boat capsized coming to shore. Seven men drowned and they say your grandfather
drowned himself. Antonio Copa saw it from the beach. He died of shame and drowned
himself, Jaime. Dignity is bigger than your own life sometimes. Almost all of his crew
had drowned that morning. And who would have imagined a similar fate was waiting
your father with the Maria Adelaide.

On the week of my graduation, my nephew, sixteen hours into his thirteenth
birthday, started coughing up blood and would eventually slip into the unconsciousness
he’d be seen in for the next sixty-eight days, at the Sick Children’s Hospital in Toronto.
After the funeral, a melancholy began to slowly hatch out of the black my family wore. It
was a collective depression which somehow managed to evade me. Instead, my grief
metamorphosed into a desire to launch myself into a brand new future, to break from the
misery settling over our silence, an acceptance by my mother and father of luck just not
being in the blueprint of their lives. It’s what finally caused me to move.

By autumn’s end I had accepted I could no longer bear my mother staring long
with swollen eyes and frozen intent at anything inanimate. She started taking walks by
herself through the labyrinth of streets in our subdivision, but they were short ones,
clipped attempts at walking away the grief, and she would end up sitting on a park bench
looking at her sneakered feet. I’d look for her in the afternoons. Or my father, there in the kitchen, taking a third and fourth glass of wine at the table, his back against the tiled wall, after the plates and bread had been cleared. The lights turned off and television on the counter muted. His still face. I had taken up walking too, in need of movement, and would often find myself arriving at my sister’s house. To see how she was doing. She’d be sweeping. Always sweeping. The corners of the bathroom and stairs, the kitchen. Her back turned to my queries. Her hair uncut and pulled back with an elastic band. My brother-in-law spent those many afternoons after work in the back yard, resuming with a fragile determination the projects he had put on hold since spring. Siding on the shed. A new coat of stain on the fence. It was early October then and the weather was still fantastically warm enough for my two nieces to swim in the pool. I remember that careful, almost incongruous sound of their laughter with each other; how they looked at me and their father for an approving smile, a kind of permission to go on living.
five

My mother and father were both thirty-five and wore black when we left Nazaré. I was eight, my sister thirteen. Tonho was my mother’s youngest brother and a foreman at Salustric Steel. He asked for the day off when we landed in Toronto and waited in the morning at the international arrivals gate, my father delayed at customs because of an absent expiration date on his passport.

My uncle was a Portuguese soldier in Guinea-Bissau during the colonial wars. He served for a year and returned with unexpressive eyes and an anchor tattooed on one forearm, Amor de Mãe on the other. He and my father piled the suitcases high in his neighbour’s van and we pulled onto the Mississauga highway and through the hot, grey Toronto streets.

There were thick moments of silence sometimes between the light small words exchanged during the ride; my father up front looking out the passenger window, my mother next to me, alternating between breathing and snivelling. My uncle grew grapes and made his own wine and my father said, You left Nazaré to become a Canadian horticulturist. They tried to laugh a little.

We pulled into the driveway of a red brick bungalow on Keele Street. It was the summer of 1981 and the afternoon was still and fat with the sound of cicadas. The engine was turned off, Nazaré left to the past.

After his Maria Adelaide capsized in November and four of its crew drowned, my father stayed home for the winter and tried to understand how it was an irrational time with the familias in Nazaré. They were calling him assassino. The Maria Adelaide had a crew of six. Two survived. Of the ones who did not, two were boys, Abilio and Rogério.
They were seventeen and were learning Pink Floyd songs together on electric guitars. Vitór was twenty and learning to be a father; he fixed mopeds and smoked marijuana on the way home from the harbour in São Martinho. Fernando was the oldest at forty-one.

My father and Fernando grew up next door to each other, their fathers as well, on Rua do Alecrim. The Maria Adelaide was a new boat with a solid young crew.

My father was a well-liked man, sometimes envied, and greeted townsfolk with a firm handshake when on the seafront on Sundays. He had taken a loan from the Caixa Geral De Depositos at a favourable interest rate and used the savings from his years in the merchant marine for the down payment. On Sunday afternoons he would walk me south to the boatyard and we would watch the building of the Maria Adelaide.

After the boat wreck, some of the conversations at the cafés and taverns and along the seafront were that Jaime Fonseca was an amateur who had taken large risks setting nets for robalo in November along the Salgado shore. Most of Nazaré defended my father, Jaime was a careful captain and took care of his crew. But there were those who did not and they were the families of the dead whose mercy mattered the most.

My mother has told me her story of the last November day of 1980: There was a weight in my heart that morning when your father rose from bed before the alarm. He kissed me on the lips before leaving the house. Your father isn’t one to kiss without intentions. I was still in bed and I don’t know what it was, but I didn’t want him to set out that day. There was that wind, you could hear it at the windows, rattling, whistling. I’d bought him a blue corduroy jacket in Leiria to wear in the winter, but your father never liked the way it fitted, saying it looked as though he was hiding two robalos around his waist. I told
him to wear it to work, and that morning was the only time he left the house with it on.
That jacket. Almost twenty years have passed, and I can still see it on him, the way he
turned up the collar before opening the door, holding the small burlap bag with fruit he
always took to work.

On work nights my sister and I slept with my widowed grandmother. My mother
sold fish with my aunt Julia at the Leiria market three days a week and they were on the
highway before dawn. My father was at the helm of the Maria Adelaide by four most
mornings. It was an early Monday morning and all three of us were curled together on
my grandmother’s bed when a pounding at the kitchen door and the cry Amalia! Amalia!
had my grandmother hobbling with rheumatic legs down the stairs. My sister and I
followed her outside, pajamaed and barefoot.

Alzira da Graça had a loose kerchief around her head and gripped my
grandmother by the shoulders. Your daughter’s husband is dead, she said. The boat has
shored up on the Salgado and all the crew is missing.

Out in the street, doors were ajar and windows shaped incandescent squares onto
the night, the entire town of Nazaré running towards the seafront. Wives and daughters
were screaming, hands in the air, uncertain of whose boat had capsized. A circle of
women kneeled around my fainted grandmother, her nightgown unbuttoned and exposing
a glowing breast under the light of a window. My sister and I followed a group of running
men who were almost all in slippers, their shirts untucked. They stopped cars and mopeds
and asked to go with them to the Salgado shore, climbing on truck beds and holding onto
their caps. The lighthouse on the promontory turned on the slow wail of the siren, the
strobe of its green light starting to circle the unlit sky. The voices on the seafront were all
affirming the same thing, that my father's *Maria Adelaide* been found lurched on its side on the Salgado, the front mast and wheelhouse clipped off. The crew was missing. The pale faces passed us, one after the other, my sister warning me with a quick matronly tone to not run anywhere, standing behind with a firm grip on my shoulders.

Miguel Ilhoca was a grandfather with white hair who had lived in and returned from Canada. Raul was his grandson and we had made bottle-cap guns together behind the football pitch at the south of town. Ilhoca recognized my sister and me under the street lamp where we stood. He looked at our bare feet and asked us who we were with before guiding us with a pair of soft hands up the steps of *Rua da Patria*, giving us warm milk and *pastéis de nata* as we waited in his living room with his wife until the sun rose and shone through the curtained window.

My mother says that when she saw the blue hull of the *Maria Adelaide* out of the water on the Salgado she collapsed on the sand. She and Julia did not hear the siren but had seen the green light from Nazaré on the highway while driving to Leiria and u-turned when the ambulances and police tore past their fish truck. I knew it was your father, she has said, there wasn’t any doubt in my body there had been a disaster with his boat.

At the Salgado, the fog continued to roll in, thick and low through the clustered silhouettes of townsfolk with their pants rolled up and knee deep in the foam of the breaking waves. This is what my mother saw when she burst from out of the truck door and heard the voices desperate with instruction, the men stumbling and searching the shore for the thump of corpses. The families of the missing crew were on their knees, the two wives, the grandmothers with capes over their heads already in mourning and rocking back and forth, calling out names to the gruff silver sea.
I sat at my father’s table one summer when I was twenty, high school finally behind me that week. I had returned from drinking at the Leamington pier with Andrew Miller—Millertime, he liked to be called, even though rye and coke was all he ever got drunk on. Millertime drove an ‘87 Dodge Omni with a boom box in the hatch and dropped me off after midnight, Against The Wind thudding away down Foundry Street. My father was in the kitchen with Armando Manél. They were friends in Nazaré and went halves on their wine when shipmates on the merchant marine, Armando sometimes siphoning from other barrels into a four litre jug with my father on the look-out. Armando emigrated in ‘74 and was one of the first Nazarenos to fish Lake Erie, working as a deckhand on the tugs in Wheatley and sending letters to Nazaré for more men to join him. My father was flying back to Portugal for the first time since the boatwreck the next day. The phone had rung with the news of my grandfather’s death from Alzheimer’s in the morning, and my father, drunk on Glenfiddich from having received immigrant Nazarenos with condolences at the house all day, was ready to tell Armando about the 30th of November.

I need you to listen to this, he said to me, have a seat there.

It was maybe four in the morning and we were pulling the nets for robalo, he said. We weren’t as close to the shore as what the familias said. I don’t know, maybe they still say. All the boats had set out that morning but the sea was rising fast and turning white around us. We were alone at the Salgado. It didn’t take long. I pointed the bow westward and there it was, a wave lifting us up from the stern. The boat rolled right over. It was shallow enough for the front mast and wheelhouse to get clipped off. I didn’t see much after that, underwater in the wheelhouse as I was, but they were all whipped around.
Vitória and me—I don’t know how much time passed, we swam to shore looking for others. Fernando was already there, unconscious, the foam gurgling around him. The boat was rolling towards the shore. I was the first to stand. I couldn’t hear myself screaming even though I knew I was. I shook Fernando. I thought he was dead. But his eyes opened and Vitória dragged him away from the water. Abilio and Rogério were missing. The fog was coming in. The three of us got back in the water. Fernando could hardly stand. And Vitória, he shouldn’t have dove back in. He had no strength, his head bleeding from a tote that hit him in the water. Everything was loose and being tossed around by then.

We waded and searched and tried to swim out into the fog. We were calling out their names, the water filling our open mouths. I had on a heavy jacket and couldn’t get it off, it felt a hundred kilos on me. There are days, even today, when I feel the weight of the jacket on me, pulling me into the water.

But I don’t know too much after that even though I’ve spent most of my life trying to remember. Vitória, we never saw him again. He swam out and was with us when we alternated between the water and the shore. I ran to the nearest house, about a half a kilometre from the wreck, as much blood on me as water. I pounded on the door and an older lady telephoned the Captania, and the Captania called the Guarda-Costa. I heard the siren from Nazaré after that, running back to shore, the green light flashing through the fog, but that’s all. I woke up at the hospital in Sitio, Fernando in the same room, his shoulder dislocated by the anchor when the wave hit. Abilio and Rogério had been at the stern. I got stitches all over on my head and chest, lost my front teeth. I’m not sure how. My mouth was swollen and I asked Fernando if we are all alive, but I already knew.
My father didn’t talk at the table that night about his life in Nazaré after the
wreck. At the funeral, the families of the crew were hard on him with their silence, not
looking up when he approached to embrace them. Abílio and Rogério had been found at
the south of the Salgado later in the morning. Vitór’s body didn’t surface until months
later when all that was identifiable were the striped underwear his mother recognized at
the morgue. The two oldest men had survived. My father did not leave the house for three
months, my mother at his side the first weeks before needing to return to work at the
market in Leiria.

The second week following the funerals is when the provocations started. The
first night with small stones thrown at our living room windows. My father rose from the
couch and turned off all the lights, not leaving the bedroom for three days. My mother
paced the apartment, calming herself this way, wanting to open the windows. The next
week, on a Saturday night, drunk voices shouted assassino from the dark and neighbours
flung open doors, asking indignantly that they go away. Altercations ensued on the street
and my father ran the water in the bathroom to drown out the voices. The whiskies and
brandies he had accumulated from the ports he anchored at when on the cod voyages and
in the merchant marine were opened and emptied one at a time, the slow clinking of his
glass the only sound in the apartment sometimes. My mother had started getting into
arguments at the fish and produce markets, tearing open her shirts and being held back,
coming home with her hair bun undone, stone dust on her legs. Townsfolk visited our
house that winter every day. Men brought cartons of SG Gigante and silent company. My
aunts and uncles formed a kind of shift rotation, each wearing black and cooking meals in
the mornings or evenings that only my sister and I ate. My grandmothers spent full days
next to each other on our couch after my father had tried jumping out of the veranda once and was pulled back and slapped by my grandfather, who dragged him into the kitchen and sobbed words into his ear, pressing and holding my father’s motionless torso to his.

At the beginning of March, my father ended his quarantine. It was on a Sunday after lunch and enough wine. That morning he told my grandmothers to stop coming. The day before Fernando had been to the house with confidence that all was beginning to pass, that my father needed to be seen and not be in hiding. And this is what he made up his mind to do. I remember my mother in the kitchen asking if he couldn’t wait a while longer, wiping bread crumbs from the table with a moist towel, her face pale and eyes large with worry. It’s time, he said, buttoning up his black cashmere cardigan, adjusting the cap on his head. He said he was going to have an espresso at Adriano’s, and decided to take me with him. My father held my hand, and we walked down the cobblestoned dip of our Rua Da Regeneração. Women swept their entrances and hung clothes on the lines from verandas. It was a Sunday afternoon and he asked me normal questions about school, focusing on my face with his wide, nervous eyes, folds and heaviness around the lids. He was squinting and adjusting to the sun, not looking at anyone, though they all saw him. We avoided the ocean but could hear its rumble. We entered Adriano’s café, his hand hard on mine, the clatter of saucers and spoons, the murmur of conversations around us.

There was an afternoon Benfica game on the television and the men my father knew quieted down with us at the counter. We asked for an espresso and Sumol. It did not take long before something was said from the corner of the café. I did not understand the
words but they were enough to have my father reaching in his pocket for escudos.

Responses were shouted back at the man. He was in black. There was brandy at the table and his gravel voice at our backs. My father handed me my *Sumol*, he drank the espresso in one swig without sugaring it. He asked for a brandy. He looked up at the ceiling, biting his lower lip, wet clear lines streaming out of his eyes. Adriano squeezed his hand on the counter, looked him long in the face. The brandy was on the house.

Ausenda da Pinoca was Vitór’s grandmother and she was waiting for us in the alley behind Adriano’s in her black cape. She clutched a broken *Sagres* bottle. The *assassino*, she said, watching a football game with the blood of four men on his hands. My father let go of my hand when she stepped towards us. He kicked the bottle out of her hand and lunged at her. He was gripping her by the blouse and she screamed in the afternoon that the *assassino* was going to kill her too, He killed my grandson and now is killing me.

He didn’t leave the house again until taking a taxi with his cousin Leonel in the middle of the night, five days after that Sunday, to Lisbon. My father phoned Karloff Grilo for help and a place to be away from Nazaré. Karloff was one of his bunkmates from the cod voyages and he had connections. My father could not live in Nazaré for a while, and neither it seemed, could we. There was talk of emigration to France or Germany before he left, but Canada is where my mother’s brother lived, in Toronto; it would be easier, and there was a community of *Nazareno* fishermen working out of Lake Erie. I’ll never touch a boat again, he said.
With my father gone the gossip was bloated with stories of him absconding to Spain and to France with the insurance money from the *Maria Adelaide*, and the altercations on the streets between my mother and the *familias* had increased so that she was arriving home throughout the week with fresh scratches on her face and black shirts torn and grey. Once she snapped a broom in half over a fisherman’s back. It was late spring and my sister and I were beginning to spend full days at the beach on the weekends, and my grandparents were coming to the house every evening, though the purpose was a different one now.

Karloff had helped my father expedite immigration papers in Lisbon and my sister, mother and I had our passport pictures taken in Leiria. Everything was coming to its end for us in Nazaré. Our house had begun to be emptied of its contents by family every night between ten and two in the morning for storage in attics and spare rooms: one day some chairs; the next a displayed China set and blankets; what were left of my father’s sealed, aged bottles; the toys and miniatures in the room I shared with my sister.

There was a long phone call one Saturday in June between my mother and father. My sister and I were given the handset to say hello and he asked if it had rained a lot since he’d gone. It hadn’t rained at all, I didn’t think. But I told him it had, and I wasn’t sure why. Two weeks later we moved in with my uncle Miguel and his wife and daughters and slept with them four nights, our apartment emptied. On the last night, my two grandmothers and grandfather stood in my uncle’s hallway at four in the morning, watching my sister and me lace up new shoes. Leonel was driving us to the airport in Lisbon, my father waiting with Karloff and four passports.
Canada.

On our first day in Toronto, I tried pizza at my uncle’s house on Keele Street and shortly thereafter threw it up on his couch. My parents’ black silhouettes contrasted with the colourful summer clothing Tonho and his wife wore. My cousin Ricardo asked to be called Richard and was six years old and let me navigate through the television with the channel changer. My sister sat soundless in the corner of the living room on the carpeted floor, her legs crossed. Only a couple of days before we had been barefoot on the beach next to the old stocking-capped fishermen napping under the sun against the hull of their boats. Tic tac toe on the sand.

My father with his uncut hair and thick Lisbon sideburns sat at the table with my uncle. They poured whiskey and spoke with a feigned understanding of the future, avoiding any allusion to the circumstances of the past which had brought us to their home. My mother washed plates and glasses with my aunt at the kitchen counter, responding without interest to questions of old Nazarenos gossip. When Richard asked his mother from the living room how to say my name in English, my father looked up to the kitchen, listening for the answer; our names were the same.
The Board of Directors voted to close down the Family Help Centre. It was the end of February and the trees were clothed in white, the City trucks sprinkling slow loads of salt behind them. I stood next to two teenagers at the Centre’s oak-veneered double doors and waited for Sheilagh Harper to arrive and let us in. We took weekly turns with the keys.

The teenagers leaned up against the wall with snow on their shoes. They’d been in fights downtown and were court-ordered to attend Harry’s anger management classes and nobody had shown up.

We were told to be here by nine sharp, one said, his attitude slick.

I said I knew.

Do you work here? Why can’t you let us in?

I said I did. But I can’t let you in without keys.

You should have keys.

Time passed and the snow melted from their shoes and José Furtado wheeled his janitor’s cart to the Centre’s suite doors and unpackaged an industrial padlock. I approached José; we had a country in common and were friendly with one another. He had received a phone call at home to lock up the entrance and not allow anybody inside. I gave José inquisitive eyebrows and he looked behind at the teenagers and motioned for me to step closer.

Idono, não tenho certeza, but I tink is Harry. He opened his hand and curled it closed, one finger at a time, winking. Is no good, I tink is taking the money.

Não sabes mais nada?
Is all I know.

José fed the long shackle through the door handles and pocketed the keys. José Furtado was the keeper of good insider information and patted my snow-wet shoulder. He emigrated from the Açores with his wife in ‘75. He was thirty then and worked with the construction companies for two decades until a worn-out back kept him home receiving workers’ compensation payments for a year. Laying pipe had paid for a house in Leamington and his son’s Business Administration degree. His son now worked as a real estate agent in Windsor and knew the Scolaris; they owned the office building on Ottawa Street and Donny Furtado found his father a job. José was the kind of custodian who whistled when he pushed the dust mop over the clean waxed floors and in the summer we sometimes had lunch together at the picnic table, where he asked questions about my family and poured coffee out of a thermos. We were compatriots.

I tink is the end, Jaime. He shrugged his shoulders with hushed speculation, saying all he could.

The Centre’s Board of Directors was comprised of executives, lawyers, and star entrepreneurs whom Harry had recruited on their names being appended to a noble cause in the community. But three years of ebbing budgets and decreased enrolment at the Centre were making Board meetings thinly attended, barely able to reach quorum. Harry didn’t mind caffeinated coffee before bed and kept the meetings long; the Centre was Harry’s baby and he was an optimist who preferred to do his thinking outside of all the boxes. When the Board was tipped in February that Harry was an executive director
taking liberties with the Centre’s bank account, the vote to padlock the Centre’s doors until further notice was rushed and unanimous. Harry was barred from the meeting.

Harry Chapman had an entire other life before the Family Help Centre and he was keen to reflect wisely on his mistakes with anybody who asked. He had spent his thirties in what he liked to term the fog of immediate gratification. Harry had been a problem drinker who chain-smoked Marlboro Lights and became a wealthy man selling fastening systems to the auto industry. He owned a cell phone in the ‘80s and was a deal maker with an expense account, living a good easy life. He purchased a Tudor home without a mortgage and added an indoor pool for his wife to swim laps in the morning. His son studied philosophy at Brandeis. But Harry kept girlfriends in Southwestern Ontario cities and this cost him his first marriage. Divorced Harry took time off and embraced the mythopoetic men’s movement in his early forties. He lived a year in California and returned to Windsor to start up the Family Help Centre. He kept a deer skin drum in his office.

Alex Abercrombie had tipped the Board. He was confident enough about Harry’s financial improprieties to make a phone call to the president at home. The closing of the Centre was but corroboration of the rumours swirling around the office since the part-time accountant, Don Dickinson, had been laid off in autumn and Harry volunteered to take on all of the accounting. Alex had sent out a flurry of outraged emails opposing the approval of Harry becoming the new accountant for the Centre. Alex had a history of mistrusting Harry, but he quieted down for awhile when he started suspecting his job would be next with only four of us left—particularly after the jokes sprouting around as to the nature of his role at the Centre. They called him *Whatshedo*. Services had been cut
and the Centre was down to anger management classes, Alex’s weekly *Finding a New Job* seminar, and my research project for a self-help lending library. But Alex was determined to nail Harry and knew he could. It was a matter of waiting to strike when there was nothing left to lose. He was offered a job in Human Resources at the Detroit Casino in February, gave Harry his two weeks notice, and called the President of the Board during dinner.

After the final meeting, we all received phone calls at home and the Board cited unavoidable bankruptcy as the main reason for its decision. A day was scheduled for staff to pick up their personal belongings, with supervision. It was uncertain whether or not Harry would be investigated, but he took us all to dinner one Saturday in customary optimism and denial of impending doom. Alex came too and was drinking, his gelled hair and new goatee doing little to conceal his expectations that the farewell party would graduate to a dance club. Sheilagh ordered two Manhattans before dinner and was wearing a black halter dress. We sat next to each other and it was a reminder that I hadn’t been with a woman since Morgan. Marnie was there too. She had been invited and turned up late with the new boyfriend she had met at a resume-writing workshop. Steven. He was a soft large man with teddy bear eyes; you knew you could depend on Steven to understand. You wanted to hug him long.

Harry drank iced tea and paid for everybody’s sirloin dinner. Sheilagh was a vegetarian and I had started to dislike the taste of red meat since it had become unaffordable. We shared a platter of Mexican food and her legs were warm against mine. Sheilagh was divorced and ready for a Saturday night. Her mascara eyes and pearl choker had known one night stands before. She wore the same faux-leather boots as she had on.
the day she interviewed me for the job. Harry was out of town and there weren’t many other applicants. It was a prosperous time in the city and the other interviewee was a young mother without a babysitter. She held her toddler, Jason, by the hand and made promises, keeping him quietly beside her. I wore a crisp white shirt under a corduroy sports jacket of my father’s, the elbow pads sewn on by my mother when we were still in Nazaré. I was confident with coffee in my veins and the job felt mine. Sheilagh was impressed with my internship at the Municipality of Leamington during my last semester as a political science undergraduate. I had learned to write lofty things on my resumé and started using a middle initial. Sheilagh stopped reading Harry’s longhand questions from a purple notebook.

Is Fonseca Italian or Greek?

It’s Portuguese.

Oh. Are you from Portugal?

Yes.

I have a friend who went to Spain.

At the dinner, after a round of China White shots, Harry stuck out his open palm. He said, We wanted to make a difference, James. He raised his hand and closed the gap between his thumb and index finger, so they almost touched. We were this close.

I said we were. I shook Harry’s hand, my eyes watery. I learned from my mother and father to be a good sentimentalist and liked fighting back tears.

Sheilagh was flirty that night and we were both laced with enough merlot that something carnivorous could have happened on my freshly sheeted bed. I had an
apartment and was greedy for a woman to step inside and take off her shoes, to walk on my mopped hardwood with nyloned feet. She whispered in my ear.

I may never see you again.

I said it was a small city.

Do you like me, James?

I said I did.

Sheilagh Harper had two daughters. They were in their twenties. I did the math.

I listened to Marnie. She was tearful and Steven had his arm wrapped over her shoulder. Marnie had been let go after two weeks as a receptionist at a walk-in clinic and Alex made jokes. How many times were you freezing your computer in a day?

I've gotten better about that, Alex. She dug out Kleenex from her half-moon purse.

At freezing computers?

He laughed at me. Alex enjoyed his humour. Sheilagh was squeezing my hand under the table, our legs pressing insistently against the other; we were reaching the threshold of an agreement from which you do not desist. Sheilagh. This was the woman I had worked next to for over a year and had watched delegate all her work to the volunteers on social assistance. The Sheilagh Harper whose dishonesty I depended on disliking when walking home from work, and the Chihuahua in her purse named Aqua everyone was amused with. The three hour lunches. I stood to use the washroom and Sheilagh tugged at my pants, smiling. Alex noticed the disguised stumble in my step and said, You’re cut off from any more wine, Fonseca. Harry returned from a phone call and
sat next to Alex, slapping his still-jacketed back and a sinister *I-need-to-talk-to-you* look in his fresh sober eyes. A bulky silence settled over the table, Alex smoothing his goatee.

The surge of a realization took hold of me in the washroom as I swayed over the sink, rinsing my face. It was never about whom they hired that mattered with my research position, nor was it ever about the research; the grant money was the item of significance, and the community self-help library, the red herring. I was indignant. It’s a sentiment that mixes well with wine, and I tipped a server five dollars to grab my coat. It was a full walk home and I held the keys to my apartment, the flicker of the Motor-City to my left and painted still on the iced river.

It was March and I was submitting good resumes to other non-profit agencies in the city, then to the City itself, call-centres, the Public Library, insurance companies—anything, and the responses were few. There was an interview for which I was the only candidate in the lounge not wearing stilettos. The job was titled executive assistant and I had a beard. The interviewers sipped bottled water and asked if I was good at handling money, paying bills on time. I said I was.

The president has a vacation home in Florida and one of your responsibilities might be to ensure his mortgage is paid on time. Are you comfortable transferring significant sums of money from one account to another, between countries?

Of course I was.

What kind of work did you do at the Family Help Centre?

I researched resource gaps in the city that mainly affected the underprivileged.

What do you know about Taedler Innovations?
It's one of North America's most impressive robotic welding gun companies. And it's committed to exceeding customer expectations.

What can you bring to Taedler Innovations?

I'm reliable, dependable. I get the job done.

They extended their hands for a loose shake and thanked me. There was a granite wall behind the receptionist, serene water running over Taedler Innovations. Everything at the Family Help Centre had been donated or salvaged, our old keyboards sounding like electric typewriters. I was unemployed and my mother was worried and calling throughout the day, using fishermen adages from Nazaré to inspire my confidence. She asked if I was feeling depressed. Your voice is different, she'd say. But to her my voice had been different from the day I left home. Your father can write you a cheque. But they were always strapped. Money and my father. He got a late start on immigration and never got beyond breaking even every month.

By April I was back in the factories. A personnel agency I signed up with called with a job, starting the next day on a midnight shift. What will I be doing?

Not sure, but it's automotive. Bring steel-toe shoes. You'll need to come in today and take a math quiz. You're not colour blind are you? How's your algebra? Come at three. Ask for Laura.

I did and Laura had left for the day. The receptionist handed me the answers to the multiple choice questions and a tidy pile of forms to sign. She winked, reminding me to be at work by ten thirty. Do you drive?

Yes I do.
ACI Automotive. My first midnight shift since having left Renaissance Label for university. ACI sequenced auto parts for the Chrysler mini-van plant. We packaged what they needed into plastic totes and the parts arrived at the plant ready for assembly. I worked at the engine-kit line, fitting AC compressors and power steering modules into the totes. You learned the names fast and scanned each part to confirm what you held.

Have you scanned anything before?

I said I hadn’t.

Aim the gun at the barcode.

The computers did not understand missed scans and neither did foremen. The auto industry has no room for error. A missing AC compressor shuts down an assembly line. I scanned all night and the freight trucks waited for the next load. I clocked off at seven in the morning, my arms still in phantom motions. Sequencing plant employees were annoying small animals to unionized Chrysler employees. We were taking their jobs at a quarter of the pay. I was error free and kept a clean speed. Weekend overtime was mandatory and I had lasted two weeks when on a Sunday morning I walked under the break buzzer to my locker and tossed the safety vest inside. I bit into an apple and decided to go home. That was the end of ACI for me.

I held a bag of furry toys for my two cats when Simpson Personell phoned with a job, manufacturing pharmaceutical and over-the-counter gel capsules. During my physical I was asked if I drank alcohol or smoked and I lied with a clean shaven face. PrecisionCaps sometimes got orders for liquid blood capsules and anybody caught pretending to die on break with red syrup gooping out of their mouth was fired on the spot. This was often the fate of newbies; suicides, they were called. PrecisionCaps had
continental shifting and you worked twelve hour days with a hairnet. I forgot mine once while auditing a tray for defective capsules. A supervisor I had sat next to on break and watched inspect my tuna sandwich with furtive eyes tapped my shoulder. He was burly and bald and nicknamed Shrek. Shrek sent me home and I never came back.

I called Kirk Garrent on the phone that day. He owned the buildings and lived in London. The superintendent was on vacation and Kirk left the tenants a notice in the mailboxes with his phone number. I was going to be late with rent.

Tenants don’t call two weeks before rent is due saying they’re going to be late.

I’m not sure when I’ll have it.

Kirk had purchased the buildings through a power of sale and moved in with his wife and two girls. They repainted the units, stripped and buffed the hardwood, and ripped out kitchen counters. He called it a labour of love. The buildings were historical and he was a handyman. He filled the apartments with tenants who appreciated kitchen doors with paned windows and built-in linen closets. He stayed for five years until buying ten acres of land next to the water. The family had grown and things were on cruise control at the buildings. There was a rapport on the phone with Kirk and he asked me about Tom, whom he called the-not-so-superintendent. Kirk was unhappy with Tom. He made a good first impression but had started to let things go. It doesn’t take long to run a building into the ground. What do you do, James?

I used to be in research. I’m not working right now.

Are you handy? Can you paint? I need help with some of the units. Tom likes leaving them empty for a while. He takes his time. I’ll cut you a deal on rent.

I said I was handy. I said I didn’t need painter’s tape to cut the edges.
seven

Lucas Wright and I spent an hour scratching our heads and gulping creamy coffee down in our Saturday morning jogging pants. The engine in my Renault had stopped turning over. Naomi was tethered to a maple and barked at the squirrels and we waved over our neighbour who had been smoking and watching us from his third floor fire escape. Dan came down. He was amused and asked whose car it was.

I said it was mine.

Well your battery’s dead.

I asked if he was kidding.

Why would I be kidding?

I phoned my father. I was worried about the negatives in my chequing accounts. We’ll go to Walmart and get one, he said. A Walmart had opened in Leamington and my father had started perusing the aisles on weekends, liking that they sold for less. The quiet triumph in not returning to PrecisionCaps after being sent home by Shrek had begun waning and Kirk’s painting jobs were covering less than half of the rent. I didn’t resist my father’s offer.

He picked me up in his GrandAm after lunch. He didn’t drive a Honda. Most of the Nazareno immigrants in Leamington drove Hondas because of Luis Mafra. Mafra worked at the dealership on Highway 77 and had given his father a wallet of business cards to hand out at the Fishermen Café. My father didn’t take one. He worked on a tug with small annual quotas and the GrandAm had got him to the Wheatley harbour and back for eleven years. Why would I want to learn to drive a standard for, he had said
once, stirring sugar into an espresso at the kitchen table. Não sei, but I’ll tell you they’re always trying to keep up with each other at that café.

The GrandAm shoved its way past tractor trailers on Highway 3 and I held onto the door grip, watching the snow blanketed corn and tomato fields whiz behind us. How are you making rent, he asked. Is the painting you’re doing enough?

I said I was covering rent, that I suspected Kirk would give me full time work soon. I’ll have a cell phone and show people apartments, I said.

Is that why you studied politics?

There’s politics in everything.

He smiled in an easy, pleased way. It’s how I liked to remember him when away in Windsor. His Zeca Afonso cassette flipped over to the B side and Grandola Vila Morena rose out of the rear speakers. He listened to Zeca when he got on highways, Grandola the song that wet his eyes and goosefleshed his forearms. Fraternity among the people. It was used as an anthem for the fishermen’s union in Wheatley in the ‘80s. The song had been banned in fascist Portugal and in 1974 was broadcast on national radio, twenty minutes into the 25th of April, as a signal that the military coup was underway. The regime was overthrown by the afternoon and the Prime Minister flown to the Madeira Islands, thanking his captors for being treated well and wishing them the best of luck with the country. He shook their hands. I was on my mother’s lap in Nazaré on the beach, newborn, when Grandola thrummed all day through the loudspeakers and men wore carnations on their lapels in the streets; the MFA soldiers in Lisbon stuck them on the end of their rifles. It was the beginning of the twentieth century for Portugal in 1974,
my father said as we drove, turning down the volume. Did you ever study the Portuguese revolution *na escola*?

I said it was mentioned once.

What did your professor say?

He called it a rare bloodless coup, that it was *um momento magnifico na historia da Europa*.

His face tightened, a warm memory in his heavy-lidded eyes, as he signalled to pass a Heinz truck. He said he was en route to Lisbon that morning with his cousin Joaoquim Miguel, the *Creola* due to set sail on a six month cod voyage. The MFA wasn’t allowing anyone into the city and traffic had stopped on the freeway, the engines turned off and everyone leaning up against cars and standing on hoods. Joaoquim got out and started singing *Grandola*, lifting his arms for accompaniment, a white handkerchief in his hand, conducting the freeway. In Nazaré they had started calling Joaoquim, *O Palavras*, after he had been arrested by the PIDE and spent three months in the underwater prison in Alcoentre. *Palavras* had spent time in France and returned with Zeca Afonso records to sell in Nazaré, each album lined with photocopied communist flyers from Paris. He was incarcerated that same week. My father took a taxi to Alcoentre and picked him up when the PIDE released him. Joaoquim’s beard was wispy and long and he was ready to spend six months in the Atlantic on the *Creola*.

My father talked about the fishermen’s union on the way to Leamington. Fifteen years had passed and things were back to the old ways. The factories now owned and had a monopoly on the fishing quotas, the tugs with little or no control over prices and the deckhand percentages dropping below thirty. He brought up *Palavras*, who’d been killed
crossing Commercial Drive in Vancouver two years before, a bag of Pacific mussels in his hand. Before moving back to British Columbia Palavras had lived a summer with us in Leamington in the late '80s, working on the same tug as my father. It was temporary. Palavras had needed to be away from his wife, who'd been having small affairs with men he was friends with. I was in the ninth grade and trying to play drums like John Bonham when Palavras made a home of my bedroom and I started sleeping in the downstairs living room watching Johnny Carson. My father hadn't seen Palavras since they returned from the cod voyage in '74, Palavras marrying that same month and emigrating to British Columbia to fish off of Vancouver Island on his brother's boat. He started a family.

After his first cheque, Palavras started having conversations with my father about the exploitation of the Portuguese on the Wheatley harbour; not just on the tugs, but in the factories where wives and daughters worked as filleters and process workers.

There's no adherence to employment standards, Palavras said during a Sunday lunch. É uma disgraça!

My father was not unaware of the circumstances in Wheatley and shrugged with embarrassment. Within weeks both started holding quasi-meetings late into the night in our kitchen, with a loose roster of bearded deckhands chain smoking Players and leaving nicotine thick on the walls for my mother to scrub off with bleach in the mornings. The fishermen had all been talking at the Café about decreased percentages and the conditions of the tug which had sunk months before, where three deckhands drowned. Palavras played Zeca Afonso cassettes during his showers, it inspired him. Things were taking on an organized form. There were protests on the harbour and long marches to the
homes of employers. Seventy OPP officers were called in once wearing riot gear and Palavras was the first to extend his arms for handcuffs, wearing a carnation on his lapel. He asked one of the officers if he was familiar with the Carnation Revolution on 25th of April, 1974. The officer didn’t reply and Palavras said, pointing to the fishermen and factory workers with interlocked arms behind him on the Wheatley harbour, that the 25th of April was right there.

The auto-centre in Walmart was next to the toy aisles and I exchanged the old battery for a new one. My mother had asked my father to look at vacuums, one weighing less than the twenty pound Kirby we had since arriving in Leamington. He was going to roam through housewares but came back and tapped my shoulder. Morgan Coolidge was in the store: Olha que tá aqui a Morga. I shrugged and felt the hair on my neck stand and understood my father did not want to be around for a lovers’ reunion. He was going to wait at the checkouts.

I heard Joey’s hiccupy shrills, they were easy to recognize. Fierce and pouty. No, over and over, interrupted by hiccups. He could get violent. I remembered this while listening to packages of toys being thrown to the floor. I hadn’t seen them since being at the Sturgeon Meadows house, where Morgan dead-bolted the door and I sprained my ankle. I pushed the cart away. I wanted to see her. I didn’t. There she was. Morgan Coolidge. She was teething her son’s name, gesticulating for him to stop, red faced. We looked at each other. All of it. I gripped my cart and said hello.

Joey wants a gun. I saw your father. He patted Joey’s head. Joey punched him. I said then maybe a gun wasn’t such a good idea. Hi Joey.
No, he said.

She looked young, a naturalness about her face that was unfamiliar. Confidence perhaps. It’s easier to recognize in others. I said it was good to see her and Morgan’s face softened with the same reply. She called me a city man. I said I was sorry about the emails I’d sent.

They were difficult to ignore.

Is that what you did?

How’s life, James? Your new life.

I said it wasn’t so new.

When are they, she said, almost wistfully.

Her hair was longer than I had ever seen it and she wore it well, tucking a strand behind her pearled ear. I said she looked good. Joey ran out of the aisle and I asked about Andrea. She was with Larry. I wanted to ask Morgan Coolidge if she was with Larry Wiper again. Could she be? But our time apart had taken the gall out of me and I didn’t want to be wrong and see him as the lesser of evils. She asked how my work was going. She was preoccupied with Joey. She wanted to go.

I’m in between things. You?

I work at the high school now. I’m the attendance secretary.

Good thing I’m no longer there. We would’ve become enemies.

She watched my eyes. It was a silly thing to say.

I have to find Joey. I need to go, James.

She raised her hand and gave a light wave. I thought we might have hugged.
We had a hard three years, Morgan and I, and I was still living at home then. My parents knew the situation was too large for me, too foreign. When you’re in your twenties adult is a fresh word in your mouth and seldom can you keep up with what it implies. Morgan was older than me and wanted big efforts, not small words. She knew men enough to be suspicious of what they said with wine, and I was a young one and quaffing a lot of it down, then moving onto gin. Joey and Andrea were the hurdles. I bought them Kinder Surprises and tucked them into bed sometimes. They called me daddy and I was good at changing the subject. My mother and father didn’t believe I was being sincere. They wanted me to love and to be with a woman, but in their silence knew I had picked the wrong one.

The morning after her thirty-first birthday Morgan said, You’re embarrassed of me. It’s been what, over two years? You don’t take me anywhere where you might come across your friends or any of the Portuguese from your town. You’ve been to two weddings alone. You don’t say it but you prefer to come here when its dark. When we do go out—when we do, we drive to the city for dinner. Why are you with me? Are you even here, James?

I had spent that night and it was a Sunday morning. Summer. We were on the same shift rotation then and both had to be in for work at eleven. I walked home and Morgan drove Andrea and Joey out to pick cattails and asparagus. They threw a Frisbee around. Morgan liked to take the kids out on Sundays. She’d call and ask if I wanted to come. We had started ending things at least once a month. It was always a long performance and I broke plates, smashing them down on her kitchen floor, cognizant that
clean ones were easier to clean up. She punched me once and I slapped her. She was stunned by the fact that I could and I bought a bottle of foundation and tried to paint over my black eye. I told my mother and father it was an air hose during the midnight shift, and at work said it was a Coleman camping stove that fell from a shelf in the shed. We had made up our minds to be done with each other as often as we became serious about getting back together. She came over for Sunday lunches a few times when Larry had the kids, my parents cautious and friendly with her over grilled stickleback and roasted potatoes. My sister had birthday parties for my nephew, Adam, in their backyard, and Joey and Andrea were invited. There were balloons drawn on the invitations by my nephew. My mother would cut cake and help Morgan rinse ketchup from plates in my sister’s kitchen, and I’d show up at the end, the disappointment large on everyone’s faces. It’s a hard reality to feel embarrassed about the woman you tell you love and worse being a friend to yourself when you’ve started disliking the person you’ve become. I fumbled to find my way out of the clumsy condition of things with Morgan, but I couldn’t leave her, the guilt was pasted thick to every attempt. I remember the last time I woke up next to Morgan. We were on her bed, her eyes not blinking. She gazed at the feigned glow of the plastic stars she had tacked onto the ceiling when she first moved into her Sturgeon Meadows townhouse. I watched her. She shifted her head on the pillow to look at the frames I’d hung for her with the black and white photos she had taken of autumn, the leaves hanging on.
eight

Spring arrived fast and full and I had started setting the alarm for six, double-knotting my shoelaces and skipping out the kitchen door for a cool run under the dawn. Kirk Garrent made me the new superintendent of Argyle Apartments that week, and a crisp morning mind is how I was seeing myself through the blur of another job. The apartment was close to the river, and the river is where I ran. That month felt like the beginning of something robust, maybe marvelous, spring being a type of affliction every April since my last years of high school. The whispery speed walkers, their elbows high and swinging, scurried in tight groups on the riverside, nodding with benign support as I passed in measured breaths and insistent footfalls. The experienced joggers knew a fraud when they saw one, and most, in their Lycra shorts and serene eyes, were quick to ignore me. It was early enough those mornings for the Detroit skyline to still be skulking in the dark, its People Mover sky-train a singular whooshing between countries.

Kirk had called and made an offer, then drove down from London in a Ford F150 pickup with his seven-year-old daughter. It was a Friday morning and he handed me a thousand page do-it-yourself manual, standing in my apartment and looking around, his daughter instinctually rubbing my cats' bellies in the living room. Things were tidy and clean and I offered Kirk a coffee. He was cutting back. Amanda asked for a hot chocolate and Kirk said they’d get one on the way home. But I had marshmallows in the cabinet and Amanda wanted to make her own. He tossed me the cell phone I had seen Tom use and dug out a file folder from a tan briefcase with combination locks. Inside were fifty photocopies of a memo announcing I was the new building manager, effective immediately.

Kirk had just returned from a meeting in apartment 3F with Tom. He arrived early in Windsor and inspected the empty units, allowing Amanda to unlock the deadbolt on each door.
Kirk chose to have the meeting where repairs were most needed for dramatic effect. It had been two months and 3F was still unpainted with discarded furniture inside and a hole punched into the living room wall. The tenant was evicted and left a full litter box in the bathroom, Eat Shit Tom in black marker on the cabinet mirror. Kirk asked Tom how long it had been and Tom argued he’d been busy installing new hot water shut-offs in six separate apartments. And there was the issue of the upcoming fire safety inspection.

There’s no income from empty apartments. And we have eight. I have a mortgage to pay. I can’t help it if people move out, Kirk. You know that.

We need the apartments full. We need to show them clean and ready to be moved into. People should want to move in now. Not like this, Tom. Kirk pointed to the hole in the dining room. There’s no second chance to make a first impression.

I know and I’ve been trying.

Tom had become suspicious that I was budging into his job when I started repainting bedrooms and kitchens in some of the empty units. He whistled at me one morning from the sidewalk, holding a coffee in a styrofoam cup and smoking a hand-rolled Drum. I was guessing my way through the tangle of keys Kirk had couriered from his home office in London. I was by one of the four entrances to the building in leafy green shorts, a fresh pail of primer and duct taped box of brushes and rollers at my side.

What’re you doing?

I asked if Kirk hadn’t told him.

Told him what?

That I was helping out.
Helping who? How’d you get those keys? I didn’t ask for help and I’m as caught up as I’ll ever be.

Tom Dirksen was younger and kept a trimmed handlebar moustache. I was taking his job. His new girlfriend had moved in and liked to drink Caesars in the afternoon, sitting on a lawn chair in the back yard and airily mouthing phrases like, you gotta be kidding, into a cordless. I cleared my throat and scratched the itch on my neck. I had shaven off my beard. I wasn’t working, I said, and Kirk was giving me a break on rent. He said you could use the help. Well I never asked for it.

I was left with a list of what needed to get done every week, now that it was spring, and Kirk asked me to make sure Tom was gone by the end of the month.

Shouldn’t he have more notice? Can’t he still live here?

It’s not a good idea to let superintendents hang around after they’ve been let go. I don’t need a saboteur on my hands.

A saboteur?

I was sorry for Tom and the situation was uglier than I expected. I needed to get the grass cut on my first full day. I settled onto the lawnmower and rode for five minutes without the blades lowered and it stalled. The spark-plugs sounded like caps being fired from a gun and I couldn’t get the engine running again. Tom watched with his live-in, smoking his Drum cigarettes from the first floor, the black fire escapes zig-zagging above them. He was friendly and shouted to me that the mower acted up when the blades were raised. I thanked Tom, wanting to offer him the job back. I called Kirk and asked if we couldn’t let Tom live in the building until he was ready to go.
Boy this is really eating away at you. You’re gonna need a tougher skin with this job.

I said there was a bad feeling in me.

You’re not bailing are you?

No.

Okay. Tell him he can stay.

Christine Lapport called about a bat in the hallway and I said, A bat? I showed up with a bath towel and broom. I saw the bat, its black mousey face, huddled in the corner of the hallway on the fourth floor. I wedged the door, leaving it open all day. There was another bat that same week, a fiercer one, and I called Kirk about our bat problem. He laughed. Kirk wanted me to replace toilets on the weekends, for ones with smaller tanks, and I read the twenty-fifth chapter of the do-it-yourself manual. I busted the plumbing that went into the tank and Kirk sent over a plumber named Vladimir in a blue rusty van. First Choice Plumbing. Vladimir was taller than me and walked with heavy thoughts on his mind. He carried a homemade plumber’s toolbox. He finished the job and I watched on my knees, asking small questions. He told me the first thing I should have done was buy the right kind of toilet. He asked if I was going to do all of the plumbing in the apartments and I said, I’ll try.

No trying. You know or you don’t know. Buildings old like this, there’s no trying. Okay? Too much work after mistakes. Like dominos falling. You understand? You know how I mean?

I said I did.

Maybe you shouldn’t not put more new toilets in. Okay? Where’s Tom? Is fired? He’s no plumber too.

On a Monday morning the water running out of the showerheads was cold and tenants were calling. I checked the boiler room and the water was knee high, the hot water tanks with
their pilot lights off. I called Vladimir and he fed a plumber’s eel through the clean-out in the
front yard, spending the morning fishing out tampons in the warm rain. They hooks onto sewer
drains, he said. They expands. First one, then other ones. They makes a wall. A whole family.
You need it to write a letter to the womans living here: *no flush tampons in toilets.*

Kirk drove down and collected rent twice a month, the second trip with names on
eviction notices for the tardy. You gotta scare them a little, he said. He was spending too much
money on First Choice Plumbing. He asked me to try doing more of the plumbing on my own. I
said I was. He lowered the rent on the vacant units by a hundred dollars and took out a large ad
in the Star. It was in a calligraphy font. Quaint, beautiful apartments with hardwood floors and
high ceilings located in a historic neighbourhood. A must see. The cell phone buzzed all week.
Young couples were calling and Kirk said, We’re on a roll, Jamie. We’ve got ‘em biting, now
reel ‘em in.

They were educated and liked the charm in claw-foot tubs and built-in linen closets at the
end of the halls. Large old trees in the front yard. They were grade school teachers and social
workers with fresh careers and could only arrive for viewings at the end of the day. There were
others. They brought government forms for subsidized rent and Kirk asked me to explain there
were currently no vacancies, to try again in a few months.

I was working fourteen-hour days and Kirk wasn’t always answering my calls, wanting
me to figure things out on my own, make executive decisions. He was launching a Geo-Thermal
heating business in London and bidding on some large projects, retirement complexes and
schools. Kirk Garrent was losing interest in Argyle Apartments. He promised he’d give me a
raise, a hundred dollar bonus for every unit I got a twelve month lease on. I trust you at the
helm, Jamie. You’ve done more in your first month than Tom did in half a year.
I said there wasn’t time in my life for me to do anything else, that it had been over a month since I’d seen my mother and father.

He asked how old I was and I said almost thirty.

You’re lucky you don’t have a girlfriend. Next time I’m down we’re going out for a few beers. We’ll have lunch, too.

Christine Lapport needed to have a kitchen sink replaced and I studied the manual carefully. She was friends with Wendy and they drank Guinness and ordered liver and onions at The Monmouth House. Wendy mentioned that Christine had started asking about me with a sheepish grin. I knocked on Christine’s door with her new sink in a box in early May. She was wearing a grey cargo skirt. A little perfume. Christine’s face had an exfoliated glow from her shower. There was a light gloss on her lips and she wore a scrabble T-shirt. Christine was a graduate student in social work and was researching Mennonite immigrant women’s access to mental health care in Leamington. I told her my parents had Mennonite neighbours. They were from Mexico and the men dressed like cowboys and women made four dresses out of the same six yards of fabric. Christine helped me install the sink, then caulked around it with silicone. I made a wet mess of her kitchen and we mopped the linoleum, listening to Muddy Waters. Christine liked American Blues. We had dark ale on her countertop. We flirted delicately. The way she paused between sentences and looked at the walls for answers reminded me of Morgan Coolidge. Morgan had been on my mind. She stared into me at the store, looking for a reason to understand why she had hung on as long as she did. Enough time had passed for the assessment to be objective, and what she saw could have only disappointed her. It’s what I felt standing there, my hand gripping the shopping cart, Joey running away.
It was Saturday and I needed to show a few apartments. Christine asked if I’d come for dinner. We’ll cook pizza from scratch, she said. It was a warm liquid moment and I said I’d bring the wine.

Could you pick up some cheese?

It sounded like we lived together.

Wine and cheese, I said.

Lucas found my superintendency peculiar. He was taking Naomi for a walk and holding a used *Ulysses*. He said it was an odd decision to go around having that kind of role in people’s lives.

You stop acting like a human being around the people you live next to, he said. Aren’t you always anticipating a motive or some form of negativity when the phone rings? When you pass them out front?

He had a point but I needed the money.

I know you do. Couldn’t you have asked Wendy and me for some help instead of changing toilets? You shouldn’t be changing toilets, James.

I needed a job and this is what I could find.

Lucas came from a world where you did good work in life. My parents worked with their hands and legs, with filleting knifes and nets. It was the country we were born in. Lucas’s father was a senior director with Heritage Canada and his mother ran a homeless shelter in Toronto. His grandfather was a journalist for the Globe and Mail and had landed in Normandy. It was how Lucas and I differed, in his courage to stare intrinsic worth in the eye, whereas I scrambled for fast solutions at the thought of suffering without an answer.
Lucas had spent most of the winter in Toronto. His parents had divorced before he moved to Windsor and his father’s Parkinson’s was worsening. His mother remarried and that’s when Lucas became serious about the book of linked stories he was writing. We were walking Naomi and I kept an ear on the messages being left on the phone. This baffled him and I was embarrassed. He wanted to talk. The agreement he’d made with Wendy to write his book until spring and then conceive their first child was wearing on him. He looked to me for reasons to change his mind. We stood in Willistead park and he asked if he was being selfish. He didn’t want it, not yet. There were four years between us and I felt like the wrong person for that kind of advice.

I don’t know if I ever want to be one.
I gave silence.
Do you, James? Would you become a father right now if you could.
I said I would. I watched my nephew die in a hospital in Toronto. It made me want to become a father.

We threw sticks around and Naomi’s tail wagged. Lucas had a joint inside Ulysses. We smoked on a park bench under a birch.

We’re moving to Toronto.
It was a hard thing to hear. When?
Lucas didn’t know.
nine

When I moved into Argyle Apartments and became Lucas’s neighbour, a year had passed since my nephew was buried. Adam was thirteen, and it was close enough to the end of July to think of summer as closer to its end than beginning. Adam’s grade six class formed a single line at Saint Michael’s Church and left careful piles of white roses on both sides of his coffin. A Mozambican priest gave the service in Portuguese, the afternoon rising and shining through the stained glass windows. I watched Father Godinho wipe long tears from his pudgy, shaved cheeks when a fado about *saudade* was sung by a *Nazareno* named Fernando Fialho. Fernando was a fisherman with a full voice and he recorded and sold his CD, *Domingo da Saudade*, for ten dollars at the Café. There’s no translation for *saudade* in english, it’s more a longing than it is a word for something gone and unlikely to return.

Adam’s coffin was a few meters from the front pew where I sat next to my sister and brother-in-law. We were all in black and *Nazarenos* had the church full behind us. There were school teachers and my sister’s factory co-workers. My brother-in-law laid pipe for Adelino Paving, and his crew’s soft uncapped foreheads contrasted with their tough, sunburnt faces. My father had his arm around my mother. She was curled against him and I thought of how seldom I saw him this gentle with her. She had fainted at the funeral home when the pallbearers slipped hands into white gloves. Rui Mendes picked my mother up with one fluid swoop and carried her outside. He lay her under the shade of an elm tree, the Erie Street traffic passing with a slow curious hum. Rui’s mother was my mother’s closest friend; they were born at the same hospital, on the same day, in Nazaré. The procession to the church was put on hold and I poured water onto a handkerchief from a plastic bottle. I dabbed her forehead and my father slapped her face with a light hand.
The pallbearers were the men of our family. There were six of us and the tallest were
placed in the back. I was the tallest. Almost too tall. The funeral director whispered in my ear to
switch sides, suggesting that I slump my shoulders so the weight of Adam and the coffin would
distribute evenly. *Pachelbel’s Canon* had been looping from speakers hidden behind the spider
plants since the morning, and there was a flat screen television with digital photos of Adam next
to the flowers and wreaths. He was opening presents and swimming in Lake Simcoe. He stood
alone in a cornfield in Alentejo, the sky long and glaring behind him. You saw the giddiness in
being a child. The director gave the pallbearers the nod and we lifted Adam’s body. Outside, the
July afternoon pressed into our eyes.

Skid marks had been left on the driveway by my brother-in-law Don’s minivan two months
before. It was on Adam’s thirteenth birthday, the balloons and streamers swaying to a May
breeze on Wallace Street. I hadn’t arrived at the party yet. I was walking from my parents’ house
and stopped by Alex Hornby’s. Alex kept bottles of Newcastle in his spare fridge and we
listened to Neil Young bootlegs while his daughters tried to make a case for opening the pool
that weekend. I had worked with Alex at Renaissance Label. He married young, was happy with
his life, and we became friends and spent time together on the weekends when I wasn’t with
Morgan. Alex held a dignified pause between his words. He kept it to himself that he read
Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy. There was a snooker table in his basement and I liked to
watch him control the cue and sink ball after ball. Alex’s life appealed to me. He had never
stopped nurturing the romance with Melanie. It was in their ability to laugh with one another, the
affection in small things, the physicality. You noticed it in how they spoke with attentive words
to each other, in how Melanie kissed his cheek and pressed her hand to his chest. They paid their
bills on time and took long trips through the country they lived in and loved. Alex told me once that when seven-years-old he recognized his brother’s running shoes under a semi-truck at the corner of Seacliffe Drive and Erie Street. They were twins. And I gathered this is why he often asked about Adam.

Adam’s pulmonary arteries never properly formed. There wasn’t enough blood flow to his lungs and it weakened him. When he was born in Leamington a group of doctors met with my sister and Don and it was the first time either had heard a medical term like pulmonary atresia. His skin was blue and they flew him in a helicopter to Hotel Dieu Hospital in Windsor that same day, and when Adam got older he liked to vaunt about having been propelled over Essex County on the first day of his life. There wasn’t much doctors could do until his body was resilient enough for corrective procedures to begin. When he was seven a team of cardiologists and pulmonologists studied his condition at the Children’s Hospital in London and surgically created two shunts. It was a six hour surgery and the shunts opened up the blood flow to his lungs. The oxygen count in Adam’s blood tests started resembling normal levels. He’d be okay until a growth spurt, then options, the kind my sister did not like to face too often, would be discussed. Adam’s doctors wanted to see him every three months and he started the second grade and learned to ride his bike at a restrained pace.

So I was with Alex by the unfilled pool. I had a fresh university degree to nudge my way into the future with. I had been working at the factory part-time after classes and greasing the guillotines on the weekends. But I gave Dave Klein my notice that week. There was a warm good feeling in me. The internship I had with the Municipality researching and drafting bylaws had evolved into a temporary contract for the summer. Alex said he was proud of me and a vibrant feeling of accomplishment rolled through my chest.
Why don’t you stop by on the way home after Adam’s party?

It’s what I was expecting him to say and I certainly would.

My father’s GrandAm was parked in my sister’s driveway. It was going to be a year of easy and light parties for the kids, just for the family. Streamers and green and white helium-filled balloons were pinned to the fence I had helped Don drill 1x6 planks of pressure-treated wood onto. The minivan was missing and my mother and father were in the backyard, gathering unused plates and glasses, the tablecloth yellow with smiley faces. My mother’s eyes were in a pink swell and my father with that pale still look on his face. Adam was coughing up blood and they left for London, he said. It was stern. He could smell beer on my breath.

I said What? London? Was it a lot of blood?

My mother asked where I’d been.

At Alex’s, from the factory. What happened?

Your sister wanted you, she said.

My mother was in her Sunday shorts and not in her petticoat and apron. She’d been diagnosed with irritable bowel syndrome and it kept her abdomen swollen and round. The petticoat disguised things and shorts were for occasions. She tossed the forks and knives she held back onto the table and slumped down on the bench, her hands trembling over her face.

My father asked that I untie the balloons from the fence. He didn’t like the irony. I untacked the streamers first. I brought the balloons into the shed and they rushed to the gabled ceiling. My sister called from London that night, Adam’s lungs had been x-rayed. She said there was a lot of blood inside them.

Adam’s body had started growing tiny blood vessels around his heart, too many for the doctors to count. The body adapts, it tries to improve itself. But Adam’s blood pressure had
increased as his body grew into adolescence. The web of veins had begun to rupture and bleed into his lungs.

I asked why the doctors didn’t know this was happening.

Not this, they didn’t know this would.

My sister called again in the morning. The sun was rising. She was vague with my mother and asked to speak to me. My mother stood by the sink with an empty bodum in her hand, gauging my reaction on the phone.

The cardiologist had met with my sister and Don at six in the morning. He said, Adam is reaching the end of his journey.

He said that?

There’s nothing else they can do here in London. They’re in a teleconference with doctors at the Sick Children’s Hospital in Toronto.

I said I wanted to be in London with them.

We’re going to Toronto.

When?

Later today.

I was going.

Okay, come. But don’t bring Mom and Dad. She paused a long time on the phone.

Dad’s at work, but they’re gonna want to come, Isabel.

We’re on the third floor.

My mother asked for the phone and my sister wasn’t able to speak to her, to repeat in Portuguese what the doctor had said in English.

I said, The doctors don’t know for certain yet, māe.
Why are they sending him to Toronto?

I don't know.

Are you telling me the truth? She held my arm. What did your sister say?

Adam, I said, é capáz de morrer.

It was eight thirty in the morning and my father was on the tug. I walked downstairs and drank brandy. I poured it into a Collins glass and closed the bathroom door, my mother’s footsteps in the kitchen, in the bedroom. She was getting dressed, gasping and letting out deep guttural sounds. I called my father’s boss and he radioed his son on the tug, asking that they return to the Wheatley harbour. I drove to London alone, charging through the 401 with my hazards on. Over the years my sister and Don had been told that Adam would be confined to a wheelchair in his twenties, that his chances for survival beyond thirty were low. But between now and then there’s much that can happen, a pulmonologist said, medical breakthroughs and technology are always a friend to cases like Adam’s.

Adam was asleep in a private room, wearing a soccer jersey and his white tube socks pulled up high. I was expecting to see his body in a gown, his chest and arms wired to an IV drip and heart monitor. But it was only my sister at his side, gripping his hand. My brother-in-law was roaming the halls of the hospital. My nephew was a thin boy, his short light hair with a front cowlick. On the weekends he hung out in my room. He liked the music I listened to and borrowed my CDs. We fished pickerel and bass on the Lake Erie pier and shared hot chocolate from a thermos.

Can you find Don? The ambulance is taking us in ten minutes. The last thing I need is to be worrying about him.
I found him. He was in the lobby gazing at a Hopper print, waiting for the elevator. I touched his back. I said, How are you doing? There was no answer and we both took the stairs to the third floor. There were three chairs and we were all standing when Adam woke up. He waved to me. A small wave with a tired arm, his mind waking from a dream.

I was back on the 401, riding with Don in the minvan to Toronto. There was the sound of the ambulance with Adam and my sister. And then it clipped past us.

I’m not ready for this, Jamie, my brother-in-law said, Fathers burying sons. Let’s not talk that way.

The doctors couldn’t even look at us, they had their heads lowered.

We took the Bloor Street exit off the 401 and entered Toronto. We pulled into a 7/11 and I bought cigarettes for Don and a map of the city. I looked for University Avenue and repeated directions. He was impatient with the traffic, pounding his fist on the steering wheel, grinding his teeth. It was rush hour and I took a smoke. I had quit cigarettes in the fall and a whirl of lightheadedness had me sticking out my head onto Queen Street traffic.

Adam was given a room in the cardiac wing of the hospital and we waited for doctors. There was a television and he flicked with the remote for a music video channel, sipping orange juice from a straw. One of the paramedics who had ridden in the ambulance from London was Portuguese. She came up to say bye to Adam. Female affection had started embarrassing him. We once walked through a department store and I pushed him into the lingerie racks. He was flustered and careful. The paramedic was young and kissed his forehead and held him long.

I met my mother and father downstairs. The atrium was festive with greens and yellows and large paper maches of dancing animals in ballerina dresses and overalls. My parents first drove to my uncle Tonho’s in North York, then followed him downtown to the hospital. My
mother was being strong around my father and uncle and I led them up to the fourth floor. There was a lot of silence in that room and Adam was beginning to take to the heaviness of why we were all there. He started coughing up blood again. My sister supported Adam’s head and my mother held the metal basin under his chin. My father was crying, but only to himself. He wasn’t a crier. I saw his hands shake and he hid them in his jacket. I sat next to Adam. I brought his birthday present. It was a music player, and before his birthday he had taken two days to scrawl a list of the sixty songs he wanted added. He reached over and tacked the bow to my mother’s hair. He wanted us to laugh, and we were docile with the opportunity. Don and my sister sat on the bed with Adam, then lay down next to him.

We waited for a cardiologist to come out of surgery and my father wandered the muralled halls with my uncle, their hands crossed behind their backs. Adam listened to his songs and drifted in and out of sleep. You could still smell my brother-in-law’s last cigarette in the room. He’d just been outside and had walked up the stairs, out of breath. My sister asked, gently, if he couldn’t stop once and for all.

I’d lose my mind if I stopped smoking right now, hun.

She said, What about those who don’t? What are we supposed to do?

Dr Gerald Keane walked into the room and extended a thick soft hand to us, his lab coat making crisp sounds as he introduced himself. Dr Keane only wanted Adam’s parents in the room. My sister asked me to stay.

How are you feeling, Adam?

He raised his eyebrows and said he’d had better days.

Adam, you’ll need to tell me how long you’ve been coughing up blood.

Adam looked at his mother. He said a couple of weeks.
A couple of weeks? my sister said.

Dr Keane gripped Adam’s shoulder and asked how he felt about having a few more x-rays. There were going to be some other tests too, but Adam couldn’t be awake for those. Adam nodded his head.

Two nurses, one in Disney scrubs, asked that we all leave the room. A medical cart was wheeled in and the door was closed. When the gurney came out Adam was wearing a light blue gown. He was strong and calm and afraid. We all kissed and we all hugged Adam. His father was the last, and Adam drew out a cry. My sister wiped Adam’s tears.

They operated that same night and worked on getting the veins to stop bleeding. It was tedious work and Dr Keane was anticipating four additional surgeries before they could move onto finding long-term ways to keep Adam alive. Adam’s body needed two day intervals between each surgery. He was moved to Critical Care and they siphoned out blood from his lungs every five hours. They kept him anesthetized, it was the only way to keep his body still.

My sister and Don were given a private bedroom on the fourth floor and I bought them toothbrushes. My parents and I stayed with my uncle and aunt, my father taking time off work and the captain said he’d still receive a catch share. They allowed me to work three days a week at the Municipality and I was picking up my nieces from a cousin’s house and barbecuing chicken thighs for them in our backyard. Carla was eight and Emily was two. I said they were making Adam healthy again and brought out an inflatable pool from the shed, and the summer warmed the water overnight.

The phone rang in the morning and Adam had gone into cardiac arrest. He was in a coma, hooked up to a heart-lung machine. He was being kept alive. My sister wanted me to bring the girls to Toronto and I asked if that was a good idea. She needed their arms around her. We drove
back up in the afternoon and Emily was asleep in the child’s seat I borrowed. I cleared my throat and tried to swallow and turned off the radio. I needed to tell Carla that her brother might die, but it wouldn’t come out of me, not with words. Adam was in his coma for two weeks. We waited in lamplit rooms and flipped through old magazines. My mother prayed the rosary and my father walked the floors. I’d watch him across the atrium, on the second, then the third floor, his hand delicate on the railings. My brother-in-law quit smoking and my sister stopped eating. They moved Adam into a private room, and on a Thursday evening in early July my sister and Don accepted that Adam was no longer living. My uncle’s family was there. Don’s parents flew in from Alentejo. My sister wanted me to turn on the music player and insert the headphones into Adam’s ears. It’s how he’d want to go. He was unshirted. It kept his temperature down. We took turns saying goodbye to Adam, the droning sobs from us all.

It was time and a nurse entered to turn off the heart-lung machine. Only the parents were allowed to stay, but my sister wanted me in the room. She said, You meant a lot to Adam. He’d want you here. I want you here.

I held his wrist. Adam felt alive. My sister and Don shared his right hand. They were hunched over the bed and the heart-lung machine was turned off. A long rush of air rose out of Adam’s mouth. It was warm on our faces and hair. A warning came up on the heart monitor, then an urgent beeping, and then a flatline. The nurse turned off the monitor. You could hear the tin of a song from the earbuds, those final rogue beats from Adam’s chest.
It was the end of June when Kirk left a message asking me to return his call as soon as I could, but I waited. I was with Christine. We were walking along the riverside on a Saturday afternoon and the day was ours. She had made tomato sandwiches from a baguette and I'd poured a bottle of white wine into the water canteen. We were going to spend the afternoon under a tree, watch people pass along the river. I had stopped running in the mornings and was secretly buying packets of cigarettes. Christine wanted to get me out of managing the apartments; it was wearing me out and she'd pointed to the bags under my eyes. She wanted me happier. We had a long way to go, but were seeing ourselves growing into the assuredness of being in a good relationship. That was how she termed it. We walked with my arm around her shoulder.

Christine and I wanted double espressos before lunch and I called Kirk back from a bathroom in a downtown café. I had become stronger on the phone and did not hide that I was taking the afternoon off to be with my girlfriend. My relationship was news to Kirk. He said, You have a girlfriend? You didn’t woo a tenant did you?

I said, As a matter of fact, she kind of wooed me. It was a strange word to use on the phone with Kirk.

A month earlier he’d put the rentals on the market and he wanted me to know they were sold.

You sold the buildings?

I was losing money, James.

And I was losing interest and energy. I said, That’s too bad, Kirk.

The new owners want to keep you on.
I paused. This was my opportunity to bow out gracefully. I said, I think, Kirk, that I’ll pass.

I figured as much. You’ve tried your best with this job and I appreciate that. I’ll pay you for this month. But you’ll have to give them notice, James.

I said, I do? There was a charge of indignation in me. How much notice are you giving me, before they take over?

Two weeks.

When I walked out of the bathroom, still on the phone with Kirk, Christine had our espressos. She was at a window table. I waved at her and raised my index finger. I mouthed that I would be another minute. She was smiling back. Christine dressed with a freshness. She gave life to old things. She had on her grandmother’s suede penny loafers and was wearing a T-shirt printed with a dinosaur wearing a yellow cardigan. She wore her own turquoise cardigan with elbow patches sewn on. She had a haircut that week and her bangs were high and framed her light vibrant face.

Okay, Kirk, then that’s as much notice as I’m giving you. I hung up on Kirk and pulled out a chair next to Christine. I told her I had just quit my job.

You did?

I said I wanted to move out of the city with her. Would she be okay with that? This surprised Christine. We had brought it up before and I was uncertain. She had been offered a job in Kingsville, working with teens. It was temporary, but she wanted to be by the lake and Christine’s mother had a friend who could get a lease on a small bungalow for six months. The backyard was a beach. I saw good times for us.

But I haven’t met your parents.
Then we should have lunch in Leamington tomorrow. I was full of confidence. I wanted the future, wanted to leave Windsor. I said, I’ll find another job.

A good one this time. Christine opened up her hand and there was a bonbon in a cherry wrap she had taken from the counter. For you, she said.

I want to hang onto this, I said.

I invited Lucas and Wendy for dinner that Saturday. It was an impromptu decision and they were returning from the farmer’s market with fresh vegetables. They’d decided to move to Toronto at the end of the month. Lucas left a typewritten notice stapled to his rent cheque, with a long excerpt from André Dubus’s *We Don’t Live Here Anymore*. It was one of the stories he had asked me to read more than once when I was still at the Family Help Centre. The paragraph he’d retyped had a large red asterisk in the book. It was about marriage and children. Lucas was afraid of what being a father might do to him, to his writing. Lucas feared one word and that was *domesticity*. He wasn’t seeing the middle ground. I was beginning to think of Lucas as romanticizing anguish. It’s what I had been aspiring to grow out of, why I left Leamington after Adam died. I had put off talking to Lucas about the note. I was disagreeing with him in a way I never had before, and it had caused me to want to avoid him.

Wendy and Christine talked in low, happy voices in the kitchen. They were the same age, twenty-six, and had become friends waiting at the bus stop in the mornings. Christine found out over dinner that Wendy and Lucas were trying to conceive and Lucas poured himself more wine. He wanted to take a walk. He told Wendy that Naomi hadn’t been out since the morning and I said, I’ll go too. Wendy and Christine wanted to meet at The Monmouth House for pints. The girls were going to meet the men later for drinks. It warmed me to think that I was having that in
my life, that I would plant a kiss on Christine’s cheek and sit next to her at the pub, listening to fiddles, the smell of a June evening on me. It’s what Morgan had wanted and what I was never able to give. Morgan had chosen me to help set things right in her life, but I was the wrong kind of reinforcer, tethered to my own melancholy.

Lucas and I walked and I told him about my sister and brother-in-law and how when Adam died in Toronto there was a life that went out of them in a way I’d never know. But I wanted my heart infused with that life. I wanted muddy gumboots in a hallway. I wanted to bolt training wheels onto a bicycle.

You’re glorifying what you don’t have.

I don’t think I am, Lucas.

Christine spent the night and we slept on twelve thousand dollars. It was in a manila envelope under the mattress. Kirk had stopped driving down to collect rent. He was too occupied with the Geo-Thermal venture and left it to me to deposit the rent into the Argyle account as it trickled in. I made a comment about waiting until I had it all and not going to the bank, instead driving out to the Maritimes to start the rest of our lives. I was still drawn to the Atlantic. Christine said she loved me. It took us a while to start passing that word around, we wanted to be sure. We were under the covers and I held her hand. I said, let’s do this.

She was nervous in the morning about meeting my family. It was Adam’s birthday and we were going to have a light event at the cemetery. My sister wanted to release balloons. It had been two years, and on the first birthday after his death neither she nor Don was up to facing the day.

We drove out in my Renault on Sunday morning and Christine had a potted rose bush for my mother. We listened to a quiz show on public radio and played along. My father greeted us at
the door. He was hosing out grass clippings from the driveway. He hadn’t been smoking since January and the lollipops he supplanted the cigarettes with had raised his blood-sugar. He was forced to cut all sweets from of his diet. He started drinking water and was emptying seven bottles a day. My mother was complaining from the garage how empty plastic bottles had taken over the backyard deck. It was a nervous way of easing into being introduced to Christine. I had explained to Christine during the drive that my mother and father were both shy about their English, and on the phone mãe had asked how to say friendly, multisyllabic English words. The Nazareno community had always worked together in the fish factories and on the boats. They spoke Portuguese, and English had remained the foreign language. Emily was four now and had spent the night with my parents. She was a buffer, there to take the pressure off those early handshakes and greetings, the anticipated awkwardness. My mother hugged Christine. She said, My house, your house. Christine brought out the rose bush from the trunk and my mother said, So nice, Cristina.

We met my sister at the cemetery. Emily rode with Christine and me and asked Christine if she’d rather be a spider or a hippopotamus, a unicorn or a squirrel. We picked up coffees for everyone. Don was due back with the minivan full of balloons, and we all stood together. Eterna Saudade is etched on Adam’s headstone. The balloons were green and white, the same colour as two years before on Adam’s birthday. We each held one, and Emily’s slipped out of her hand, twirling up above. She said, oh man! My mother had an arm over Isabel’s shoulder. They had become friends in a strong silent way. My father was next to Don, and Carla stood with Christine and me. We formed a circle and held hands, and Don said, one...two...three. Some of the balloons
bounced onto each other, and the afternoon took hold of them. They squiggled alone and
together into the sky, and we watched them all shrink away.

Don had built a rotisserie out of scrap metal and an electric motor and we had Portuguese
piri piri chicken in their backyard. My father poured his shed-made wine into our tumblers. We
raised a toast to Adam, and my mother said, À família. É o que sálva agente. I borrowed a pair of
shorts from Don and rolled out a few slow somersaults in the pool with Emily and Carla. We
wanted Christine to join us, but she was getting to know Isabel. Don convinced us to stay the
night and I drove out with Christine to pick up some apple wood for a campfire. My mother and
father had started taking evening walks to the lake together. They were waiting to cross Erie
Street and I stopped my Renault and waved them across. They said thank-you and crossed, not
recognizing the car at first, then laughed together, pointing, after I honked and drove away.
In Search of *Saudade*

Memory, Identity Construction and *Saudade* in Sunday *Saudade*

1. **WHY?**

I began this project knowing full well that the complexities of identity construction inherent in the immigrant experience had been assiduously documented in Canadian fiction. From Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* to Nino Ricci’s *In A Glass House*, to the abundance of all the remarkable works before, between and after so thoroughly addressing the effects on individual identity in a new country, I felt there was little that I could contribute that hadn’t already been written. In short, I was worried and secretly intimidated.

What could I have possibly added to an area of creative writing that had been so exhaustively covered? It didn’t seem that there was an adequate enough answer. This caused me to place this project on the back burner for some time as a way of evading this so valid and inevitable question. This delaying tactic, however, only produced a new question, one that was far more challenging to address and comprised of far fewer letters: *why?* Why was I even wanting to write about the immigrant experience, about a character who had emigrated from Portugal to Canada when he was eight years old, and had spent close to twenty years growing, seemingly successfully, into a fresh identity as a Luso-Canadian? Where was the story in that, which hadn’t already been the story in so many other novels?
The story I had been wanting to explore was significantly autobiographical; many of the intricacies of identity construction James Fonseca was to narrate in *Sunday Saudade* were based on my own experiences as a Portuguese man living in Canada. I took up running; there's a lot to be found in the rhythm of one's footfalls. During these sneakered sojourns along the riverside the idea of a question being more interesting than its answer started formulating itself. I had heard Robert Kroetsch say a similar thing during an interview, and this only intensified my sense of curiosity over the issues of validity I was grappling with. The question of *why* started to forge into a kind of answer on its own. *Why* started becoming its own reason, in a way, its own answer. The farther I ran, the further my mind retreated into my past experiences, not only after immigrating to Canada, but before I had any notion of Canada's existence. I began to realize that I wouldn't be writing an immigrant novel at all. Although emigration was a major aspect of my identity, and an unavoidable element I would need to contend with in the writing of the *Sunday Saudade*, memory was the true subject of the story. It was this realization that brought the writing of this project from a swirl of ideas, memories and insecurities, to the clacking of keyboard keys in a study carrel. *Sunday Saudade* was going to be an interrogation, a query--not only about my own life as a man who was *also* an immigrant, but more importantly about why any writer, foreign or native born, embarks on the often dubious journey of writing one's story.

This creative writing thesis has an universal theme; our lives are understood through and because of their telling, the details of our biographies can only become illuminated when they are dusted off and spread out for our own observation, for our own reflection. Our desires, losses and glories make us who we are, and our present notions of self are invariably rooted in our pasts. Only in coming to terms with whom we have or haven't been--or are yet to become, can any truthful measure of where we are going, and why we need to go, be understood. *Sunday Saudade*
is about James Fonseca exploring this understanding, this process of reflection as a way of moving forward, or in his terms “nudging one’s way into the future”.

2. NEGOTIATING MEMORY

My interest was in exploring the process of remembering and retelling, particularly in the performative aspect of writing one’s self via the guise of a fictitious narrator. James was me, and I was James; there wasn’t much fiction in that. We were both immigrants, and both had also tried to live what we construed as unimigrant lives. Our experiences were the same. In other words, James was my memory. But this would also pose the biggest challenge.

With memory established as the compass for this project, I was drawn to what Joanne Saul has written on “biotext”, suggesting that “biotext” writing bears a reliance on memory as a kind of counter-discourse, while also questioning its reliability. She notes, “The slippage between past, present, and future helps to emphasize the untrustworthiness of remembering and the uncertain process of cultural recovery” (27). This raised the question: how truthful is the truth I am purporting to write? Has the slippage between tenses convoluted the clarity of my ability to recollect anything on its own objective terms--without time augmenting and shaping the experiences I was recalling?

Daniel Schacter, writing on time and autobiography, emphasizes that “it is from the ongoing dynamic between time and memory that our autobiographies [...] are born” (79). This idea interested me in a profound way. It became clear, as the project progressed, that James Fonseca’s accounts were being written from this dynamic between time and memory; the autobiographical episodes he was documenting were from his life, but were also being drawn out
of a well of subjectivity. In short, David Gallo’s assertion that “memory is not simply retrieved from stored traces, but instead the subjective experience of remembering is created ‘online’ at the the time of retrieval” (93), is what I took into consideration in trying to reconcile this dilemma. The conclusion I came to is that memory is a negotiation. Recalling and perceiving our pasts is a process of repetition; however, how we remember is entirely malleable, and seldom, if at all, is this how a predictable endeavour. The entirety of Sunday Saudade is as episodic as the individual chapters are. They are narrated from a place in which James finds himself; this place is an undisclosed present, but it is also a present from which the past will be recalled in the same way only once. What I am suggesting is that the story James Fonseca has narrated is likely to be a different version if revisited from a place in his future, or aptly, my own.

3. IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

The Third Space

In Sunday Saudade, the intended effect with the looping flashbacks--from his distant (Portugal) and not so distant past (Leamington) juxtaposed with an immediate “chronological” present (Windsor)--was to highlight with its very narrative structure the elusive and challenging pursuit of figuring out who we are as selves. James’s story is comprised of what he remembers, and as discussed earlier, how he remembers himself. Personal identities are invariably rooted in experience. We may or may not feel a strong connection to a personal narrative, that is, we do not always perceive our lives as one growing, evolving account; however, our sense of identity will always be rooted in the autobiographical details of our lives.

Identity construction, in the words of Nicole Falkenhayer, “is highlighted as a perpetual project when feelings of alienation and confusion about what to identify with are frequently
expressed” (6). James Fonseca is an adult whose “identity” has never been anchored to any sense of true origin. His life has lacked cohesion, and identity construction has been a kind of perpetual project of his; it’s what spawned his desire to create a personal narrative.

What I wanted to achieve by structuring this novel with ten episodic chapters was to create an individualness about them. Although each chapter chronicles separate experiences, they all contribute to the narrator’s quest to narrate his twenties as they draw to a close and a new period in his life begins. However, in reflecting on his twenties James is also compelled to recollect events further in his past, namely, his father’s boat wreck and why he lives in Canada. The immigrant theme in James’s life becomes glaringly unavoidable.

Joanne Saul asks the question, “What happens to a stable sense of self when it is undercut by various modes of belonging? What happens when one’s roots are uprooted?” (29). Leaving Nazaré, Portugal at the age of eight with his parents and sister because of the disaster his father was blamed for, James’s association with the act of immigration has been from the beginning tragic; the immigration itself was born out of tragedy. This is the “sense of secret gloom” (26) James shares with Morgan Coolidge, although her “gloom” arises out of a different tragedy altogether.

The inclusion of a chapter which takes place in Nazaré in a novel set in Canada underscores just how uprooted James’s roots have been, and how this still impacts who he is. James also acknowledges how this uprooting is not only a phenomenon he has had to contend with, but one faced by his father, mother and sister:

My sister sat soundless in the corner of the living room on the carpeted floor, her legs crossed. Only a couple of days before we had been barefoot on the beach next to the old stocking-capped fishermen napping under the sun against the hull of their boats[...]

My father with his uncut hair and thick Lisbon sideburns sat at the table with my uncle. They poured whiskey and spoke with
a feigned understanding of the future, avoiding any allusion to the circumstances of the past which had brought us to their home. My mother washed plates and glasses with my aunt at the kitchen counter, responding without interest to questions of old Nazareno gossip. When Richard asked his mother from the living room how to say my name in English, my father looked up to the kitchen, listening for the answer; our names were the same. (48)

From this uprooting, however, James has tried to reconcile Portuguese and Canadian culture by forging a third space. Mayte Gomez, writing on what he terms the “individual border” in Guillermo Verdecchia’s Fronteras Americanas, notes “The individual who experiences two cultures defies acculturation, as he searches for a place where two cultures interact with one another equally, creating an identity which is “not-neither”(30). Gomez goes on to suggest that only when the immigrant is able to look at his “border wound” not as a problem but as the potential to find “home”, can a third space be created where the immigrant is truly himself. In essence, the “individual border” is the site where this interaction takes place. Sunday Saudade is James’s quest for this other space, and his twenties have been the site where such a negotiation was in full bloom, particularly because of their reliance on non-familial adult relationships as a means to construct an individual identity.

Non-Familial Relationships

James’s relationship with Morgan Coolidge is a problematic one, particularly because of the foreignness it emphasizes. An older woman with two children, entirely removed from his Portuguese upbringing, seemed initially a fruitful step towards the independent identity he was procuring; one removed from his immigrant world. It was, in short, something wholly different. But the relationship grew out of a common despondency with the tragic pasts they both shared.
Their pasts had more in common than anything happening in the present of their lives—with the exception of working in the same factory. From the beginning, James suspects an infirm foundation for any real future between them:

I removed her shirt, then the small warm breasts from her bra, and muttered brokenly, in the dark and into her ear, that I loved her. But the emotion, even the physicality of this moment with Morgan Coolidge, felt unmitigatedly irrational, even wrong. I didn’t attribute it then, but I can now, less to a fear of my mother and father’s stunned reaction to the circumstances of my romance, than to something more sinisterly inauthentic in me. (29)

What James terms “sinisterly inauthentic” is an early premonition that he is starting a relationship with Morgan Coolidge for the wrong reasons. He is with her more because of a hunger to be in an adult relationship, one disconnected from his uprooted childhood and immigrant identity. Later in the novel, we seem James reflecting on why he was with Morgan, “Morgan had been on my mind. She stared into me at the store, looking for a reason to understand why she had hung on as long as she did. Enough time had passed for the assessment to be objective, and what she saw could have only disappointed her. It’s what I felt standing there, my hand gripping the shopping cart, Joey running away” (72).

I wrote earlier that only in coming to terms with who we have or haven’t been—or are yet to become—can any truthful measure of where we are going, and why we need to go there, be understood. James’s ruminations on why he was in a relationship with Morgan throughout Sunday Saudade assert this theme of coming to terms with a past self at a crucial juncture in the story; he’s in the early stages of a new relationship he is confident about, one being approached from the “third space” Mayte Gomez speaks of. James is aware that Christine Lapport offers an opportunity to approach a relationship where the word “adult” isn’t a fresh one in his mouth in the way he suggests it was with Morgan (65). Rather, Christine symbolizes the clearing of a path
into the future he can be confident about. In the final chapter James says “Christine said she
loved me. It took us a while to start passing that word around, we wanted to be sure. We were
under the covers and I held her hand. I said, let’s do this” (89).

An important element in James’s formation after he leaves Leamington for Windsor is
his friendship with Lucas Wright. His relationship with Lucas provides the first real opportunity
to construct an adult identity for himself, one relatively free of immediate familial and immigrant
strands. James embraces the opportunity to “maintain a friendship to keep with us for the rest of
our lives, one that we would write billowing and wet eulogies over and take with us to the grassy
grave. It was an unspoken desire” (30). However, as their friendship evolves over the year they
spend together as neighbours, James begins to acknowledge that perhaps Lucas is at a different
place in life; the very place James has spent most of Saudade walking away from. “He
wasn’t seeing the middle ground. I was beginning to think of Lucas as romanticizing anguish.
It’s what I had been aspiring to grow out of, why I left Leamington” (88). What this creates for
James at the end of the story is an affirmation that he has changed, that his ability to construct a
more optimistic outlook on his life has come, ironically, out of himself, rather than out of the
relationships he had been looking to for legitimation.

Masculinity

According to Mairtin Mac an Ghaill, “The hard, physically demanding labour of manual
work is understood and reinterpreted by working-class men as being heroic, and as requiring
physical and mental bravery” (29). James is part of a relatively small and close-knit Nazareno
community in Leamington. They all originate from the same fishing village in Portugal, and as
immigrants, the men are generally either fishermen or construction workers. James has avoided
both of these traditional vocations, and instead, settles for some time into full-time factory work.
But he removes himself even from this role as a “man of work” in an attempt to attain a greater sense of fulfilment from what he does for a living.

When he graduates from university as a mature student with a degree in political science, James feels he has a “fresh university degree to nudge [his] way into the future with” (77). However, the only real acknowledgement of having accomplished something meaningful comes from his friend Alex Hornby: “Alex said he was proud of me and a vibrant feeling of accomplishment rolled through my chest” (77). Although James’s mother is supportive of his decision to return to school, “She’d wait by the window during winters ask[ing] how the day went, if the roads were safe” (18), his father shows only a mild interest, even after the fact. Driving to Leamington with his father to pick up a car battery (for which his father is paying), James’s father asks, “How are you making rent? Is the painting you’re doing enough? [...] is that why you studied politics?” (60).

Judith Butler concluded in *Gender Trouble* that “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through stylized repetition of acts [...] This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constitutional social temporality” (140). If masculinity is achieved through the recognition of one’s proper performance/repetition of the iterable standard, what happens for someone caught between two different cultural standards? In James’ case, the answer was to never fully choose *one* standard. After his position as a research assistant with the Family Help Centre ends, he tries for a time to secure other similar employment. But his resilience is low and he regresses to manual labour. This exposes one of James’s most undisclosed vulnerabilities, his sense of guilt for having chosen to not be a “man of work”, essentially creating the secret feeling of having betrayed his origins. James alludes to
this sentiment after a discussion with Lucas, wherein he is questioned about why he is going around changing toilets as the new superintendent of the apartment building they live in:

Lucas came from a world where you did good work in life. My parents worked with their hands and legs, with filleting knives and nets. It was the country we were born in. Lucas’s father was a senior director with Heritage Canada and his mother ran a homeless shelter in Toronto. His grandfather was a journalist for the Globe and Mail and had landed in Normandy. It was how Lucas and I differed, in his courage to stare intrinsic worth in the eye, whereas I scrambled for fast solutions at the thought of suffering without an answer. (73)

What James suggests with this passage is the likelihood that he may never fully break free from the clutches of a type of working-class guilt, where, in this context “staring intrinsic worth in the eye” equates to shirking the responsibility to earn a living by being overly selective. In Sunday Saudade James is looking for a redemption, a way to acknowledge his past without being weighed down by it.

4. SAUDADE

One of the main reasons I settled on Sunday Saudade as the title for this project was my interest in juxtaposing the English and Portuguese languages, encapsulating the theme of two cultures being forced together in a non-integrated way. With the exception of saudade, there was a decision not to translate any of the Portuguese used in the novel. It was a way to reverse the foreignness of the immigrant experience. I was interested in leaving the usages and idioms of the Nazareno dialect with the Nazarenos as a means to emphasize its function in holding the homogeneity of the community together.

In the novel, James notes that “There’s no translation for saudade in English, it’s more a longing than it is a word for something gone and unlikely to return” (75). Saudade, a uniquely
Portuguese word, has been said to be “one of the deepest human feelings, and the greatness of its power is exactly that it transcends itself, creating other feelings, becoming greater and deeper” (Leandrof). Saudade is a word passed around quite frequently by the Nazareno community in Leamington. It’s the reason the fishermen return to Nazaré “in the winters when Lake Erie froze over, or in the summers when the boats paused, staying in the same homes they grew up until early March or late July, taking long walks in the afternoon along the sea-front as Luso-Canadians” (35). Edite Noivo, writing on this phenomenon that is often a part of the Portuguese Immigrant experience, has noted that, “some Portuguese report feeling at home only during their periodic sojourns in their native land” (163). Noivo also goes onto suggest that Portuguese immigrants often refer to “home” as their membership and social networks in their new communities, equating home with pátira and invoking Fernando Pessoa’s adage: A minha pátira é a língua portuguesa (My homeland is the Portuguese language). This is thoroughly the case with the Nazareno community James is a part of. Before Christine is about to meet his mother and father for the first time, James explains to her that the Nazareno community had “always worked together in the fish factories and the boats, they spoke Portuguese, and English had remained the foreign language” (90).

James often retreats to Leamington from Windsor on the weekends to be with his mother and father. Sunday is an important day for him; the day in which a yearning for his family is most pronounced. Although he has spent the bulk of the novel reconciling a way in which to shape his own identity, one that is independent of his Luso-Canadianess, in the end, his origins cannot be denied, nor does he aspire for this to be the case. James Fonseca has been in search of a separation, but not a removal from where he has come. He realizes that his “migration from home was in all ways a small one” (34), and still needs to be around his family. When over a
month has passed since he has been in Leamington because of his obligations as a superintendent, he voices concern to Kirk Garrent on the phone (72).

Sunday and *saudade* are two inseparable sentiments for James. He needed to leave Leamington in his twenties because there was no other option for him; he could only truly discover an individual place from which to reside and be James and Jamie and Jaime, without ambivalence, by coming to terms with their inseparability. And this is where we leave James in *Sunday Saudade*, learning to rely on himself to provide in the future what he has found lacking in his past.

At the end of the novel the family is together for a dinner. Two years have passed since Adam’s death. A toast is raised in his honour, and James’s mother says, “*A família. É o que salva gente*” (91). Although untranslated in the novel, I end by doing so here: To Family. It’s what saves us.
Works Cited


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