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**Missed Connections**

By

**Laura Mulrooney**

A Creative Writing Project  
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies  
Through the Department of English & Creative Writing  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for  
The Degree of Master of Arts  
At the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2021

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**Missed Connections**

By

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## ABSTRACT

*Missed Connections* is a collection of short stories exploring queer and peculiar women navigating the minutiae of their existences in cities across southern Ontario; Hamilton, Burlington, and Windsor, in particular. *Missed Connections* navigates the complexities of identities that are mutable and in flux, reflected in part through the youthful state of most of the protagonists. Some stories in *Missed Connections* include: “Stick-N-Poke” which follows a bisexual high-school drop-out who struggles with addiction and infatuation, “Ephemera” in which a militant lesbian unwittingly falls for a drag queen and meditates on desire, and a triptych, which is composed of “Catfish,” “Vernacular,” and “One New Message” an ironic bildungsroman following a fat straight white girl’s pursuit of authenticity. *Missed Connections* asks what it means to be here, now.

## DEDICATION

To Me,  
For making it far enough to write this down.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you Mom. I couldn't have done this without you and I hope you never read these words. Richard too. You are my only brother and the only person I'm certain is stranger than myself. That's a compliment.

Thank you André Narbonne and Richard Douglass-Chin. You guys put the advice in advisor. Haha. I now know how to use a comma, thank you. *Missed Connections* would be an assortment of rocks, twigs, and malapropisms without your careful attention and occasional screams. Me too. You two are *literally* the best.

Thank you Catherine Hundleby and Tom Dilworth for agreeing to give this a try.

Thank you Chloe Burrows-Moore, Dylan Vance, Christine Rutherford, Stephanie Gussain, friends of indescribable measure. To all my friends I can't list here. And to everyone whom I've made laugh while telling a story.

Thank you Alice Munro, Jane Rule, Marian Engel, Jane Austen, Carol Shields. You are the muses I invoke today.

Thank you Woody Allen, you are the reason I believe in the separation between art and artist.

Thanks to all my unmentioned colleagues, classmates, and professors at the University of Windsor. What a long, strange, trip it's been.

## EPIGRAPH

“And I thought, all these things don’t seem that much like life, when you’re doing them, they’re just what you do, how you fill up your days, and you think all the time something is going to crack open, and you’ll find yourself, then you’ll find yourself, in life. It’s not even that you particularly want this to happen, this cracking open, you’re comfortable enough the way things are, but you do expect it.”

“Forgiveness in Families”—Alice Munro

“King Saul fell on his sword when it all went wrong  
and Joseph’s brother sold him down the river for a song  
and Sonny Liston rubbed some Tiger Balm into his glove  
some things you do for money  
and some you do for love, love, love.

Raskolnikov felt sick, but he couldn’t say why  
when he saw his face reflected in his victim’s twinkling eye  
some things you’ll do for money and some you’ll do for fun  
but the things you do for love  
are going to come back to you one by one”

“Love Love Love”—The Mountain Goats

“Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself.”

“Song of Myself”—Walt Whitman



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## EPHEMERA

“I’ll never see that girl again  
 He did it as a gag  
 I’ll pine away forevermore  
 For Andrew in Drag.”  
 “Andrew in Drag” - The Magnetic Fields

Nobody is looking at you. Relax. And even if they are, that’s okay. Leslie, they’re your friends, it’s your birthday, you’re allowed to be the center of attention for like an hour. Nothing bad is going to happen. I try to calm myself out of an anxiety attack by repeating this to myself over and over again.

It’s working, kinda. My shrink says I should re-familiarize myself with my surroundings whenever I find myself overwhelmed by the pervasiveness of my emotions. *Ground yourself in the reality of now, the world outside of your own head. Your feelings aren’t lies necessarily, they’re just not telling you the whole picture. Plant your feet in what’s tangible, you are sitting on a brown suede couch in my office, my air freshener is new-car-smell, it might help you from getting too distracted by “potentialities,” as you call them.*

I am standing in Yoghurt, Hamilton’s only almost-gay, almost-trendy, perpetually empty, ace dive bar stuck in-between an abandoned pawnshop on the left, and on the right a farm-to-table breakfast joint whose posters plastered out front have read *Coming Soon 2009* for nearly a decade. Yoghurt is known for its apple pie and off-brand-jaeger specials. As a result, the interior smells like cardamom and cinnamon, wet leather, and old fermenting licorice. The walls are black, but decorated with magazine clippings of used-to-be famous people and anonymous advertising models. They are tacked up with wooden push-pins and linked to each other by haphazard strands of red yarn,

connecting JFK to a cartoon of the Kool Aid Man, to women in spotted bikinis on a beach somewhere in California (the Golden Gate Bridge gleams in the background) and so on. A conspiracy map connecting nothing to nothing.

Behind the bar a sign printed on computer paper in Comic Sans says, *No Touching. No Kissing. No Horse/Ponyplay.* Handwritten at the bottom in all caps someone has added *HETS AND HOMOS!!!! GROSS!* Aro told me months ago he had to write that after some queers were getting too showy and had forgotten their place. He pays \$1600 a month for this piece of shit. It's going to be his safe-place from the onslaught of hook-ups and make-out sessions if he has to die trying. Every straight, and now gay, person thought it was their God-given right to dry-hump the whole ride on the Go-Train from Aldershot to Toronto. Well, not here. Aro conscientiously objected. No rainbow flag sticker beckons out front, but two in grayscale with a single ribbon of green or purple. Against all conformity, he considered making the place itself an anti-bar, determined to serve actual yoghurt instead of liquor, but needed to make rent. Alcoholics are more reliable than cultivated milk fans.

I found the place on a wander two years ago, and saw the white cursive neon letters on the sign out front. Thinking it was capitalizing on nostalgia and would sell niche vegan Yops, or maybe high-end regular yoghurt in those plastic tubes that used to be all the rage, I stepped in. Instead, I found a man behind the bar arguing with a woman who looked exactly his type. Two partially shaved brunettes with septum piercings screaming at each other. They had almost-matching floral tattoos in full technicolour but she wore a short-sleeved black turtleneck dress that she had to keep pulling down around her thighs as she made faces at him. He was in the process of ejecting her from the premises. From what I could gather she had been asking questions that had more to do with her desire for

internal validation than any sort of sincere curiosity. I only got to hear him yell “Fuck you! Nobody fucked me, now fuck off!” before she brushed past me on her way out the door. After, he said, “It’s because we live in a culture that’s obsessed with sex. Not the physical act of propagation, that would make sense at least, but sex, or at least the desire for it. It’s the be-all-end-all in every human narrative, most people can’t imagine a life of meaning even being possible, let alone worth it, if there isn’t even the chance of getting laid, or at least falling in love.” I stopped going to the LCBO and started shopping local. And they say it’s impossible to make friends as an adult.

Now, Aro is doing the robot off-beat to Eurhythmics. He readies the CD player with whatever mixtape Sam has conjured up for the evening, who is invisible for the moment. I cannot see him or Andrew but imagine they’re wrangling something behind the gaudy blue velveteen curtain that wiggles like a cat with a blanket thrown over it. They can’t be doing anything untoward back there, aside from Aro’s strict rules, Andrew is as straight as a right angle or a right wing majority whip. He plays Super Smash Brothers competitively and runs an Instagram meme account for a living. Chelsea is Andrew’s sister and my ex-girlfriend. We dated, for her this meant cuddling on her corduroy couch as *Up* or *Sleeping Beauty* ran in the distance, for six months. She’s the only person in the known universe who says let’s just be friends and actually means it.

Nobody is looking at me. Chelsea plays with the plastic sword skewering a cherry in her Shirley Temple, orchestrating a battle between the miniature pseudo-weapon and the littlest finger on her right hand. Sam has left Andrew behind the curtain and paces as he flips through a pink unicorn notebook. Unlike most white gay men I’ve had the misfortune of encountering, Sam is cool. Sam is gay, but not faggy, which is a relief. He doesn’t have that lilting impossible stereotypical voice (a

documentary I saw once claimed it's intentional, like a big Gay calling card). If you called him on the phone you'd think he was a plumber or a slaughterhouse technician, not a location scout for some of the plethora of films shot in the city. He always wears light wash blue jeans and a white tank-top like he's an extra for a remake of *The Outsiders*. He wouldn't be caught dead in a dress. It's refreshing, honestly.

Look, I'm not one of those Gold Star Lesbians who thinks bisexuals are dirty or contaminated by sleeping with men, neither am I one of those TERFS, like that chick who wrote that shitty magic boy series, who think it's okay to misgender somebody just because you don't like them. I have a degree (two, actually). I just think it's irresponsible to ignore the clear satirical implications of drag culture. I don't care if it's supposed to be kitsch, or camp, or an ironic nod, or an homage. It's wrong, it's gross, and it's just another excuse for gay men to make fun of women and treat them like shit. I don't think people should commodify being mean in a dress and high heels and then be able to call it art or culture.

Sam interrupts my reveries with, "Quiet everybody! The show will begin in one minute! That's one minute for any francophones in the audience!" even though literally nobody is talking except for him. Four tables with matching single chairs make up the audience and Chelsea and I sit as far away as possible from each other, maybe six feet apart. Sam stands in front of the curtained stage that still quivers every few seconds, Andrew still scrambling to ready whatever magic trick or comedy act he was about to perform for us.

I sigh and shift my weight in the chair furthest from the action. Sam shifts from foot to foot as he flips through the pages of his unicorn notebook until he stops, squints, grins, first at the page, then at us,

and begins, “Theybies and Gentlethems! Oh. Gross. Who came up with that? Let’s try that again! Welcome, welcome, humans and spectres! Friends and enemies! Furrries and conscientious objectors! Tonight, for one night only, we have the pleasure to be graced with the presence of the one, the only, the beautiful, Kristine (with a K) Klueless (with a K) Kostanza (with a K)...” Sam drifts off and has an expression on his face like he’s trying to do his own taxes or translate something from Spanish. “Whoa man, are you sure? That’s kinda fucked up.”

Evidently, no one has rehearsed prior to my arrival because a gloved hand begins to pull the blue velveteen aside and reveal a dream of pink lace. Dolly Parton ringlets surrounding almost-beige pink lipstick but her eyes are covered by her second hand that looks dainty despite its size. Kristine is whispering something just too far away for me to make it out. She is snapping just out of time with the jazzy recording coming from the speakers everywhere, grabs the microphone shaped like a honey-dipper, and starts lip-syncing to Nina Simone. It isn’t until I see her teeth that I realize it’s Andrew. His front left tooth has a horizontal brown line going right through the middle from an accident with a metal fence as a youth. What are the odds this strange, tall, beautiful girl could have been in the same incident?

I don’t know who did the makeup, Sam or Chelsea, maybe even Aro. But good choices were made. Smart to go Fish instead of Trixie Mattel. She looks...real. Like a peppier Chelsea, one who listens to country music and believes Disney musicals constitute real art. The kind of girl who would pat your back and ask you what was wrong if she saw you crying at the sink in a public restroom. Her smile is toothy but unselfconscious, almost glowing. She opens her mouth too wide when she mimics, “I wish I knew how it would feel to be free.”

The funny thing is Andrew doesn't really appeal to me as a human. When we hang out, the five of us, he's always so...performative, like he'd rather be funny than honest. Andrew is the kind of guy who would call someone retarded as a joke but wouldn't get in a hot tub with Sam and Aro when they all went to the gym. He once told me he knew he was doing alright because he had 16,000 Instagram followers.

But, wow. She is perfect. It's like I finally get to experience how Prince Florian felt when he saw Snow White in her glass case, perfect and pristine and timeless and dead. He finally found her but it was too late, she was already gone. Just a body painted pretty by well-meaning friends.

While she mouths, "I wish I could do all the things that I can do." I melt.

Instead of gaudiness, she went for authenticity. I waited in half-terror for the facade to crack, for Andrew to break into his horse-guffaw or go for a lap-dance and ruin the whole thing for everyone.

I know this is the part where the lights dim and her timbre fades into effervescence, but I want her to keep going.

## NO SILK ROSES

I.

If somebody had told me a couple of years ago that a woman named Gertrude was going to ruin my life, I would've been sure they were talking about that awful poet Tessa was obsessed with, the one who kept repeating herself over and over and poorly describing animals. A dog is nothing like a monkey.

My Gertrude turned out to be much, much worse.

Before her and that Saturday, I literally had the perfect life. Sure, Tessa haunted the house like a Casperous Mr. Clean, and followed me around with a broom and dustpan so I couldn't make a mess. And yeah, Dad was gone half the year, doing who knows what in China, or India, or Senegal, it had something to do with the internet, or computer programming, maybe even storage chips. All I cared was that when he came back he brought the best gifts: real Samurai swords so sharp I wasn't allowed to touch them, framed paintings of young brunette women milking cows in green pastures, and carpets he called tapestries with so many colours that I didn't think they all had names yet. He said he learned enough of every language to haggle me the best stuff, so I tried not to miss him too much. Mostly it was good, we were happy.

We lived in the woodsy part of Burlington. Mostly white suburbia, but green. My bedroom even took up half the second floor and looked over the expanse of forest that we owned all the way to the base of the escarpment, part of the Bruce Trail cut through our woods and the best part was the expressions on the hikers' faces when they finally discovered our *Private Property* gleaming in the distance. The exterior walls painted buttercup-sunshine and the whole place fenced by a garden



ricocheted with colour. Purple and white hibiscus trees starved anything that wasn't hearty enough to thrive in their shade, leaving begonias and tiny roses and those fuzzy succulents to Tessa's near constant trimmings. In the warm months the inside smelled the exact same as the backyard. Every room had at least one glass vase stocked with impossibly clear water and Tessa's latest victims, their stalks split open to better absorb the water and stay fresh and bright smelling for at least a week. She spent months singing to herself as she made farmer's market strawberry ice-box cake and rearranged the knick-knacks in the house until they were just so. Dad would save his summers for Canada so we could do all the regular family things, cottaging in Tobermory, drives to the beaches near Port Dover, and family sailing lessons at the club in Oakville. Tessa's idea of mother-daughter bonding was scouring the cast-iron pans and oiling the cheese-boards.

Whoops, I'm getting off track. It should have been like any other Saturday morning. Wake up around 7:30, pad downstairs, consume whatever breakfast produces the least amount of crumbs, clean up, wash dish, make sure the kitchen looks untouched, go back upstairs and stare at the wall until I'm bored enough to do homework.

Instead, an intruder.

I was drinking a glass of orange juice over the sink when I heard rustling paper noises coming from the breakfast nook, the sound of a newspaper being flipped to the cartoons, maybe. Instead of Tessa there was a strange woman drinking coffee from one of the good mugs, reading the local interest section of *the Burlington Post*. Her hair was cigarette-ash silver pulled into a perfect donut-hole bun and she kept pushing her tortoise-shell print horn-rimmed glasses against the bridge of her nose. Her clothes looked slept-in, her white shirt crinkled in a way that looked new, her black cotton-ish skirt

hung unevenly on her waist like she was missing a belt, and stockings but no shoes from the leg that crossed over her knee into my eyeline. She didn't look up. Thank God. She would've seen my Hello Kitty short-shorts, nearly invisible crop-top, and absolutely naked face.

I abandoned the rest of my glass in the sink and snuck upstairs before she had the chance to catch me.

Ornate carpets and partially ornamental swords hanging from the walls distinguished my room from the rest of the house, the only room safe from Tessa's terminally feverish pursuit of good taste. I burritoed myself into my comforter and tried not to panic.

What the heck was she doing in the house? Tessa's sister got a new husband and house in Texas last August and this woman looked nothing like Aunt Cheryl. Dad didn't have any sisters and wasn't scheduled to be back for another eight weeks, he wouldn't send someone else instead. The idea that she was a burglar seemed silly. Who burgles in day-old business-casual then stays to have breakfast? She wasn't any of our neighbours, or Tessa's friends, or clients, otherwise I'd have been warned and the whole spread would be out. What the heck?

I wanted to go back downstairs with the sharpest and most threatening sword and interrogate, and if needed shoo her away like we had to do with the skunks and raccoons that sometimes got into the shed. By the time I got the courage to go back downstairs I could hear elaborate cooking noises, Tessa had brought out the juicer and waffle-iron. She only performed Breakfast with a capital B when she had someone to impress. I paused mid-step down the stairs and slunk back into my room to change, so I could eat without complaint. My current pajamas would be inappropriate but it would be excessive to be in full-morning get up. I split the difference and put on grey slippers, matching

sweatpants and a white-camisole. I cleaned my pores, brushed my teeth, put on my face, rehearsed “good morning” as if I had just woken up, and made sure to stomp on every creaky step on my way down the stairs. I started yawning at the third step from the bottom and entered stage left into Breakfast.

Unless there were more strangers hidden in the mudroom, the continental assortment spread across the kitchen island was way too much. Croissants, English muffins, waffles, a plate of melon wrapped in prosciutto stuck together with fancy toothpicks, even red onions, capers, smoked salmon, and cream cheese on sliced everything bagels.

Tessa dressed like a 1950’s dream-wife, something out of one of those sitcoms on DeJa Vu I always flipped away from. Her hair was fake blonde and she matched her low-lights to my natural hair that I wasn’t allowed to colour until I turned sixteen, an impossible eight months away. Today’s dress morning spring blue partially covered by a quilted pink apron carefully dusted with flour, she looked more like a truant older sister playing house than my mom. She looked at me approvingly and said, “Good morning, Bailey. Sweetie, you left a glass in the sink before you went to bed last night.”

“Oh, I’ll get it before I sit down.”

“I already took care of it. I’m just letting you know.”

“It won’t happen again, Mom, sorry.”

Tessa wouldn’t let me call her anything but Mom to her face, she believed it to be the only proper title for a matricide..., Mommy; too diminutive, Mother; too capricious. But she’d been Tessa to me since the family Christmas party a few years back when Aunt Cheryl had to drag her upstairs to bed because she’d gotten drunk off the too-naughty eggnog and wouldn’t stop referring to herself as Queen

Tessa, sovereign ruler of the dominion before us. And wouldn't let anyone try and clean up even though she had been leaning on Dad since the after-dinner Grand Marnier and coffee. It was impossible to think of her as anyone other than Tessa. Not Mom, though she technically earned the title after 18 hours of labour. Not Tess, the rueful woman Dad sometimes teased into existence but I never dared to approach. Just Tessa. I didn't have that problem with Dad. I knew objectively his name was technically David, but it felt wrong, too presumptuous, to even think of him that way. Dad was Dad. And Tessa was Tessa.

She hovered near the kitchen island with a pair of plastic tongs watching as I filled my plate with toothpicks of melon and the blackberries she used to garnish the waffle plate. I was followed into the breakfast nook but Tessa beat me to the far chair and the only one left was next to the stranger who chagrined a nervous smile but didn't introduce herself.

"You know, they're flushing out the fire hydrants in your neighborhood next week, yearly cleaning apparently. I didn't know that was something that needed to be done. It might be fun to watch, don't you think?" she said to Tessa, who stared disapprovingly at me as I untangled the melon from the ham until I left a red pile of what looked like peeled off pieces of sun-burned skin and toothpicks on my plate. She gestured for me to cut it out but I pretended not to notice. I wished we had a dog I could feed scraps to under the table.

Tessa looked up at her and said, "Fire hydrants? Oh, I don't know. Do you think it'll make much noise? They really wrote about that in the paper? Goodness...Oh, Bailey, Dear, I forgot. This is Gertrude. She helped me last week with my computer. You know how I've been having trouble getting

the pictures from my new digital camera onto the computer? I could only get it to charge? Turns out I had no idea this one had a SIM card, that's where all the pictures are stored.”

None of this explained what Gertrude was currently doing having breakfast at 10:30 AM in our house on a Saturday morning. She seemed to think her explanation was sufficient and didn't elaborate. They continued to chat about the pros and cons of nearby fire-hydrants as I pinched myself and tried to wake up.

II.

Inexplicably, Gertrude stayed. The closest thing I had to a sibling until this point was my half-sister Emily from Tessa's first husband, but she was sixteen years older and got me such good presents she was more like a cool aunt than someone I wanted to scream at for borrowing my clothes and not respecting my personal space. Thankfully, Gertrude used Tessa's attached ensuite bathroom, but she also used everything else.

No place was safe from her presence. She read the paper or James Patterson novels in rooms that Tessa and I only visited to clean. And the worst thing was she got away with it. If I wanted to read Stephenie Meyer or do my homework in the sunroom with the good light I'd be shadowed, not trusted since I knocked over a vase of Easter lilies years and years ago. Everything was glass or fragile or antique or still alive so I had to be careful, careful, careful. Flowers could last two weeks in a vase and look as fresh as the day they were picked as long as you were especially gentle. I was only allowed to handle anything breakable if I was cleaning it or changing out the water in a vase to prevent rings. Not that Gertrude noticed. She thought it was wonderful how homey it was here, like a big version of a

storybook cottage. Gertrude loved that when she smelled cinnamon, it meant Tessa was baking coffee cake or apple crumble or hot cross buns and the rest of the time it smelled like lavender shampoo and fresh lemons, even though it was Pine Sol and Lysol, respectively. She spread her notes across the dining room table and put her feet on the glass coffee table when she watched old Clint Eastwood movies and didn't get so much as a reproachful look.

Dinners were the worst. Just the three of us, me, Tessa, and "Gerrie" as my mom had taken to calling her. Tonight was pumpkin ravioli in a walnut moscato cream sauce and Tessa demurely reveled in Gertrude's compliments of her orange summer dress. But Gertrude had gotten Tessa hooked on God's love and not just on Sunday mornings. She wanted us to be grateful before every meal.

"Bailey," it was the first time Gertrude ever addressed me by name, "if you ever want to come with us on Sundays, I think you might like it. You know why it's called Club 87? It's not just because God's the best club to join, and there's no bouncer. It's because our building used to be a nightclub, so all the walls and floors are still painted black and it still has a few cages in the ceiling where the dancers used to go. There's even a youth room in the basement, it has a whole skate-park and a room with couches and a big TV where you can watch movies, they even host graffiti nights sometimes," Gertrude laughs. "It just goes to show that any house can be God's house. You might really like it, I hear it's pretty popular with kids your age."

"Thanks. I'll, uhm, think about it? Can we eat now?"

"First, I'd like to say a few words, if you wouldn't mind, Tess?" Gertrude looked at her the way I look at the moon on a clear night, awed and mystified.

"Please. Bailey, that'd be lovely wouldn't it?"

Tessa and Gertrude reached their hands across the table to grab mine, theirs were already daintily attached in between their plates. Tessa's fingernails were manicured coffee-creamer beige but her hands were tan and warm, her palms calloused and scarred from all the hours pruning roses and rhododendrons in the garden. Gertrude's were so pale and soft and almost cold it was jarring holding them both at the same time.

Gertrude didn't wait for me before she said, "Thank you God, for allowing us to be here another day, with great company and food to share with our loved ones. We hope you will watch over us another night and keep us safe so we can continue to bask in your lovingkindness and spread that joy to the people in our lives. Amen." Tessa and Gertrude had their eyes closed and they piously faced their plates, but Tessa's fingers were tracing circles against Gertrude's thumb as Gertrude continued. "Wait. I'm going to recite a bit of my favourite one if you don't mind?" Gertrude looked up and made sure she still had Tessa's attention. "Good. Blessed is *she* whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is *she* whose sin the Lord does not count against her, whose spirit possesses no guile. When I kept silent, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me: my moisture turned into the drought of summer. I acknowledged my sin to you, and my iniquity I hid not. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord and he forgave me. Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found, and let the flood of mighty waters escape her. You are my hiding place, you preserve me from trouble, you will compass me with songs of deliverance. I will instruct you and teach you the way in which you should go, I will guide you with my own eye. Be not like the horse or mule, who have no understanding, and must be led by the bridle in order to follow. Many sorrows will fall on the wicked, but *she* that trusts the Lord will be

enveloped in mercy. Be glad in the Lord, and rejoice. Shout for joy, all those with righteous hearts.

Wow. I'm surprised I remembered that whole thing, it's been a while since I read it without the book in front of me."

Disgusting.

I was allowed to get away with not going to church on Sundays on the condition that I tidied up everything in the house, except her bedroom. Gertrude had taken upon herself (after begging Tessa's permission) all the non-gardening-related outdoor tasks, raking the ever shedding leaves from the willow and hibiscus out back, taking out the trash, mowing the lawn, windexing all the front-facing windows so anyone walking by could see me making KD if the curtains weren't drawn. Everything inside was easy except the dusting and vacuuming, everything collected dust. Gertrude was supposedly staying in the big guest room down the hall, but when I went in to clean I found the smiley face I had drawn with my finger on the glass side table ages ago, untouched but fuzzier and stale. I opened up the closet and found the suits and assorted Hawaiian print shirts Dad hadn't brought with him. I leaned in, hoping they would smell like him, seat leather and car oil and that sandpaper rough orange soap you need to use to scrub it off, but they just smelled like spring meadow, or fresh rain, or *Gain*.

III.

The eight weeks couldn't have gone by fast enough. But after my counter ran-out Tessa evasively said Dad called and told her he had rented a room in the Waterfront Hotel across from the



pier, where he was going to stay until things settled down. He would take me to school from there every day, he promised. Most of the rides went something like this:

“How’s your mom?”

“She’s Mom. Same as usual...”

“I know this is tough, Sweetie, but I just want you to remember this isn’t your fault.”

“No. It’s yours.”

He was silent the rest of the way to school.

By the time summer-break rolled around again he showed up for beach-day in this pale yellow drop-top so round it couldn’t have been made in the past fifty years.

“What happened to the black one? I liked that one.”

“Oh, well, your mom was always complaining about the red leather seats. I believe the word she used was tacky.”

“Noooo! It smelled like a warm living room.”

“Oh, but it was so much smaller, isn’t this much more cozy? And besides, there’s no roof, so instead of having to push the seat forward when you’re sitting in the back, you can just jump right over, isn’t that cool? And it’s yellow. Who doesn’t like yellow? And think how great it’ll be when we get to the lake, just the shore and the breeze...”

“Are we leaving now?”

“Isn’t your mom going to come out and see you off?”

“I think she’s busy inside getting ready for church with—”

“—Oh, well. That’s not a problem. I’ll see her when I drop you off, I’m sure. Ready spaghetti?”

“Stop it. Let’s just go.”

“Rightio. Pick a station and we’ll blast off.”

“Oh, I don’t care. They don’t play the music I listen to on the radio.”

“Sure they do, Sweetie. They have everything on the radio. It’s like magic.”

I turned on *the Edge* and he over-enthusiastically head-banged to four-and-a-half minutes of A Day to Remember until I switched to a Top-40 station so he would stop.

“Oh no! Why’d you change it? I was really getting jiggy with it there, Hun.”

“I know. It was embarrassing.”

“You know, I used to listen to the rock music when I was your age,” he said, making it worse.

“Please just stop. I don’t know if you’re trying to be funny or cool but neither one is working.”

“I’m sorry, Bailey. I didn’t mean it. I won’t get anymore jiggy with it or rock out with my—nevermind...Sorry. I’ve just missed you and it’s been difficult and I didn’t want this to happen but you know your mom...”

“I want you to move back in.”

“I do too, Sweetie. Don’t worry. I’m working on it.”

As he drove he told me about all the coolest things he ate while he was away: frog leg sushi at this French-Japanese fusion restaurant, a stew made from parts of a pig he didn’t even know you could eat (tongue, brains, and hooves), and these little button pastries so small he could’ve fit twenty in his mouth at once. He also had an eight-hour layover in Switzerland on his way back and bought a

different chocolate bar from every shop that was open, a 1994 Chateau Mouton Rothschild as well, but that was for Tessa.

When we got to the beach instead of swimming we went rock collecting. We went in search of the perfect circle and wouldn't stop until we found it. By noon, the two beach bags were too heavy to carry and we spread all of our round treasures on a towel to organize and make sure we brought only the best ones back. There were twelve in total that passed the test. Too thick to be appropriate for skipping but still undeniably circular, most were regular grey pebble types, but one was this luminescent coke-bottle-green, that one Dad put in the pocket of his Hawaiian shirt for safe-keeping before we left.

The first Sunday in October, Dad picked me up for breakfast but grinned conspiratorially and said, "Let's take a little detour first."

He drove down Highway Five until we passed the Welcome to Hamilton sign, up up up the escarpment, until we reached Scenic View Drive, which lived up to its name. Every house was ornate and gated with long long driveways, new-old chateaus designed to mimic Old Hamilton at its height, those blocky squares that Tessa called "modernist eye-sores" which I secretly thought were beautiful, and some of the last of the Old Hamilton stately homes that hadn't been converted to apartments or real estate agency headquarters. The house he stopped at had a For SOLD sign out front but you almost didn't notice because it was the least interesting part of the yard. White pillars out of a Roman fantasy extended up and up to a balcony terrace Juliet could have stood from. The left side of the house was enclosed by a glass greenhouse that extended almost to the Mountain Access, the windows were so streaked they looked grey and almost green, but it was transparent enough to make out tangles of flush

life proving some things could thrive without good light. The whole interior was empty except for a milk-white grand piano in what was either the parlor or music room.

“I was told the old owners hired someone to deconstruct and put it back together in the room because the archway wasn’t big enough, why they’d go through so much trouble and then leave it behind I’ll never know...”

All the walls were white but you’d never know because of the windows. Dad narrated as he toured me around. “Look, see. Both the big upstairs bedrooms have balconies, so the one that overlooks the front garden could be yours if you want, or maybe somewhere in the basement...” I stopped counting the number of rooms when I hit seven.

“So, what do you think?” Dad looked nervous, tentative, like this wouldn’t be enough.

“You’re going to live here by yourself?” I teased.

“I was hoping...If your mom was interested, and you, of course, that *we* would live here. Like a fresh start? What do you think?”

“I think you should talk to Mom about that...I hate to say it...but I think she’s...happy...as happy as she has the capacity to be anyways, she’s a lunatic.” I shouldn’t have said that. He looked broken. Like I dropped him and chipped a piece off.

“Oh. Well. You’ll just have to come and visit me then, won’t you?”

“You’re not going to have to sell the Burlington house to pay for this one, right?”

“Oh, Sweetie. Don’t worry, that’s where you live. We’re very comfortable. You don’t have to worry about anything like that, ever.”

“Are you making breakfast?”

“Well. I don’t have any utensils. And the hydro isn’t hooked up yet. So, let’s say you and I get something delivered?”

After a day of Clue (the only instrument of fun left behind in the basement game room) Dad lied and said he had a beer and didn’t want to jeopardize my safety by driving me home and asked if Tessa could pick me up instead. I couldn’t hear if she sounded surprised by the address change but Dad said she’d be here in twenty minutes.

Forty minutes later she looked like a young Elizabeth Taylor in sunglasses and a red silk bandana covering her roots, complementing a red and white polka-dot dress that could’ve had petticoats underneath it. I couldn’t see her eyes but her smile made my stomach feel like when I’d eaten all that Swiss chocolate in one sitting all over again.

She embraced me like I had just returned from the War then kissed my forehead. I could feel the oily residue of scarlet on my forehead as she approached him.

“David! It’s so good to see you looking so well.”

Dad was wearing a neon pink and blue Hawaiian shirt patterned with flamingos and palm trees, cargo shorts, and paisley socks underneath Velcro sandals.

“Tess, seeing you is like a cold glass of water for my eyes, always.”

I openly gagged as I pulled on her car’s door-handle, waiting for her to finally unlock the door.

“Bailey, Sweetie, it was so great seeing you today. And if you want, I’ll pick you up next weekend, and we can go looking for some things for your bedroom, does that sound fun?”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Love you too. Now can we please go now? I’m starving. I haven’t eaten since lunch...”

“Dinner isn’t until 6:30, so you’ll just have to wait.”

It took both of Tessa’s hands to cover one of Dad’s, she held his thumb to wrist as they exchanged great-to-see-yous as I hopped in frustration waiting for her to click us in.

The only thing she said the whole way was, “You could’ve been nicer.”

“To whom?” I didn’t say.

As she drove, I pulled down the passenger side mirror and scrubbed my forehead, but only succeeded in creating a large angry smudge.

Gertrude was more dressed for dinner than I’d ever seen her before. She usually took casual to the extreme, wearing floral blouses with snap buttons and denim cut-offs no matter the occasion, unless she was just off work. But tonight she was wearing a dress that could almost be considered formal. It’s what I would wear if I just got my first ever job and it was teaching at a Catholic elementary school. A white blouse underneath a blue cottony overall dress with these ornate golden buttons that went all the way down. The only issue was that it clung slightly too tight around the chest because the top two buttons failed and revealed two little o’s of white that she should have safety-pinned to cover up.

Instead of God, Gertrude thanked Tessa for the meal before we ate. I echoed her thanks but asked to be excused halfway through the parmesan asparagus shiitake risotto that tasted like chewing paste because the air was so thick and heavy, like just before a thunderstorm, and I didn’t want to get drenched.

I listened as long as I could but didn’t hear anything suspicious before I fell asleep.

## IV.

The next morning my parents were having breakfast like the past six months had been some horrible practical joke that whooshed over my head. Like a magic trick that turned the rat up Tessa's sleeve into a harmless rabbit. Dad didn't look apologetic or demure, just relieved. When I came downstairs, they were already mid-conversation.

"And we have to power wash the greenhouse first thing. And I mean first thing. I don't understand how the fudge anyone could have such incredible things and not give a hoot enough to take care of them. Such a waste. But we'll fix that soon enough. And what did you think about getting a pool and a fire pit for the backyard? It'd be perfect! Looking out on the whole city from the water."

"As long as the ground's safe, I don't see how it'd be a problem. We have enough backyard I don't think we'd be too close to the edge to cause any structural issues."

"Oh, and Bailey, Dear, I know you wanted the trellis balcony bedroom, but it's really the selling point of the whole house. It'd be silly to have it be anything other than the main guest-room, or maybe a reading-nook, don't you think? What about the one that overlooks the greenhouse? You'd still have your own bathroom, but you wouldn't have anyone barging into your room on a tour or anything, how does that sound?"

"Sure, I don't mind," I said, too relieved to want to break whatever time-reversal-magic spell had been cast. Whatever was happening, I didn't want it to end just yet.

And just like that we were moving again.

## V.

It has been six months and the house is rejuvenated. The greenhouse windows are so clean it is unbearable to spend any time there until sundown; the only things thriving in it are cacti, lavender, and basil. The interior filled according to Tessa's current notions of contemporary-rustic-modern design, the balconies and trellises have been repainted lily-white and filled with soft wicker furniture and coral accent pillows. Tessa decided she liked the idea of a music room and has been dabbling with learning the piano she'd decided we'd keep. Construction on the new pool and firepit consumed the last month with the sound of drills and clanging but it is supposed to be finished within the week, then everything will be complete. Perfect. I can hear Dad gently cajoling the Porsche's engine out front and find Tessa on the deck overseeing her dominion. The bedroom's balcony cast the deck in shadow and obscured her from any potential sun-damage but nevertheless she reclines in a floppy sun-hat and her oversized circle sunglasses and watches the team of guys and one girl, they couldn't have been more than a few years older than me, construct something from nothing. It is definitely pool shaped now, an S shaped concrete pit that is being smoothed out by gleaming statues. None of the guys are wearing shirts and even their skin seems too much the way the sweat rivulets down their red backs. The girl pauses and stretches away from the sun, towards us, she flings her already almost-see-through white crop top over the edge and it lands on the grass somewhere in the distance, revealing a neon-pink sports-bra. She smiles and waves at us. Tessa has a frozen strawberry margarita on the side table next to her and an Oprah's Pick book on her lap. She picks up her glass to take a sip, leaving behind a wet ring of condensation.



## CATFISH

After Myspace was un-cool, but way before Vine, or Instagram, or Snapchat...

Facebook had recently captured everyone's attention. You literally didn't exist unless you had an account. It was the year before the iPhone 3E came out. People still carried around Blackberries and those Androids with keyboards that slid out from nowhere, there were even a few flip-phones still knocking around.

I first noticed Bailey when she dropped her bright orange LG Neon on the pool deck, she said "Gosh darn it" as her phone slid towards the water instead of "fuck" or "shit" like any normal teenager. Two months into grade 9 and I was still fat. Maybe not by American Walmart standards, but enough that it would take at least two of even the heaviest girls in our class to lift me up in the air on a teeter-totter. I exclusively wore baggy sweaters and loose-fitting flare-legged jeans. Bailey had acne. Clawing pink and red pockmarks dug into her face like misshapen moon-craters. Kids were unoriginal and cruel enough in middle school to call her Pizzaface behind her back. She slathered her face in an orange concealer to fill in the holes, but didn't notice enough to blend the stark rude line between her chin and neck that revealed the illusion. She dressed like she spent her lunch-hour in the math-hall with the other study-freaks. For obvious reasons it was in both of our best interests to avoid having to squeeze into swimsuits and splash around.

The first day, when everyone was unabashedly changing, I doubled over, ran to the deck, and cried to the teacher. I claimed blood and the worst cramps possible. Like someone was taking a pair of

crimped scissors to my uterus. She sighed and directed me to a set of almost-empty beach chairs where Bailey reclined, fully dressed, blissfully texting.

Bailey had thought ahead and gotten her mom to write a note, delicately explaining Bailey had “lady troubles,” and wouldn’t be able to swim today. The note was signed but not dated so we continued the lie for the whole two weeks of the swim curriculum. We watched our classmates, girls with perfect bodies, and skin, and hair, splash each other as we seethed. It wasn’t fair.

The pool looked like a greenhouse growing goddesses, every girl emerged from the water a woman, fully realized and pristine. Chlorine almost masked the smell of adolescent sweat. It was too much to take but there was nowhere else to look. Hundreds of white plastic deck chairs lined the glass walls like an audience, but only the ones Bailey and I occupied were full. We sat in as much clothing as possible, I didn’t dare take off my sweater or even my backpack—only our shoes and socks had to be removed for safety—and looked. I wondered if this was how people who went to strip clubs felt, the compulsion on some level to want to peel off your own fabric, to match vulnerability with vulnerability, but nevertheless enjoying the protection of getting to watch without being seen, to be able to pick someone else apart without being at risk yourself.

The girl Bailey wanted to pick apart wasn’t in the water. She was older, grade 11, and dating the boy Bailey was enamored of, Chase, or Chet, or something. Rachel was shallow, plastic, immaterial, not good enough for him. But how was she to prove it? After making sure Madame Doyle was too preoccupied with ensuring no one drowned to care about us, Bailey dug out her laptop and opened up a profile: Rachel May. In her profile picture she holds the arm of a man whose face has been cropped

out, her face is radiant and smiling, surrounded by billows of curls the colour of milk-chocolate, her dress teal, in the background is a park with a little pond in the distance.

“Her real last name’s Horowitz. Whore-no-wits. Ha! I think it suits her, don’t you?” Bailey said, frowning at the computer screen. “They’re not even official. It’s like she doesn’t even care about him. Uggghhh.”

“So, what’s he look like? I mean, he has a nice shoulder...but you don’t get much from that.”

Bailey illuminated then paused, “You have to promise you won’t fall in love, okay?”

“Relax. I never even met the guy!”

Bailey scrolled through Rachel’s friend list until she located the profile picture of a teenage white boy with sandy hair mostly covered by a snapback, standing behind a bronze statue of a bucking bull. He holds an expression of smug contentment, his hands gripping where its hips might be, as he looks at whoever is holding the camera. When she clicked his name the first thing I saw was “add friend.” Bailey sighed, “He’s always in the hallway with his friends on their longboards, but I haven’t even managed to say hi yet...how do you even? Like, he’s 16, that’s like, sooo out of my league. And her. Gosh darn it. Though...I heard she’s just into any cute boy that talks to her. Emo boys, that’s her type. At least we have one thing in common...”

“Emo? What’s that?” I asked.

“Are you kidding me right now? I coulda sworn because you’re always wearing black you must be into it...I’m jealous. My mom would *never* let me go outside in anything like that...”

“So, what is it? A beverage? A sexual orientation? A lifestyle choice?”

“It’s the best music you’ll ever hear.” Bailey materialized a pair of headphones and handed a bud to me. What I heard was screeching and a baseline that was almost drowned out by someone who compensated for not knowing how to play the drums by doing so very loudly.

Bailey beamed at me, “What do you think?”

“Is it all like this?”

“Look, you’re probably just not in the right mood. As soon as you feel this burning rage inside, the kind that not even eating an entire box of KD in one go can stop, listen to this and scream along. You’ll feel something that you’ve never felt before.”

“How do you even know what they’re saying?”

“You listen.” Bailey sighed. “It’s not all screamo though, there’s lots of emo music with soft vocals.” She noticed me staring blankly. “You know, regular singing...Gosh, you have so much to learn...I’ll make you a Mix-CD. But first, listen to this, it’s a lot softer, I guess. What kind of music do you listen to?”

“I used to really like Avril Lavigne?”

“God...I mean, Gosh darn it. We’ve got a lot of work to do. What do you listen to now?”

“I guess whatever’s on the radio?”

“Okay. A blank slate is better than if you were really invested in the Jonas Brothers.”

“Oh! But don’t they have the coolest lives? That’s the dream, isn’t it? Just being a guy on the road, right?”

“That’s it!” Her words were loud enough to momentarily pause the lesson on proper diving form behind us. No one said anything. When we didn’t continue, the girl gripping the diving board railing made her jump and we were forgotten again with the splash.

“What?”

“I know how to get her to dump him.”

“Who are we talking about now?”

“Rachel! Of course Rachel, who else? Keep up. We’re going to become her dream-boy so she loses interest in Chris and I get my chance!”

“Do you have any idea what you’re saying? Don’t you have to read *Twelfth Night* too? I’m pretty sure it doesn’t end well. And besides, we don’t exactly have the makeup team Amanda Bynes had to pull it off.”

“*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It’s just donkeys and love potions or whatever. Anyways, that’s just fiction. This is real life.” She smiled and pointed to the glowing blue and white screen displayed on her computer. “We just have to make accounts. You’ll have to do it too, or it won’t work. To make it seem legit. You can’t just start adding people if you don’t have any friends yet, that’s just weird.”

“How are we going to do this?”

“How does anyone do anything? The internet.”

\*

The water torture was over but our friendship cemented.

“No one goes on Myspace anymore. So we just have to pick someone we like with enough pictures to make it seem real.”

We must've scrolled through thousands of public profiles before we found our guys. People's whole lives circa 2007 archived in archaic graphic design, the cerulean, magenta, yellow, black combination background seemed most popular to display the photographs taken in fingerprint smudged mirrors at concert-halls. The boy Bailey picked couldn't be described as anything other than cute. Natural blond hair, flat-ironed and almost obscuring his green-green eyes. He looked so skinny, like I would break him in half if I accidentally bumped into him on the street, but almost as tall as the stop sign he perched next to in his most prominently displayed picture. He was vain or self-aware of his beauty enough to have hundreds of pictures marking his ascent through puberty. The most recent pictures, two years old, show him in a cap and gown and a wisp of patchy facial hair on his chin.

I decided I didn't want anyone too attractive. That would be beside the point, and it felt more dishonest somehow, to pick someone I thought was pretty. It was the combination of the nose and the teeth that did it for me. If a girl had a nose like that, she'd either be on the cover of fashion magazines or ostracized at her private school until after the surgery. But on him it looked almost regal. Too big, on anyone's face, but his eyes were a crystalline husky blue, so you almost didn't notice the right-angle triangle grafted between his lips and forehead. He kept his mouth closed in every picture except one, caught laughing, revealing his large equine teeth that show why he always smiled with his mouth closed. He was thin, my one capitulation to objective beauty, but the neon pink women's skinny jeans he wore in half of his pictures fit a little too snugly around his hips and thighs, which assured me he wasn't starving. He had coloured his hair seven times during the three years he maintained his Myspace

profile. Between 2005 and 2008 he went from black to neon-red, to copper to bottle-blond, to lilac to seaweed-green, to black again. He was alone in every picture except his lilac phase, in these pictures he is wrapped around a chubby boy about his age with a fledgling neck-beard. In the rest, he poses awkwardly by himself, making weird expressions at the camera, often with one eyebrow arched and a distorted false-frown, or else pointing at something in the distance behind him. In most of his pictures he wears a thick smear of black eyeliner. He was perfect.

Bailey frowned at my choice. "I guess he'll do. It's just. He's so.... Boring. Have you thought of a name yet? It's the most important part. What do you think? Mine's going to be Jacob Samuel Cooper. Isn't that just precious? Doesn't he just look like Jake? My little Jakey-Wakey."

What's in a name? A name is nothing, yet everything. A person is formed and changed by being called Jack or Reginald or Latisha. You wouldn't accept a guy on Facebook called Mike Hunt, but Sebastien Reynolds wouldn't do either. I wanted him to be innocuous but approachable, the kind of guy you wouldn't be afraid to ask for directions if you were lost. I settled on two first names. Gregory Nathans. Greg. I thought he maybe looked like a Greg. A reluctant Greg, who maybe wishes his parents had named him Nightshade or River.

"Suze. Suze! Earth to Suzy! Helloo?"

"Greg."

"*Really?* Nevermind. Fine. Okay. Good."

\*

We waited until we had at least 50 friends before we added ourselves. It was a precaution and an extra layer of security, in case we had to vouch for the identities of our alter-egos. The best way to

make them real was to claim they were friends of friends we met at a birthday party. No. They didn't go to school around here, they were from Hamilton. This last decision felt particularly risky as we had never met anyone from Hamilton, let alone been there. Our cities shared two bridges and countless roads yet our only experiences with its residents were at Sound of Music every year—anytime there was a drunken brawl Hamiltonians were said to be responsible. Hamilton seemed dangerous in the best possible way. We started joining groups with names like EMO MUSIC ROX and Hamilton Scene Kids and NORMIES \*\*\*\* OFF, adding the people who seemed the most far away or peculiar.

Rachel quickly became the least interesting part of Jake's life. Anything Bailey wasn't allowed to do was permissible, if it happened to Jake instead. Jake attended all the parties we weren't invited to, had a part time job at D-TOX in the mall, was openly bisexual.

"You know, there are guys waaaaay cuter than Chris on here. And they *actually* like me. Too bad they're all gay." Bailey said, a week after she had given up on Rachel because her idea of conversation was sending things like "nm hbu?" "lol" and "tru" to anything Jake sent her.

"Well, they don't really like *you*, do they?"

"Of course they do. It's me. Who else would they be talking to?"

"The pictures of Jacob..."

"That's not a person. I could cut my hair and look just like him, if I wanted to. I am Jakey. They like *me*."

"I don't know. I think, maybe, they like the idea of you, the person you've created...but you can't know if they actually like you unless you tell them the truth, right?"



“You’re not allowed to tell anyone. I’m serious. It’ll ruin the whole thing. What’s the fun if you’re not taking this seriously?”

“I am taking this seriously,” I said.

Bailey was afraid I’d let truth-telling get the better of me, so she insisted we could only share so many friends. She tried to keep me in the loop with her lies, but Bailey had the tendency to leap into narrative intricacies, and enact whatever family drama she thought would get the most rise out of whatever audience she was performing for, there were too many balls in the air for me to count them all. To Cheyenne, she’d send pictures of makeup-bruised arms and claim Jake’s step-father was abusive; to Nick, Jake’s mother had just come out as a Lesbian and destroyed his little sister’s dreams of a happy nuclear family; to Jessica, he claimed absolute autonomy, his dad worked night shifts at a factory and his mom split when Jake was a kid, so he pretty much had free reign to go anywhere, do anything. I don’t know where she came up with this stuff. Why it wasn’t enough.

It was months before I got the courage to talk to anyone. I had collected around 500 strangers by this point, cultivated an identity, changed Greg’s profile picture at least four times to give the illusion of his life moving forward, made funny status updates about things I may or may not have gotten up to in real life, garnered more likes on a picture of my breakfast than even the best picture of my face on my real account.

I tried to pick girls who seemed weird, in one way or another. People who would be grateful to be spoken to by anyone. I wouldn’t pick anyone *ugly*, but no one too illuminated or unattainable. Jane and her horse had matching teeth and equally bright eyes, she looked like she had never been to a city, full stop. Stephanie lived in Berlin and spoke four languages fluently, had never set foot in North

America and didn't want to. Aurora, whose mother worked at a strip club near Orlando, lived a two-minute walk from the beach.

We lived on the internet. Our bodies were transposed to floating heads and the fingers we needed to type on the keyboard. The glowing, portable box we carried around more precious than fire. Gregory's bony-sinewy hands felt more real than my own. We failed our swim make-up tests, prioritizing Cheyenne's response to Bailey's latest lie over a dim sense of future. I never ended up finishing *Twelfth Night* so it was impossible to find out how this would end for us.

\*

Grade 10 meant everyone had to read *Romeo and Juliet* and I was sick of it. Teenagers negotiating their lives through poetry, what was more far-fetched than that? They were supposed to be our age, Jesus Christ. In the real world, everything was reduced to fiery-static on bodies, and I was invisible.

"You have to date me!"

"What?"

"Well not *you*, of course. *Sorry*. Greg. I'm trying to make Cheyenne jealous."

"Listen, I can't. I've already promised myself to Aurora, we're planning a future where we move to Colorado and open a mid-mountain tea hut for the stoned tourists who come looking for transcendence or whatever. It'd absolutely break her heart if she thought I wasn't taking our life together seriously." A lie. Of course. But one Bailey would understand and agree with. I couldn't moor myself on the affections of strangers the way she could. I was more of a sounding board or sympathetic ear to the girls I messaged, I'd talk them out of bad days and learn what kept them from falling asleep at

night. Bailey would copy and paste the same romantic diatribe to Jake's seven girlfriends and marvel how they all sent back almost the same thing. I bet if I had swapped the names in Bailey's contacts she wouldn't have been able to tell, there was nothing to delineate these women from each other.

I knew the girls I spoke to by their particulars.

Aurora hated everything Disney, her mom had gone from being a meet-and-greet princess at the big castle, to a stripper wearing an identical outfit 50 miles away from the main property. She looked the exact same now as in her childhood pictures and it disgusted her. She suffered from celiac disease and couldn't even order French Fries in a restaurant without interrogating the staff. She once drove four hours to the nearest free-clinic because her little brother broke his leg falling off the monkey-bars, and they couldn't afford the ER two minutes away where you didn't have to wait in line.

Stephanie, stereotypically European, wanted me to confirm her bias against Canada. She wanted concrete details. She was amazed that I had to calculate the tax before I bought something at the store, horrified that it would take me 19 hours to drive to Thunder Bay and I wouldn't even be as far North in Ontario as I could get, and disappointed in my having never left the province. When I tried to explain the relative sizes between our locations, I asked if she'd been to every country in the E.U. and she said, "Yes."

Jane was only attracted to emotionally manipulative musicians and her current one performed in a Post-Crunk band and wrote all the lyrics for their three piece team of drums, bass, and sound—he refused to use the word vocals. Jane wasn't sure how she felt about being referred to exclusively as Bishh in the songs but he was the first boy Jane had ever dated that was six months sober.

I didn't know who was going to be important before I clicked them. I had maxed out my friend list at 4000, so there was a literal sea of girls to pick from. I tried not to romanticize anyone but it was difficult when people did it to themselves first.

The name Kalliope Rose looked fictional, like a storybook princess. But a real one, not a sexed-up imitation like Aurora's mom. Kalliope's profile picture displays a tanned youth in a grassy plain, holding a golden retriever puppy. Black-black hair, almost shoulder length melding into a black sweater. I didn't know anything about her yet.

Kalliope and I had only been texting for a few days when she sent, "Okay. I like you, but I hate typing all this shit and having to wait for you to respond. Can I just call you on the phone?"

"Doesn't that cost money?" I asked. "I'm pretty sure Saskatchewan isn't a local call on my end..."

"We have Canada-Wide calling! I'll call you. You don't get charged for incoming calls, that'd be crazy. Why should you have to pay if someone else wants to talk to you?"

"I'm not sure I believe you, but okay."

I practiced, "Hello," in the most masculine tone I could muster. It sounded bad, like the stereotypical impersonation of a stoner dude. I hoped at worst, I would sound younger, like a boy whose voice hadn't dropped yet. But I couldn't say no, that'd be obvious.

In retrospect, I wonder if Kal knew from that first call, the one where we talked about what summer smelled like to us. To me it was warm nights where the warm came from the air not the temperature and inexplicably the smell of peanut butter and extra toasted bread, to Kal it was sweat and rushing water and hay bales and the feeling of rope-burn on your hands from spending too many

hours on a tire-swing. I re-named her Kal that night, after she confessed she wished her father hadn't punished her with his interest in old mythology and her mother hadn't made it worse by calling her Kallie-Baby. I wasn't paying too much attention but I heard her say something about a reservation.

"Wait. Stop. You're Native?"

"Well, yeah, what did you think I was?"

"I didn't think about it. I just thought you were tan."

"Tan isn't a race, Greg."

"So, do you like, live on a reserve and have a card and everything?"

"Yeah," Kal said.

"That's really cool," I said.

"Not really, I'm pretty sure I live pretty much the same life as you. I just have to drive a bit farther to get to a Timmies than you do"

"No, I've never been to a reserve or anything like that in real life. I just learned about them in schools, that's crazy," I said, still marveling. "Can you send me pictures? What's your house look like? Tell me everything! What do you have on your reserve?"

"I can send you a picture of my backyard and living room, because I can see that from here, but I'm not like getting up and walking around to take pictures for you." Kal sighed and I heard the click and shutter of her camera flashing. I almost do not believe the pictures she has sent me. The backyard is Eden-esquely green, the fence stretches further than the camera lens and there is no end in sight to the space, it is almost wholly unoccupied, there is no patio furniture, no deck chairs or poured concrete imitation stones almost haphazardly decorating the yard. It just is. The living room looks like a gigantic

paneled log cabin. You can see Kal reflected in the TV, sitting on the couch, more comfortable than ornate. The ceilings were higher than I'd ever seen in a family home, and I was struck remarking, "You're rich."

"No. We're not."

"Yeah you are. Just look at the size of your place, if that's not what being rich looks like, I don't know what does."

"It doesn't work like that. We're like middle class, maybe. What were you expecting?"

"This is going to sound awful," I said.

"Say it anyways."

"I guess I expected like, cholera huts and Attawapiskat like we learned in school, so to see you living like this, I guess I feel like I've been lied to a little bit."

"Hey, listen, just because we're living a comfortably well off life, that doesn't mean that the awful shitty things that you learned in school aren't real and aren't happening. It's just different depending on the place, okay? We didn't get to pick and choose. Some things just happen. I don't know why." Kal was two years younger but sounded decades older. She already had her driver's license and I wasn't allowed to walk outside past 9 PM, Kal had already been drunk, and smoked pot, and actively smoked cigarettes, and her parents didn't even mind the last one as long as she was buying her own and not stealing them from her mother's purse. She was the first person to ever love me.

I didn't believe her at first when she said, "I love you, Greg." After I had made some bad pun about alligators.

I was silent for a ridiculous amount of time before I said, "Thank.... You?"

She said, "Relax, I didn't mean it like that. Don't freak out on me."

I said, "How did you mean it?"

She said, "hasn't anybody ever told you they love you before?"

I said, "Only my mom."

She said "Relax. It doesn't mean anything. Well. Of course it means something. It doesn't mean just that. Love is important. If you can love your mom why can't you love your friends? I love all my friends. You're not committing your soul to me; you're just saying something is important to you."

We started talking every day after that. And kept it up too.

\*

Greg and Jake had been around for two years, but we had run out of photographic evidence of their existence. I had taken to finding strangers on the streets that could be him and snapping pictures that looked as intimate as possible to use for his account. There was a boy in my English class who always volunteered to read, but didn't understand iambic pentameter, so he took a lot of unnecessary pauses. He had the wrong coloured eyes and was much too tan, but his nose was the right angle, enough to claim Greg went to Mexico for a week with his family. But, to be honest, I was losing interest in Gregory Nathans, and didn't see the point of keeping him going except for Kal. Bailey disagreed. There was no harm in us having a little fun. She went so far as to recreate Jakey herself for his new iteration of life, she went to the D-TOX where she claimed he worked sales and bought whole outfits, baggy neon blue sweaters and matching skate shoes and impossibly tight skinny jeans that would've caught her out if she didn't literally stuff her pants. She was more likely to refer to Jakey as herself than as an omnipresent invisible friend. She was happier as Jacob than Bailey.

“We’re in some serious trouble. Gosh darn it.”

“What happened?” I said.

“Jessica wants to meet us.”

“Us?? Surely she doesn’t want to meet *us*, because I’ve never spoken to her.”

“Don’t worry, I already told her Greg was busy. She wants to meet Suzy! Jakey’s other best friend.”

“Hold on, back up a second. What are you talking about?”

“Jessica moved! Like *past tense*! They were all the way up in Sudbury, and like, who’d ever wanna go to Sudbury. I figured we’d be safe. But she moved! To Brampton! She waited until she was already here to surprise me. She already bought three tickets. Asking Alexandria! Can you believe it? This Friday, at the Phoenix, it’s ridiculous. We’ve never been to a show this cool. She said she was planning on ditching the whole day so she can start waiting in line at 6 AM to make sure we’re right up against the gate! It’s going to be sick! Only thing is Jakey’s the one that has to go, not me. So, you see why I have to take Suzy. Why I have to take you, Suzy, my friend, my dearest friend, and the only person in this whole world that truly cares about me. Please?”

“Why can’t you just tell her your parents won’t let you go? That’s my excuse for even when you ask me to go to the mall after school...”

“Did you hear me correctly? I said. Asking. Alexandria. Danny Worsnop. Live in the flesh. We might even get to touch him. And besides, I can’t. She already knows Jakey’s a wild-child with absolutely no rules at home. She’d think I was crazy if my dead mom suddenly said I couldn’t go out on Friday night.” Bailey looked too pleased to have run out of options.



We decided to take the train straight from school so we'd have as much time as possible to prepare, but it turns out that was unnecessary. Jessica fell for Bailey's performance immediately. Jessica was a good four inches taller than Jake in her chunky black combat boots. Jessica was beautiful in the way that addicts, drunks, and goths can be beautiful sometimes, their haunted pallor illuminating their eyes in a way that made it impossible to look away. She was wearing fishnets and petticoats and had surely spent an extraordinary amount of time detailing little stars and flowers in silver eyeliner around her eyebrows.

They seemed more than fine when I went to pee just as Danny Worsnop started screaming "You! Stupid! Fucking! Whore!"

When I came back from the bathroom Jessica was crying and I couldn't see Jake or Bailey anywhere. She stomped over to me and held up the snapback Bailey wore to cover her hair.

"Did you know about this?"

I didn't say anything but my expression must have, because she looked like I had stapled her arm or spat on her.

I found Bailey standing outside with clenched fists in the smoking section. She wouldn't say anything, she just kept shaking her head.

\*

We were mid-way through *Othello* when I realized I was the villain. It was hard to figure out at first. Iago had the best lines, the only one with a sense of humour. How could he be evil? He hardly did anything at all, just told a few lies. And where was the harm in that? Kal just enjoyed listening to me

revel in the language. “I am not what I am.” I kept repeating but she didn’t understand the importance of my insistence.

She said, “Oh! Before I forget! We’re going to be in Toronto this summer for a few days. My whole family. My mom decided she wanted to see the CN tower. We’ve never been. I’m not sure when exactly, probably mid-July, but, I know you live pretty close, so if you wanted to, Greg, we could meet up? I think that’d be super cool! It’ll be all of us, so we wouldn’t be able to do anything too wild, but I think it might be fun? What do you think?”

“Promise me you’ll still love me if I tell you something?”

“It depends. You’re not a serial killer or anything are you?”

“I am not what I am,” I said. I took a deep breath and laid out the whole truth to Kal. Every excruciatingly minute detail of Bailey and my follies in impersonating men, how much I hated to see every perfect detail of our classmates, and how I expected to revel in the cruelty of hurting someone, of having that kind of power, but instead, instead, I felt horrible. Twisted. Changed. Wrong. Everyone was so kind. Even when there was nothing in it for them. And Kal, I never expected to love anybody, ever. I thought I was way too broken for anything like that. And that I knew it wasn’t romantic love, but this was the most important relationship I’d ever had in my life. I even told her about Jessica, and the concert, and the look she gave me when she knew I knew.

I kept waiting for Kal to explode. To loose righteous anger against me. I had committed treason, and even I knew there was only one punishment for that. But Kal started laughing. Light, airy, like a cork popping. “I understand,” she said.

“How could you possibly understand?” I asked.

I heard rustling on the other end, then the sound of a screen door clicking shut, then outside noises, cicadas and grasshoppers and crickets, maybe even water or wind in the distance.

“Me too,” she said. “I am not what I am.” She laughed and continued. “I am not a girl. I might have a girl’s body, but, I’m a guy, like...Greg. Wow. I can’t believe I’ve never said that out loud before.”

I was so relieved I started crying. I could hear Kal making distressed cat noises in the background but could not think of a way to soothe him. “Fuck,” he said.

“Sorry! Don’t worry! Sorry! I just thought you’d never talk to me again and that’d be it. Shit.” I was forced to pause so I could sniffle and blow my nose into my sweater. “Is there something else you want me to call you?”

“I think I like Kal...”

“So do I,” I said.

\*

The morning after the concert Bailey didn’t mention anything at school. She didn’t say anything to me, in fact, for a whole week. Later, she said she considered killing Jake off in some horrible drunk driving accident and making one last status update from the perspective of Jake’s mother to give his exes some twisted sense of closure, but ultimately decided on deleting the account silently. There was no longer any trace that Jacob Samuel Cooper ever existed on the face of this earth. I was too sentimental to delete Gregory in his entirety, erasing him seemed unnecessarily cruel when he didn’t exist in the first place. It was enough to choose not to log on again. To be able to see him on my friends list and smile. Kal got a haircut, shorter than it had ever been before, and ended up coming out to everyone except his parents. He told me one night that his little sister, Casseopia, told him that she’d

still love him even if she was her big brother and not her big sister. Everything seemed like it was going to be just fine.

\*

Kal only had one request before I met his family. “Oh! if you could refer to me as her, in front of them, I’d really appreciate it. Please still call me Kal. I don’t know if I could take you calling me Kallie-baby or some shit. You can still use him, when it’s just us and when you’re thinking about me. But it’s an us thing, okay?”

My mom dropped me off at the CN Tower where I watched for anyone who could be Kal and his family. I found them in matching Canada’s Wonderland T-Shirts. They were impossibly bigger than I expected. Bigger than Walmart Standards. I felt guilty about referring to myself as big before we met. Kal looked down at me and kept reiterating how small I was, like a chipmunk or Tinkerbell. We told his family some lies about how we were assigned pen-pals at school but kept writing long after the assignment was finished. We toured Toronto with Kal’s parents and little sister with the tentative excitement of small children, we giggled as we pointed out marvels of street art and had Kal’s mom take a picture of us sharing a foot-long hotdog purchased from a street vendor as we each took a bite from either end. It was a good day.

The last thing Kal’s mom said was, “I can’t believe you’re just meeting for the first time today. It’s not like that at all. It’s like you’ve been best friends for years and years. Incredible.” We smiled furtively at each other.

\*

I was studying for my Grade 12 English Exam when Kal called.

“Hellllooo,” I said.

Nothing.

“Hello?” I said again.

“Oh my God,” Kal said. “You sound like one of those fairies, who live in like glass bottles or some shit, so light and airy.”

“Don’t make fun of me!”

“I’m just giving you an objective description, don’t worry.”

“This is nice.”

“What?”

“Not having to worry about...anything, that’s nice, isn’t it?”

“I guess...”

“What are you worrying about?”

He sounded different, cracked, like a scratched record. “Okay. Promise me you’ll still love me if I tell you something?” He said.

“Anything,” I said.

“I think...I think I’m going to try to be a girl.” Kal said the words like she had fish-oil in her mouth.

“What happened?”

“I come home from school the other day and my dad’s watching TV. He has this look of almost uncomprehending horror on his face, like he doesn’t quite get what he was seeing. There was a story on TV about how they’re setting up for the big Pride Festival in Saskatoon next week and he

went on this rant about how disgusting it was. People could do whatever they wanted in private, but to wave it in everybody's face like that it's an.... Abomination. That's the word he used. I don't think he's even read the Bible. I know. I know. He just doesn't understand. But he's my dad. And I love him. Cassiopeia's not even in middle school yet. I can't lose my family. I still have a year left before I graduate. I promise this isn't something I'm being guilted into or anything. This is important to me. And I want to try. I *have to* try, for his sake. It can't be that bad, right? You're a girl every day. I just have to put on lipstick and pretend, fake it till you make it, right? I know I can do it, at least for now. At least for a little while.

"You understand right? Please tell me you get it? I just don't want you to be mad at me and lose everyone because of this. I told my friends at school, you know. *My friends*. The people I've gone to the past three prides with...They said I was crazy for going back in the closet. My dad's reaction was better. At least *he* didn't know any better. They were my friends. And they said they wouldn't talk to me again until I changed my mind, can you believe it? My friends."

"Don't worry. I love you. Anything you want to do is okay." I could hear her crying softly on the other end. "Can I ask you one thing though?"

"Yeah."

"Can I still call you Kal?"

"Please? I'd like that."

\*

I lost track of Bailey after she unfriended me. The last I heard she had gotten married to a boy she met the summer after we graduated, one she found through Jake. I ran into her a couple of years

ago at a bus-stop in downtown Hamilton. She had a pixie-cut and her arms were gardens of floral tattoos, lilacs, lavender, full colour tiger-lilies. She had finally learned to blend her foundation so her face was a mask of uniform pale except for the eyeliner. I made a joke about her looking like the emo boy she always wanted to be when we were young, said something reminiscent of the good old days, and laughed. She sort of smiled and told me about her fiancé, his name was Jeff and they were getting married that summer. When I got home, I went to message her about how good it was to see her well and found the words “add friend” instead.

I guess she imagines a future for herself without nostalgia.

Kal and I are still friends, on Facebook at least. She makes a beautiful girl. Her hair has grown past her shoulders and she has coloured it a deep-red, she looks like Ariel. Based on the comments on her most recent pictures she goes by Kallie now. She moved to Saskatoon last year and is studying to become an esthetician at the local college. It is impossible to tell from the expression in her photographs and the vaguely sarcastic tone of her status updates whether she is happy or not. I want to ask sometimes, but I’m afraid to know the answer.

VERNACULAR:  
COLLECTED IPHONE NOTES 8/9/14 TO 5/11/15 OF A DEFINITELY **NOT** RACIST FAT  
WHITE CHICK

Everything is boring and...

8/10/14 Last updated 12:07 PM.

Everything is boring and I am soooo bored. Summer feels like time is standing still when you're all alone and all your (two) friends are cottaging in Sauble Beach and Tobermory, or hiking near Jasper, and I can't even have fun packing because I need basically everything I'm going to bring with me. Bailey hasn't even texted me in weeks. Ughhhhh. Just ugh. I can't even get a pet fish. Not that I'll have time for anything other than studying if my mom's to be believed. Yeah right. Time couldn't inch by fast enough for my taste. It's like my feet are stuck in molasses and everyone else is swimming. I bet Bailey even has a tan. I wish. At least we're not American, I guess. I heard some people talking in the Tim's line about another shooting, and some big thing about it. People for guns, or against guns, or violence, or whatever. Summer-school shooting maybe? I felt like it when the AC broke going over cosines again.

I don't know how...

8/29/14 Last Updated 6:46 PM.

I don't know how my entire life is going to fit into my mom's Corolla but we're going to make it happen. Everyone keeps talking about how University (College in all the American movies) is the best time of your life, where everything falls into place like a precisely thrown magnetic puzzle, and I'm



starting to believe it. Mom thinks I'm texting people right now, telling everyone how amped I am to finally get out of here and be free to carve my own goat-track. A perfectly shaken etch-a-sketch.

Oh iPhone notes app, my moonbeam and slice of pecan pie, you are the only reason I'm allowed to do this. You make regressing into introspection seem cool. Or at least necessary. A fuzzy pink lock-and-key diary from Claire's can't compete. You are the keeper of all my wants too foolish and hopeful to be set loose into the world. But clichés are clichés for a reason right? 12 million people don't have rose tattoos for nothing, do they?

I'm on the Sports Floor.

8/31/14 Last Updated 3:14 PM.

[no additional text]

Just kill me now...

8/31/14 Last Updated 3:31PM.

[no additional text]

By some clerical error...

9/04/14 Last Updated 7:00 PM.

By some clerical error, (probably the same one that led ME someone who has never sported in any way whatsoever in her life, to be assigned to the SPORTS floor) there are an odd number of people in our Rez building, so I don't get a roommate. Like usual. They tried to phrase it to me like it was a

good thing. I'm paying the same price as everyone else but I get twice as much space FOR FREE, but the way everyone's paired up like they're lining up to get on Noah's boat to get lunch, I can't help but see the ominous implications of my lack of assigned partner.

I also met the girls who share a bathroom with me (I'm in one of the "good" buildings where it's one bathroom per 2 rooms rather than a boy's room and a girl's room on each floor) I looked up at my basketball team bathroommates as they tried to look around me to discern whether I'd eaten my roommate, but alas for them, it was just me. The best way I can think to describe them is nice. Ever since our first meeting they've only communicated with me via post-it notes stuck to my bathroom mirror. The tone is passive aggressive but the i's are all dotted with hearts.

The only person...

9/07/14 Last Updated 8:45 PM.

The only person who says hi to me on a day-to-day basis is my RA...

RA Stephen has been...

9/28/14 Last Updated 9:06 PM.

RA Stephen has been fired and replaced by Alex from floor 1. Rumour has it that Stephen got caught fucking one of the girls on our floor, and you're not allowed to do that. Jealous! Some people have all the luck.

I can't help but...

10/02/14 Last Updated 10:02 AM.

I can't help but think there's something I should be doing. But I can't for the life of me figure out what it's supposed to be.

I keep contemplating...

10/15/14 Last Updated 2:56 AM.

I keep contemplating the Bee Movie starring Jerry Seinfeld. I don't know what that means.

Somehow ended up...

10/31/14 Last Updated 11:57 PM.

Somehow ended up invited to a Halloween party. Not really invited, per se. More like I was wearing a costume, and no one objected to one sheet ghost joining a group of slutty bunny-rabbits, and nuns, and nurses, and one lone Indian chief caricature. Some people never learn.

“What're you supposed to be...

11/01/14 Last Updated 2:43 AM.

“What're you supposed to be, a panda?” says a guy in a tuxedo complete with a cummerbund.

A beautiful girl in loose cargo shorts and a white t-shirt so thin and tight she couldn't be wearing a bra says, “Don't be dumb, Simmer, she's obviously a marshmallow, like that jiffy lube guy.”

A man in a blue full body spandex suit says something like, “Don't play. Y'all never seen a sheet-ghost before??? Charlie Brown and shit?? Chill.”

It isn't until I've joined the circle that I recognize that no one except for me is white.

That's how I remember meeting the guys. This was after I asked if I could bum a smoke because I saw them passing a glowing flame between them, and at my old high school it wasn't uncommon for six, seven people to share the same cigarette. They told me cigarettes were disgusting, this was pot. They invited me to join their circle and I mimed puff-puff-passing when it was my turn.

Introductions: Kim Possible is Maab, Tuxedo man is Simmer, like the verb. Blue Spandex is Jacob. There are two vampires. Abby and Gabrielle. Abby is dark dark and Gabrielle is the lightest except for Simmer. A Guy dressed like a guy without a costume says his name is Kush, and no one laughs so he's probably not joking. Someone says something like this party is full of lame white people, let's go back to the trap. Somehow, I am invited. The walk is short and someone has handed me a flask of something that tastes spicy and vaguely like motor oil. The first thing I notice is the Greek pillars. There is no railing separating them from where the porch just drops off into the bushes. One wicker rocking chair and at least 7 cans of Folgers coffee and Primo pasta sauce converted into ashtrays that smell like poison and wet leaves surround the front door which is painted yellow. It sounds loud before anyone even opens the door. Inside it smells like wet dog and toasted cumin. There are at least 12 pairs of shoes, sandals, boots, sneakers, in the hall when we get in, but only two guys populate the couch in the living room. They are watching a TV show that displays a man wielding a chainsaw against a woman who shuffles towards him. As he goes for her neck someone says "turn that shit off." Blue Spandex nudges my elbow and asks if I'm scared, says I haven't looked up from my phone since I got here. He holds two red solo cups containing a beer coloured fizzy liquid that smells sweet. He tells me it's "trap champagne" and I shouldn't drink and text at the same time.

Trap: A Formal Defin...

11/01/14 Last Updated 3:14 AM

Trap: A Formal Definition: Simmer just laughs like I've only been invited for comedic effect. Gabrielle explains that it means a drug house, a place where maybe they cook crack, or meth, and a bunch of people live and get high and sell drugs. I tell her I heard there were lots of those types of places in Hamilton, near where I grew up. It's also a genre of Rap music. Trap music is like house music, none of that shit you hear on the radio. Maab interrupts with, "No, no—don't be bright, she doesn't know what you're saying. White-Girl's gon' think we're actual crackheads. I don't know why we call it the trap. It's not a trap-house. It's just a name. James, Olu, Ema, and a couple other guys rent this place. It's not a trap. We just call it that."

I was sooo...

11/02/14 Last Updated 3:50 AM.

I was soooooo intoxicated I started tasting colours. Apparently I told Jacob that purple was the tastiest colour, and orange was the least flavourful one, but I hadn't correlated food with their visual colours, so raspberries were purple and rutabaga was orange. I met a bunch of people whose names I will never remember even if I spent the rest of my life remembering.

Stayed up way too late again. Time is nothing. President is everything. If it's the last thing I do, I will stop sucking at this card game. At least they're kind here. Back home, President was called Asshole and it pretty much gave you license to harass whoever had that role. President felt more

optimistic. Even the Asshole is called Bum. I don't know if it's referring to a homeless person or someone's butt. The goal of reaching the top, not just avoiding the bottom. I never thought I'd like card games. But this is fun. We tried playing Spoons but we made way too much noise the RA's had to come to the common room and shut us up. It's not our fault Maab threw that spoon across the room, we had to jump for it. Being on the seventh floor doesn't help with that.

Note to Self...

11/03/14 Last Updated 11:11 PM.

Note to Self: Figure out how to lock the notes app on my phone ASAP like ASAP ASAP!!!!!!

Blahblahblah blah blah blah

Type-y type type type

Words and words and words

Okay. I think it's safe now.

I have a real conundrum on my hands. Of the likes of which I've never faced before.

So like, I wanna type out all the funny/interesting things my friends say to me and each other, but the language they use is such that I could NEVER say out loud, for moral, proprietary and not wanting to get my ass kicked reasons. Does that mean I'm not allowed to type out the things my friends say, even if they're addressed to me? Would it be racist if I did? Is me thinking about if this is racist, racist? Am I even allowed to be thinking/writing about a discussion on "the n-word" as a white chick??? Is there a real substantial difference between intention and result when it comes to this kind of stuff. If I know I would never call someone else a racial slur, I can talk about the use of racial slurs in

the context of their use right? I would never call anyone a bitch, or a cunt, or a skank, and I'm not afraid to type out these words in the privacy of my own phone, not to mention chink, or gook, or nip, or even mother-fucking-cock-sucking-faggot, and I don't feel the need to use euphemisms or asterisks to disguise what I'm talking about. It's just a phone, your personal cell phone, which is password locked and on your person at all times. I'm sure people write actual racist diatribes with less shame than you're considering writing your friends dialogues verbatim without censorship. I've seen them carved into park benches. Think about that Samuel Jackson interview about *Django Unchained*. That white interviewer lady got in trouble for not saying the word "nigger." See, it wasn't that hard. Yikes. It kinda was. I don't know if that's a good sign or a bad sign. Probably because of the hard r, which Abby and Maab n them never use. It still feels gross, but typing out ni\*\*\* doesn't feel representative of what they're saying. Should I just stop writing? Maybe the problem is that I'm a white recorder in a space that I'm not sure I'm allowed to be in. This is a sticky wicket indeed. What to do...What to do...

Oh it's 11:11 right now make a wish!

IDK if this is...

11/05/14 Last Updated 11:26 AM.

IDK if this is illegal or nah? But... I was just heading back to the dorms... And I hear in the distance someone scream my name and the words "my nigga" in the distance until I saw Abby running towards me! You should have seen the looks on everyone's faces when they saw it was me she was referring to! Am I allowed to be pleased? Or is that not a thing? Hmmmmm.

We're all just...

11/07/14 Last Updated 6:42 PM.

We're all just getting ready to go grab dinner, and Gabrielle, who doesn't even live on campus, is buck naked except for a chain that glimmers between her waist and hips. She's acting like this is completely normal, so I'm trying not to look at her. Not below her collarbones at least. No one else seems to care. Maab's just flipping through whatever issue of Cosmo she's currently reading, Aruna is focused on her thick German textbook, Abby sees nothing wrong with eyeing her up and down.

Abby says, "Where'd you get that bruise on your inner thigh?"

Her words directed me to a purple and greenish splotch vaguely shaped like Portugal.

Gabrielle giggles, says, "Oh! I didn't even realize that was there. Must've been from Simmer."

As Gabrielle spreads her legs further so Abby can continue her examination, Aruna turns to look out the window. Maab starts teasing Aruna until she admits nudity isn't something acceptable in her household, people shouldn't just walk around naked, it's inappropriate, you should only be naked in the shower or when getting changed.

Gabrielle went off: "I can't believe you're talking about *my* body this way...[something about her loving her body and thinking she's beautiful]...You can't keep living with these puritan ideas of the idea that the body is necessarily a sexual object. It's a body. We all have them. It's just a meat-shell we're forced to wear to protect our brain and spinal cord. There's nothing necessarily sexual about it. We only wear clothes to protect ourselves from injuries and getting sand in awkward places. The Olympics used to be naked..." The whole time Gabi spoke she stretched and contorted her body into positions



that made it hard to look at her as a human, let alone a sexual object. She reclined onto Aruna's bed as she tossed the dress she was going to put on in her direction.

Aruna just kept blinking into the opposite direction until Gabrielle agreed to put her clothes back on. She was hungry.

Why do these things...

11/10/14 Last Updated

Why do these things happen to me? So we're just hanging out in Maab's room. Me, Aruna, and Gabi and Abby. And Maab, of course. Aruna and Gabi are reading, headphones in, at the desks near the window. Maab and Abby are talking about a TV show on Maab's laptop. She says, "It's soooo ratchet, but I love it." Abby laughs.

I say, "So, like, what does ratchet actually mean?"

Maab giggles, says, "Gabi!"

Gabi pulls one headphone out and creases her eyebrows in Maab's direction.

"Suzy just called you ratchet," Maab says with a completely straight face.

"What?" Gabi stood and moved like she was going to start taking off her jewelry.

Maab starts cackling. Says, "Gabi! Chill! Simmer! Simmer! I was only playing. Allah..."

Gabi notices my hands shaking and smiles. She plugs her headphones back in and sits back down.

"Did that answer your question?" Maab smiles at me.

"Yes."

Uhm? I don't...

11/22/14 Last Updated 11:58 PM

Uhm? I don't know if it was a prank, or some form of initiation? But uhm? Jacob ? He???

Okay, So we were all chilling in Maab's room, drinking, contemplating playing King's Cup or toking.

When Jacob starts asking me to call him the n-word. Like not saying "the n-word," obviously. He says,

"C'mon Suzy, I know it's something you think about doing. We all do it. I'm giving you permission.

Say the word nigga"

Look, I'm white, not stupid. I say, "This is a trick," as haughtily as I can. While looking at the faces about the room. No one looks conspiratory. Maab frowns into her red solo cup. No one is especially drunk at this point yet and I can't read anyone's faces to see how this is going to go.

"Suzy. C'mon. We call you my nigga all the time. We're giving you permission to say it back, just this once. Do you want me to write the words n-card on a piece of paper and hand it to you for it to be alright? Just do it."

"No. I think racist language has a really serious importance. Like negative connotations. Shit Like That. It's not appropriate for white people to use that kind of language regardless of the circumstance. It's just not cool."

"Fuck that shit, Suzy. I'm telling you. Call me a nigger."

"You're not being very nice right now."

"I'm not going to stop until you call me a nigger. Just do it."

“No...I don't want to...”

“Call. Me. A. Nigger. It's just a word.”

“No. This is a double-edged coin or whatever. If I do it, you're just going to call me a racist cracker who's secretly harboring white supremacist ideals. If I don't you're mad at me because I'm no fun because I won't play along. I lose either way. I'm not going to call you a—use that word, ever. Let alone in front of you.”

“Almost. Call me a nigger, Suzy. Or just say the word in general. You're just keeping on the same cracker bullshit if you act like the word is Voldemort or some shit. I ain't a faggot but I'm not scared to say it. And I'm not homophobic. I've seen too much shit to be on that bullshit. Suzy. I'm not going to let this go. Call me a nigger.”

Before I could protest again, Maab threw her empty solo cup in Jacob's direction. “Stop it,” Maab continued, “it's not funny anymore.”

Jacob says, “Chill. I was just playin'. Suzy isn't upset or offended or anything, is she?”

“Nope? I don't think so?” I say.

Maab says, “I'm sorry, Suzy.” But I can't help but wonder if I made the wrong decision.

I want to ask but that would just make things worse, wouldn't it?

Maab is wearing...

12/06/14 Last Updated 6:57 PM.

Maab is wearing her natural hair for the next week or two until her new weave comes in and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Ughhhhhh. I would actually kill a man to have natural hair that bouncy with such perfect tight little curls...ugh...not only is Maab a 12/10 in the hotness factor with literally the body described in that "I Like Big Butts" song, but her natural hair is waaaaay prettier than the silky black weave she'd been wearing until now. I haven't tried to touch it, of course, but wow.... So pretty!

So when we were getting ready to go out for dinner (Well, they were getting ready, I don't wear makeup and by default was already ready) I got the chance to ask them about it. Because Gabi's hair is in braids and I haven't seen what Abby's real hair looks like under her weave.

OMG they went off on me! Gabi asked, "Suzy, what did you do with your hair this morning?"

I said, "Nothing? I just woke up, got dressed, and headed to Maab's room?"

"See. That's exactly my point. You can do absolutely nothing to your hair and it still can turn out looking perfectly fine. Like nigga please. If I tried to do that you'd think I was homeless. That's why they have specific words to describe Black hair in disrepair. White hair can never be nappy."

"We have words too! If I don't brush my hair for a month it gets totally matted!"

"That describes like, poodles and shit, not people. You know how much product and maintenance it would take if I were to get rid of the braids and try and maintain a 'fro? Not to mention how much work already goes into keeping the braids neat and clean. Fuck. Yeah, it's way less maintenance to buy beautiful, natural, well someone else's natural hair. It's not a trend, it's a lifesaver. Why else do you think this is a global fucking industry?"

"Oh. Uhm. I'm sorry?"

“Don’t be sorry. Just know it’s not that easy. And if you ever want to cut your hair, give it to me. I will pay someone to turn it into a weave. Just think about that everytime you hate your limp white hair, that a black woman would gladly scalp you for it.”

“Uhm. Thank you?”

So, I’m just minding my...

12/14/14 Last Updated 4:09 PM.

So, I’m just minding my own business, going to the bathroom, and as I’m washing my hands, after, you know, I hear someone call my name from the shower stall!

It’s Gabi! She says “Suzy? Good. I thought that sounded like your walk. Listen, I left my washcloth in Maab’s room? Can you run and get it real quick?”

I agree and when I come back I am perplexed at how to proceed. The shower curtain is plastic and impossible to knock on. I can’t just stick my hand holding the washcloth into the stall without risking inadvertently brushing against one of their nipples or something. Oh God.

Like a gameshow host showing off a new car, Gabi opens the curtain. Aruna is in there too. Naked. Of course they both are, they’re showering. But still. She looks suspiciously enthused to see me.

I make no moves to hand the washcloth over and Gabi has to reach out of the stall and grab it from my limp fingers.

“Someone was using the other one when I got in. I couldn’t wait.” Gabi says, before closing the plastic white shower curtain once again. The curtain hooks screeched across the shower rod and

sounded like a cat sharpening their nails on aluminum siding. Doing nothing to remove the image of Aruna washing Gabi's back from my mind.

We're halfway through...

12/16/14 3:27 PM.

We're halfway through December and it's positive 7 outside right now! Am I dreaming? Is this some sort of beautiful hallucination of weather? Are we in some topsy turvy land where things like Winter only exist in the figment of our imaginations?? God I hope so...

Home feels less...

01/01/15 Last Updated 12:02 AM.

Home feels less like home than it ever has before. I can't wait to get back.

Maab isa peofgr...

01/31/15 Last Updated 4:06 AM

Maab isa peofgr! I am so drufk rift now I can't even comprehend how autocorrect is saving my life...Everythidh is wonderduk

I don't know her works.. But wadd lik Body, SaD :( :( loneliness. Pain. Maab is the most perfect idealiasation of evruyhinnh wonderfulll but she is still sad :( :( Why are people sad?

I have to be qui...

02/24/15 Last Updated 2:49 AM.

I have to be quick! I don't want Maab to think I'm texting anyone about this. So it's just a quiet night tonight, just me reading in Maab's bedroom, on her roommate's side of course, IDK where Maab was, I thought maybe she was out with Jacob. But suddenly I hear this frantic but quiet knocking in the dorm room. I'm confused and perplexed, but no one's smoked in here recently, so I open the door. It's Maab! Completely naked except for the washcloth she's using with her free hand attempting to cover her breasts. I noticed before I back away from the entrance that she is shaved everywhere below her eyebrows. With her natural hair cropped short she looks like an incredibly hip-y little boy or like a Bratz doll. All hips and ass with nothing up top.

Maab says, "Thank Allah you're here Suzy. Wasn't thinking. Forget Key. And Towel."

A Fluffy beige paisley beach towel waits folded on her bed for someone with better foresight. She sighs and wraps it around herself, obscuring herself from collarbone to kneecap.

"I don't know what I would have done..."

She left again to get her shower caddy and hasn't come back yet.

UHM TODAY I...

03/05/15 Last Updated 8:33 PM.

UHM TODAY I LEARNED ABBY ISN'T ABBY'S REAL NAME? Can't believe I've known this girl for "a minute still" as they say, and I'm only now finding out, on her birthday for God's sake, that Abby's real name is Abifoluwa. It means something like God's gift, she said. But you know how

white people are. It's easier to go by Abby when you're the only little black girl in an all white kindergarten. Stuff like that makes me so sad :( :(

Jacob's Chest!...

03/30/15 Last Updated 10:58 PM.

Jacob's Chest! How has he never taken off his shirt in front of me before? Oh my god. His tattoos are legit the prettiest thing I've ever seen. Black on Black make them almost invisible on his skin. They're more textural than visible. He lets me feel up his arm as I try and decipher the biblical verses protecting him. So close he smells like Man (it's impossible to describe really, Man-smell, kind of dark like molasses, but also warm like a campfire, with a little bit of tree-sap and sweat residue) and orange peels. Everyone but Maab laughs as I feel my way into interpreting Jacob's body-art. I don't know if she is jealous of me or his tattoos. Only Jacob and Abby are Christian. Maab, Gabi and Mo are Muslim. Kush and Simmer are Hindu, Simmer lapsed, Kush not. Aruna is a strict believer and practitioner of Jainism, which she explained is like a vegetarian sect of the Sikhs, if I understood her correctly. I felt bereft of more than just faith listening to them talk about God. Or Gods, as it were.

Maab laments Islam's strict tenants against body mutilation. She admits her nose and ear piercings are technically against the rules, haram, as she calls it, but figures Allah won't hold it against her as long as she plans on taking them out sometime, and besides she's forgoing tattoos completely. Even though they'd look so beautiful on her. Jacob says that God doesn't like tattoos either. But he thinks the Bible was only referring to heathen tattoos. Like the devil and pagan shit like that. Why would God be angry if he's showing his love and respect for him through bodily art?



Simmer thinks the whole thing of worshipping Gods is bullshit and wants us all to talk about something else, please.

I ask, "So, uhm..."

04/06/15 Last Updated 11:55 PM.

I ask, "So, uhm, what does 'kawal' mean? I know from listening to your guys's usage that it's a verb, but what exactly does it mean to kawal?"

"Oh Suzy, you're so funny," is what Maab always says when I ask another white question.

"It's Somali," Gabriella says. She kisses her teeth and continues, "It doesn't have an English equivalent, so we just took the whole word and moved it over. The best translation I can think of is 'to make crazy' but uhm, it's used as an agitation. Like when Simmer says 'she kawaled me into it.' He's saying that I drove him crazy enough to do something, like when I snap him every fifteen seconds for him to get me pizza. Some people use it to say that like you've been tricked into something, but I think that's a mis-translation, or misinterpretation of what the word's trying to do."

High as balls...

04/14/15 Last Updated 1:04 AM.

High as balls and everyone is talking about race (not me, of course) Maab and Jacob are arguing about the intersectional between different religions and racism. Jacob doesn't think he benefits from his Christianity in any greater sense. Maab contends that Jacob's never had a hijab torn off his head. And not just by white folks. "Fuck. It's not even about white people. Fuck them. It's about us. It's

about our inability for the community at large to have these kinda discussions... It's like we're dissolving into house slave vs. field slave all over again. That ain't it."

Maab looks at me and notices my white skin as if for the first time. As she's looking at me I recognize being consciously aware that for the first time in my life I'm outnumbered. Not that I'm aware anything bad's going to happen. I'm literally in a room with my friends. There's nothing intrinsically scary about being the only white person in a dorm room full of people of varying shades of brown. I just feel, intensely, acutely, aware of that fact right now. Is that a bad thing? Or is it just a thing? Hmmm.

"Sorry Suze, this must be soooooo boring to you."

"What? No! Not at all. Uhm, see. Like, at school, we're taught that everyone's equal. That racism and all that bullshit ended with slavery a long time ago, and all that stuff with discrimination and prejudice was in the past, as it should be. And I totally thought they were right. Like what would our schools teach us that everything's Hunky-dory if that's not the case? Like, why are they lying to children? I think it's really cool to listen to you guys talk about this kind of stuff. I've honestly never thought about a lot of these things, ever in my life. I'm like... actually learning something."

I am looked at like some scrawny kid who just made an outstanding but improbable catch at a local touch-football game. Like the words I have just said are improbable but amazing. Like a concession needs to be made for my ultimate awareness and education.

Maab says "Oh."

Abby looks impressed.

Gabi asks if I have any questions about what we're saying, anything I wanted them to elaborate on.

“Okay, so this is like, a really weird question, so apologies if this comes across bad, or wrong. So like, white people are just white people right, like even though I'm pale and can't go outside without SPF 50 sunscreen, it doesn't make me MORE white than someone with a tan, or whatever. But you guys are like “Dark skin tings” and “Light skin tings” and like obviously I know what light skin and dark skin are/mean, I'm not blind. But what I'm wondering is like, how do you decide if someone's light skin or dark skin? Is there a colour? Or, like, does it depend on your country of origin or what? Are there other parameters? Is anyone who can take a decent selfie after dark light-skin? How does it work?”

A collective breath of air is let out.

“That's actually a really good question... I don't know. It's really difficult to think about. I'm the darkest person in my family. Both my sisters, Suzy, they're just a bit darker than you. So my whole life, literally until I got to University, I grew up thinking I was dark-skinned. Like my parents would call me dark. Not in a bad way. I was just their dark-skinned daughter. Olu, you met him at the trap, I think? He's Nigerian, and he's the kinda dark that makes white people cross the street to avoid walking past him, he was the one who made me realize I was light-skin. I made some joke in front of him about being dark. And he did the arm test with me! We held our arms next to each other and I looked white next to him. It shattered all of my preconceived notions of existence. Of what it means to be dark.”

“So, basically, it's super complicated?”

“Pretty much,” Maab laughs.

Jacob got into a fight...

04/14/15 Last Updated 8:45 PM.

Jacob got into a fight with a tree... And Lost! I can't believe this actually happened. And in finals week no less. What a dumbass! Okay, let's back up. So I go to Maab's room to visit and find her gone. Everything in her room is in place, but no Maab. I ask around the common room and here's the tea:

So, Jacob was just playing a casual game of soccer with the boys. His team is winning. He's running for the ball. Like really going for it. And WHAM! Runs right into a tree. It was a tiny little thing. The impact cracked one of its branches. And when Jacob went to get up he couldn't. His knee looked pretty messed up and it took two guys to shuffle him off the ground. Someone called Maab and she called for an ambulance. Went all the way to the hospital with him. Everyone's worried but Maab said they'll be back soon so we shouldn't waste any money cabbing to the hospital to visit. Abby's pacing the hallway like she has a splinter in her heel. It feels like forever before Maab helps Jacob limp out of the elevator and into the common room to regale us with his diagnosis. Dislocated Hip. But the gash on his knee didn't need stitches. He just needs someone to change the bandage every 12 hours or so because he can't bend over. Or participate in any strenuous activities. This loss is lamented by all the boys. (And Maab and Abby). Since he is not seriously hurt everyone is able to laugh about Jacob's pain. He was not given any painkillers and therefore is allowed to drink away any discomfort he might be feeling.

Blood and guts and...

04/15/15 Last Updated 8:47 AM.

Blood and guts and pus are apparently hard limits for most people. Jacob looked desperate when he came into the common room and interrupted our game of President asking if someone could help change his bandage. It's over-time and he'd do it himself but he can't bend over. There is a small dark circle soaking through the centre of the cotton bandage wrapped around his left knee. Simmer and his roommate had both already refused. I learned basic first aid at my first minimum wage job and figured I could wrap a bandage. Jacob holds a fanny-pack first aid kit and paper holding instructions that had been folded and re-folded over and over again. The paper said to remove the dirty bandage, make sure the wound is clean/not infected, then wrap up the wound again tight enough to secure it, but not enough to restrict blood flow. That seemed simply enough. Jacob sat on the edge of his bed and I kneeled on the floor in front of him.

If these were any other circumstances the smile he gave me wouldn't have made me go, "Yikes."

He says, "It hurts when I move it."

I say, "Don't move it, then."

I use the tiny scissors to slowly reveal a jumble of crusty brown blood and skin. It doesn't look red or inflamed, just mostly mushy, like he's spent more time walking than resting. It smelled clean too. Like the remainder of antiseptic, not the sickly sweet smell of decomposing flesh that signaled infection.

"Thanks," Jacob says. "It's difficult for me to ask for help. The way I was raised I guess. My father taught me it was weak...or feminine to rely on someone else to do something you should do

yourself. It really sucks having everyone fuss over me like this. I just want to get better so it can all stop.”

“Don’t worry, Jacob. Mr. Tree-fighter. I think it’s great that you have so many friends who care so much about you that they want to make a fuss. Nobody thinks you’re weak. And even if they did, it’s okay to rely on someone else, isn’t it? That’s what friends are for, or whatever?”

“Yeah, thanks. Don’t tell anyone I told you any gay shit like this.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not too tight is it?”

“No. It’s fine. Great.”

I admire the almost invisible rabbit ear bow that secures the bandage around his leg. As he stretches out to admire my handiwork I am struck by how simultaneously strong but fragile he looks. Like one of those Roman marble statues, somehow, someone had carved stone into a lace veil.

Immovably solid, yet soft.

In the elevator...

04/18/15 Last Updated 3:00 PM.

In the elevator up to Maab’s room and two guys who just finished a friendly game of soccer come in with me. One black, one white. I know they’ve just finished sporting because one of them carries a ball. They make chit chat about their lives, and the black guy says he’s from Ethiopia. This makes the white guy laugh and he wants to know what his name would be in “African” He says his name is Brandon, and wants to know if it would translate to “maple syrup canadian moose” or

something like that in his language. Me and the other guy double take at each other like we're both watching the camera in *The Office*. I wait for him to laugh or wink to reveal his intent but apparently he's serious.

I say, "Thats..." but falter on how to finish. What I want to say is "racist" or "really fucked up" or "completely and utterly stupid" But he's much taller, if not wider than me. And I don't think I can take him. What I decide on is, "not how it works." And I can feel the relief emanating from Not-Brandon.

Brandon looks between us and says, "Oh. I'm...uh...sorry?"

The elevator dings me to my floor and I see Not-Brandon raise his eyebrows at me before the doors close.

I think that makes me "Woke" now, doesn't it????

Dreams of cottaging...

05/11/15

Dreams of cottaging fade as I haven't heard from anyone except Aruna since we got our grades back. Nobody has Facebook and I never needed anyone's phone number when we all lived less than 50 metres from each other. I ran into Aruna at Shoppers while she was buying concealer and rice. I got her number and updates about everyone else. Jacob's mom saw his transcripts and was able to deduce from his grades what he must've been getting up to. He wasn't under academic probation like most of us, but his mom arranged for him to transfer to a college closer to home, where he would be easier to keep track of. Kush and Simmer decided they'd rather be in Toronto and got their credits transferred to

Ryerson's Business program. Aruna managed straight 70's. Maab's highest grade was a 54. Gabrielle was taking a year off to work at McDonald's until she saved enough money for another semester's tuition. If I wanted another chance, I would've had to fill out so much paperwork, meet with Academic Advising, some sort of dean, the head of my department. It was easier just to not. Pretend I never got the email and let its memory slowly slip.

A place that sleeps at least 8 in Grand Bend for even a weekend is impossible to theoretically organize when we're split between three cities. And poor. You can't forget poor. And evidently, stupid.

Well, it was fun while it lasted. I have no idea what I'm going to do with my life from here on out.

I hope for the rest of my life my favourite taste will be room-temperature Trap Champagne. Bubbly with just a splash of rotten fruit and saltine crackers.



## ONE NEW MESSAGE

The birds crescendoed from Suzy's phone, sounding more and more irritated as she continued not touching it, not even to decline the call. This is what she had wanted. She literally asked for this. Now... The birds kept chirping.

\*\*\*

*Wacky. Shit. No. Sorry. Hi. Sorry. [one deep exhale] Hi, my name is Suzy. I know, this is wacky. But Craigslist's missed connections is just full of weirdos looking to get head or secretly have a gay experience...oops...uhm.....sorry...I'm not this crazy I promise...if you think we talked from across the water, please call me back. Thanks.*

\*\*\*

—9373

*Hey, Alice and Katherine here, we're not home right now, or we're busy. [giggles] Leave a message and we'll get back to you as soon as we can.*

\*\*\*

—9333

*You've reached the Richards household, if you're looking for Steve try his office.*

\*\*\*

—9389

*Boop. If you're listening to this hang up and text me. It's not the nineties.*

\*\*\*

It was the constant motion of the river that made Suzy feel less alone, that and the boats. Not the hulking monsters that slowly crept, making so much noise she could hear them from her dismal basement apartment six blocks away, but the ones intended for tourists, so white and pristine they looked anachronistic, half-filled or empty by strangers so close she could make out their expressions of boredom or rapt wonder from the shore.

Suzy was mourning a death.

Her name was Snowball and she lived five good years. Quite a while for a Flemish rabbit of her size, the vet insisted. She would have been the equivalent of an old lady, like the Queen. She did nothing but make the whole place smell like a dilapidated barn, she was the only thing Suzy had. Now, nothing.

Suzy had to constantly trace the river to keep from crying. It had been two weeks. Suzy had since cleaned out the now empty cage, vacuumed up every last bit of fur and kicked aside bedding, even donated to her local shelter the rest of Snowball's food and those orange yogurt treats they would share when Suzy was too drunk to remember how much she paid for them. It didn't help. Snowball had sunk into the walls like she was a pack-a-day smoker and Suzy was desperately trying to quit. The first step inside started the withdrawal all over again. It was easier to stay out.

The river wasn't anything close to uninhabited, not at any hour, people were always walking, if not stalled in their cars, looking, but with Suzy's eyes blazing red from what looked like either misery or drugs, she was left alone. Both conditions were feared to be contagious. That and she was lucky in a sense. Suzy was self-aware enough to know she wasn't *conventionally attractive*. Her hair was limp and the colour of wet sand, it spent most of its time in one long braid. She was mostly proud and slightly

insecure to admit she had never been cat-called in her life. Her figure being closer to a teapot than an hourglass, she admired and pitied the girls whose beauty led them to be treated like car accidents.

Once, waiting for the bus, Suzy watched as cars bottlenecked around a brunette in a low-cut dress, every single car slowing down to look as if she had been mangled and the first responders had yet to reach the scene. Suzy wasn't ugly, or deformed in any specific way, only more likely to find her doppelgänger in a museum display than a magazine advertisement.

From a distance though, she imagined herself as beautiful, the way manatees used to be misrecognized as mermaids, the way strangers and lovers looked the same if you squinted.

Walking against the safety fence the only people who acknowledged her existence were the fishermen floating by in the distance, who might nod or smile to themselves as they passed her staring into the water, or at whatever vessel looked most interesting.

\*\*\*

—9302

*Yooooo-haaa Bro-ha. Issss Schbmiirnofffff. Waaas goooood?*

\*\*\*

—9369

*Hey! [long pause] Ha-ha! Did I get you? Sucker!*

\*\*\*

—9315

*This is the voicemail box for the Ali Family, if you want to leave a message, wait for the beep.*

\*\*\*

The word *boat* was an understatement, it was bigger than Windsor's sorry attempts to compete with Detroit's *Princess*, not quite a yacht, but close. All white, three decks, no angles, all smooth curves. It made sense to Suzy now why they were referred to in the feminine. She was beautiful, flying one flag from each country. Everyone on board was dressed so formally Suzy was sure it was a funeral, until she saw the blonde on the top deck in a white dress too poofy and elaborate to be anything else. The boat was moving slower than the current; Suzy could even make out the sparkles on the blonde's bodice, going from yellow to pink to orange as the light reflected against her. She was dancing to *Staying Alive* which seemed to emanate from everywhere. A pile of smoke and raucous laughter occupied the middle deck.

There was a guy on the lower deck. In his suit he looked like all the others, the perfect disguise. He stood out only on merit of being alone. All that merriment and he was three floors down drinking something brown from one of those plastic-fake-wine-glasses. She had been staring at him for a long time before he looked up. Eye-contact. Like they had touched, brushed by accidentally and felt something like sparklers without the burn.

"I love you!" It meant nothing, probably. Just intoxicated words driven out by circumstance, or maybe he was mocking her, it was impossible to tell from this distance. Still, the words hung there, waiting.

"I love you too!" She didn't expect anything more. This was enough.

"905-315-93—"

"—Heeeeyyyy! My name's Kenny and I'm your DJ for the night! If you have any requests, don't be afraid to ask. Let's kick it!"

Sometime during Kenny's introduction, a beautiful woman in pink had touched lower-deck-guy on the shoulder, beckoning him up the stairs, back to everyone else. Before he disappeared for good Suzy thought there was an expression of embarrassed regret on his face. They were now too far away for her to shout anything back, besides, all anyone could hear was Soft Cell crooning *once I ran to you, now I run from you...*

Suzy wasn't carrying her phone or a pen, not even eyeliner or a razor-blade so she could carve the numbers into her arm. She ran all the way home, repeating *ninety-fiftythree-fifteen-ninetythree* to herself out-loud the whole-time, oblivious to the concerned expressions of every witness she passed, she may as well have been invisible. It wasn't until she got back that she recognized she was two short of the necessary ten. *Close, but no dice*, as her friend Aruna was keen on saying. But, there were only a finite combination of numbers. Unlikely, but not impossible. After all this trouble, it'd be silly not to.

*905-315-9300.*

Dial Tone. Not even a voice saying out of service.

—9301

—9307

—9312

—9318

—9323

By this point Suzy had determined a script for her calls, polite, warm, almost business-like, but still recognizing the absurdity of the situation. She didn't have to worry too much, for the most part the numbers weren't attached to people, just continual beeps and the occasional small business, this

should have been disappointing but instead was a relief. By *ninetythree-thirty* she had only left six messages saying some variation of

*Hi, I know this is kind of wacky, but if you were on a boat on May 12th on the Detroit River I think we had a conversation, please call me back, my name's Suzy. Thanks.*

Her voice sounded unfamiliar to herself, too high, more airy than she would use to talk to anyone. Closer to singing than speech. It was exhilarating, at first. Suzy had never used drugs but thought that this must be what they felt like, that rush of pure okay-ness, like nothing was ever going to improve from this point on.

\*\*\*

At a wine-bar known for their terrible but cheap rosé spiked with grapefruit syrup, Aruna and Karen were animatedly discussing the last text Karen's most recent date had sent her. For women who had almost failed high school English, they were able to parse his sentences with exceptional skill. While negotiating whether his last exclamation point was ironic or sincere, they realized Suzy had yet to option even one theory about his emoji usage, she was consumed with her own device.

"You know what they say about a watched pot."

"What?" Suzy wasn't listening.

"Nevermind."

Suzy's friends had never seen her care this much about anything. When it first started they thought it was cute, now it was just annoying. "Sooooo boring," in Aruna's words.

She had got to *ninetythree-ninetynine* last night. Suzy held off as long as she could, making two, maybe three calls a day, delayed gratification, or something like that, after she had gotten to

*ninetythree-fourtysix* that very first night. She wasn't expecting anything to happen until she had reached the end, now anticipation had given way to desperate impatience. She had been punctuating every thought with a sigh for hours. Karen was beautiful, therefore, uncaring towards Suzy's plight, the idea of getting so fixed on a boy, one whose name she didn't even know, was stupid, especially when there were so many of them everywhere. Aruna was more sympathetic.

"I know how you feel. Before I met Chris, I was so bitter, even seeing flies fuck in the air made me nutso. Once you find out either way, I'm sure you'll feel better.

"But you have to wonder right...if it wasn't a trick...or something...not that I'd think anyone would do something like that to you..." Aruna smiled brilliantly, in a way that left goosebumps crawling all over Suzy's arms.

"Sorry, that was mean. I shouldn't have said anything like that. *Que sera sera*, right? I think Miss Doris had the right idea about that, there's no use troubling yourself with things that are out of your hands. Whatever will be, will be."

\*\*\*

Suzy was certain that someone had broken in, not to take anything, just to move things around, she kept expecting to find apple cider in the bathroom cabinet or something drawn with lipstick on the mirror. It took a while for Suzy to realize that the *something* that was missing from her place was the smell of bunny. Instead, the place smelled distinctly of not-rabbit. Of Suzy, in truth. The smell of nothing, or, when she had been gone for hours, sweat, old radlers and strawberry chapstick. Snowball's cage had turned into a modernist sculpture constructed from Suzy's tossed clothes, all

beige, black, and army green, it looked like the truly-alive-cannibal-plant from that play everyone had to perform in tenth-grade-high school. It was almost nice.

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—9355

*Shaun! Fucking Shaun! Goddamnit my name is fucking Shaun!*

\*\*\*

—9317

*I must be out or I'd pick up the phone, where could I be? Believe it or not, I'm not home.*

\*\*\*

—9396

*It's Dave. You know what to do.*

\*\*\*

*Hi. Listen, I know this is w—weird or strange or just hopeless, but I have to try. Do you understand? It's just that this meant...something...to me. If it's not you, don't worry. I get it. Sorry.*

\*\*\*

While the phone rang, birds chirping everywhere, Suzy dreamt an entire life. One that involved flowers, forests, bird-watching with cans of beer, ice cream cones, gardening, homemade lasagna, soft twinkly lights, negotiations about cotton or cashmere, snowball fights, a white wooden fence they'd have to re-paint every summer, reminiscent trips to the river long after they'd moved, towing small hands behind them, a life.

Better not.



## STICK-N-POKE

Her name was Claire and she illuminated my existence. Both figuratively and literally. My whole apartment was grey when she left. Even my furniture was monochromatic—a stained futon, two stiff sitting-room chairs, a lacquered fake wood coffee and end-table set, everything either eggshell or sulfurous-tar, donated by the landlord from the last communal area renovation. My bed was cream, alone in the eponymous room, the only thing that would fit.

She left behind spools of gold-lightening-silver. Never anywhere expected. I'd go looking in the mattress, under couch-cushions, between the bristles of my hairbrush and only find my almost-red black tangles. It'd only be when I was doing something like watering the fern or putting a TV-dinner in the microwave that I'd see that glitter out of the corner of my eye and know. I wanted to collect them. Put them in a jar like a sentimental parent collecting teeth, or make intricate jewelry, like our class was learning the Victorians did. But I knew that was too weird. I worshipped her—though she didn't find my adult/idolatry joke humorous, she said, *That's not funny. You know Joe's been in Owen Sound with Julie since Ben was fourteen.*

Still, she was pure light. Her blonde-ish hair haloed her, like she was constantly under the influence of a static-y balloon, almost but not quite obscuring her vision. Her eyes looked just-grey from a reasonable distance, but close up there were these little flecks and streaks of orangey-yellow, like the sky during a storm. She was usually wearing some obscene avocado coloured, or floral printed, or acid-wash, muumuu, two sizes too big, so billowy you could hide a second person in there.

I considered her the best thing about me.

She was a cashier at Bob's Foodland (owned and operated by Greg Stavros) every weekday 9-3 except Tuesday. This was the only store in Malcolm, Ontario, population: 1,989—300 less than my last high school—where you could purchase milk, sausages, bread, and vegetables all at the same location. They even had things you couldn't get anywhere else, like sriracha, and cream of tartar.

I first noticed her because she said *my pleasure* instead of *you're welcome* and *thank you for your patience* not *I'm sorry for the wait*. She would comment on people's purchases as they strolled past her conveyer belt. This wasn't malicious or prying, she just didn't know when to stop. The first thing she said to me was *sweet tooth, eh, Babe?*

I was buying strawberries.

She looked older than the ambitious teenagers pursuing a limited sense of financial freedom, but younger than the women who had spent the past thirty-five years here, escaping the confinement of casseroles and hockey practice only now beginning to admit regretting it, and taking it out on the shoppers. Her uniform consisted of a plastic name-tag that said *Clare* pinned to a red shapeless smock.

I wish I had said something cute. Laughed, looked coy, blinked at her suggestively—something. Instead, I told her not to call me that. Insisted that pet-names and that kind of baby-talk was gross, unfair, condescending, diminishing, the worst. Every superlative I could think of. Her voice was calm but her hands were shaking as she counted my change out to me, not missing a dime.

As the automatic doors embraced behind me I realized I had fucked up.

I doubled back to the entrance, pausing to pick up a chocolate bar so I would have an actual reason to go back to her till, but the only one open was *twelve-items-or-less*, guarded by a spectacled and mustached man. He was thoroughly unhelpful. She was *Probably on break or something*.

I was so busy chewing over my error during my flight from the parking lot that I almost didn't notice her reading. She was across the street in what was attempting to be a park. It was a small square of grass between the Anglican church and the Garden Rose Variety. The only sign that it was a park and not a development-in-progress was the picnic bench placed strategically next to a fresh elm.

She didn't look upset, sitting on the edge of the table in the only sliver of shade, but she wasn't turning the pages of the book she was reading. *Write Your Own Horoscope*. She was breathing so loudly I could hear it over the sounds of people struggling to park across the street.

"Hi," I didn't know what to say next. If she wasn't upset, my apologizing would just look stupid, right? She looked up from her book and watched me like I was holding a knife. "Can I sit down?"

I took her silence as an assent. I sat at the opposite end of her bench and regretted it immediately. There was no way to inch closer without seeming calculating.

"Okay." I leaned into the table and started my crawl towards her. "I'm really sorry. I shouldn't have done that. It wasn't right. It was true, but it wasn't good of me to do that."

"Thank you for apologizing. No one's ever done that before. You're forgiven."

"No one's ever apologized to you before?"

She laughed and the sound was music, but good stuff, *Swan Lake*, or *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*, not *The B-52s*, or *She Thinks My Tractor's Sexy*. I was afraid I might start humming *The Girl from Ipanema*.

"Not a customer."

"Wow." I could not think of a thing to say and had to rely on a non-sequitur. "Good book?"

“Well, I’m not reading right now. This is just something I do to feel better. I guess most people stop reading when they find themselves reading the same sentence over and over again. But to me, it’s the most relaxing...the point where words, all words, even the worst ones, become complete gobbledy gook. Listen, *each star is a sun. Eachstarisasun. Eech arr issa sun.* Isn’t that just incredible? It’s the only thing that really makes me feel better when I’m stressed, how can anything anyone says be upsetting when *eecharissasun.*”

She was waiting for a response. Of course she was, that’s how conversation worked. But I couldn’t arrange enough words together to form a complete thought.

She smiled like she had been caught committing an embarrassing or possibly criminal faux-pas, molesting a museum statue, touching a painting, or mispronouncing the word *Bach*.

“I’m sorry, this whole talking to people thing has always been difficult for me. I was raised to *mind your own beeswax.*” She affected an authoritative but distant voice for those words. “So when I moved here with Joe I wasn’t used to people asking how your day went and actually expecting more than a polite smile. I had the same next-door-neighbours for half my life and only spoke to them around Christmas...we moved here before James was born and I still feel like half-a-tourist because I can’t get it right. It’s like someone turned on the wrong faucet and hid the switch. Even my car is wrong, too...” She pointed at a shiny golden form in the distance.

“It’s okay,” I said, but I wanted to do something more. I had managed to inch close enough to smell the coconut-hibiscus of her shampoo, but she seemed so fragile I was afraid she’d dissolve into tiny bubbles if I even traced her hand. I hovered as close as I dared.

“I’m going to stop talking now. What do you do for fun? Drink? Go out? Sauble?”

“Not on a school night.” I smiled as Lolita-ishly as I could.

I had never seen a real grown-up look more terrified.

“Oh! Don’t worry. I’m nineteen, aha, I dropped out yeeeeeaaarsss ago and I’m going back for my last three credits. History, Environmental Science, and English. They almost didn’t let me in I’m sooooooooooooo old.” She didn’t look much better.

“Well. It’s okay. Do you have the time? I left before I could grab my phone.” Her assurance wasn’t assuring.

“Half-past-two.”

“Shoot. Really? Time flies, eh?” More music. “Listen, this was...*nice*.” She furrowed at the inaccuracy of the word, hopefully.

“See you?”

“Yes.”

Has anyone ever invented a more beautiful word than yes?

\*

There are two kinds of alcoholics, the ones who drink, and the ones who don’t. My parents were the second kind. They were into sobriety the way some people were into Jesus. Dad taught fourth grade, Math and French. Mother was a school-bus-driver, turned mid-tier-management in a pyramid scheme that enlisted women to enlist women to sell make-up and other self-esteem products. She must have been pretty good, because after Avery was born we moved from Barton street to Carlyle, a neighbourhood so *nice* it dissuaded anyone from appreciating it by neglecting to include sidewalks. It

wasn't as bad as it sounds, I promise. Our backyard's treehouse had electricity. They even got a place up North in Malcolm—right off Spry Lake—and we spent all of August there every year. The three hour drive with a stop at Mr. Freezie's on the way was my favourite part of the trip. I would spend the whole month re-reading whatever murder mystery or high-concept fantasy novels occupied the bookshelves that had been there since before I was an embryo, while Dad haunted the dock pretending to fish, and Adison and Avery caterwauled around Mother crying about how they were just so bored. It was the only time we all got along.

But it was an understatement to say they freaked out when I fell for Al. I guess they didn't believe in love at first sight. A spire-y goatee and diminutive eyes. He was seventeen *and* had tattoos. A waning moon next to his left eyebrow, the words *this hurt* on his ribs, caricatures of Mickey and Minnie on his forearm accompanied by a Cheshire cat wrapped around his wrist, a fifteen-and-a-half-year-old's dream. I met him at the only bush-party I was ever invited to. He was the only one there not from our grade, or any grade. He was bragging about his mother's heroin addiction and drinking something clear from a plastic water bottle, and I was naive or dumb enough to assume that's what it was. That was the first time I tried gin. The first time I tried anything. It smelled like sickly liquorice and tasted like fire. Firier than fire. It was disgusting. We finished the bottle in half-an-hour, him mostly. I probably only had a few more sips, but I was more intoxicated than I can remember.

I forgot my address, it was close but so far, so he piggy-backed me to his place, I only remember everything was sideways, then I was half-on his couch, the left half of my body dangling in open air, my fingers just touching the floor. I could smell wet-dog and burnt-sugar, along with pot,

tobacco, that antiseptic smell I would later come to recognize as hard liquor, and popcorn. I got my first one that night, a smiley face on my wrist. By the time I remembered where I lived it wasn't my home anymore. I got back still drunk, my arm burning more than my throat, mid-way to my first hangover, and they were waiting for me. They were more terrified than disappointed, talking about how I was jeopardizing *their* sobriety, how they wouldn't let Avery and Adison live under the same roof as an abuser. It was the first time I had done anything. I ended up kicking myself out. Had to walk backwards to make sure I could make it there straight. It was seven, maybe eight in the morning when I found the place with the red door. The whole neighbourhood looked rented. Garbage cans littered the curb days after collection, used needles, condoms, and candy-bar wrappers dusted the grass like campfire ash on a dirty carpet. I knocked on his door crying *Al* over and over again until a girl answered. She was his mirror-image, in the sense that they were the same but opposite. I wasn't sober enough to recognize the difference and collapsed into her.

Her name was Al too, she explained. Irish twins. Alister and Alison, but everybody called her Cosmo. I was welcome to as well. They had the same dark dark hair and eyes so black that they seemed extensions of their pupils. Born eleven months apart but you wouldn't know it. Raised as twins and it was obvious, since they were little everything had to be bought in pairs, anything that belonged to just one of them was either broken or stolen. Sharing wasn't an option. They were raised by an aunt and uncle who got custody after their mother had left them in a bar with strangers one too many times, while she was using in the nearest alley.

Who was their dad?

Nobody knew the exact answer to that question, but there was no doubting whether the Als shared that history. Their mother was a wispy mouse of a woman with grey-green eyes, who ensured that Cosmo would be born drunk and going through withdrawal, if her aunt was to be believed. Her children were given up on as soon as they decided on similar proclivities.

There were six of us in the house, seven, myself included. Me, Al, Cosmo, Jet, Money, Scat, and Matthew—Jet and Money were really Jennifer and Steven, but Scat insisted the whole time I was there that it was his real name—Al, Money, and Matthew sold drugs. Dealing really amounted to them spending a lot of time in parks, alleys behind bars and nightclubs, and in houses with fish-tanks that almost always contained a miniature shark. Cosmo, Jet, and Scat panhandled. Honest at least, instead of false-hunger-pleas or guilt-trips that implicated malnourished children, Cosmo had drawn a detailed pot-leaf on the grease-covered side of an empty pizza box. They did incredibly well, considering.

We stagnated like this for three years.

A year in, I picked up all my worldly possessions, which at that point amounted to a practically empty wallet, a sleeping bag that unzipped into a blanket, and a hollowed-out Fall Out Boy pocket mirror, and moved into Cosmo's room. She was ecstatic, anything fairly lost was fair game. I was more upset by Al's indifference, even if he was faking it. Cosmo said, *It's not about you, it's me, he won't give me the satisfaction of winning. He's such a sore loser.* This was said loud enough to ensure that *Dark Side of the Moon*, angrily rotating from across the hall, would be the only sound for hours.



I became ridiculous. I stretched out my weekly shopping into as many trips as possible. There would be four, maybe five things on my list and I'd find myself at the Foodland seven, maybe eight times a week.

I don't know what she thought of me, sitting at her till like it was an appointment, a book waiting beside the register for the next lull. It was never anything I expected. Not the *Bible* or *Pride and Prejudice*, not even *Eat, Pray, Love* or *50 Shades of Grey*. She was reading things like *Folk Medicine and Gentle Cures*, *Simon & Schuster's Guide to Rocks & Minerals*, *The Psychology of Dreams*, and once, *How to Make Love to a Negro (Without Getting Tired)*.

After enough needless purchases of one single orange or box of macaroni, I managed to convince her to see me on her only free day.

I didn't think it was anything, not really, until a couple of Tuesdays in. We had taken to hiking the trail that led up to the ruins of the McNeil mansion, after all those stairs the sweater that protected me from poison ivy and the bugs that took chunks out of me was suffocating, but my camisole clung on as I pulled it off. I could feel the breeze right underneath my bra, by the time I fixed my shirt she was staring dutifully away from me, wearing the same careful expression I had to keep in the gym class changing room, as soon as I had figured out what specifically was *queer* about me.

I can't remember how we ended up back at my place. I must have invited her. Of course I did, but the exact words, the conversation, nothing.

After the first time, we never went anywhere else.

She was the only time I wasn't thinking about anything else. Less like I'd thrown out my watch, more like I'd thrown out the entire concept of elsewhere.

“What’s this?” She was holding a worn purple book, sitting cross-legged on the bed, flipping through the poems like they were magazine advertisements.

“Ugh. Don’t remind me. Shakespeare makes more sense. It’s awful, I’d actually rather be reading iambic pentameter rhyming couplets. It’s worse than awful. It’s nonsense.” She laughed like she didn’t believe me. “C’mon, it’s stupid.” I grabbed the book from her pointless fingerings and flipped to a random page. “How do you even go *amaying*? ridiculous.”

“Well. You don’t have to like it,” was her attempt to be helpful.

“I do, actually. In two weeks. We have to pick our favourite. And recite it to the class. And talk about why we like it. I’d rather be reading that Frost poem about the road again. There *is* one...but there’s no way I’d ever be able to read it out loud...it’d be too...”

“Is it about sex?”

“No! Yes. Maybe? I’m not sure actually...Let me find it...” I passed by the word *balloons* and so many parentheses before I found it. “Now, imagine we’re at a bar in West Texas, or like Deep Carolina, somewhere with that *twang*,” I affected the accent that I believed a hard-working American from the Bible-Belt might have. “...*A purdy girl who’s naked is worth a mill-yun stat-chews*. Ah! See, that makes sense. Isn’t that incredible? A million statues...”

My reveries were interrupted by her ringtone. To my horror she started digging through her purse, making a noise that sounded like glass bottles clinking together, until she eventually pulled it out and said, “The dentist.” Her sigh was resigned and relieved. “I’ve been trying to get ahold of them all morning.”

I waved her off; she mouthed, *Thank you* as she retreated from the mattress into the hallway. “Thanks for getting back to me.” Her sigh was audible from the next room. “I booked two appointments for the 23rd...12 and 2...” She laughed at something on the other end. “Yeah, and I checked with him before but...” The way her voice was trailing in and out, I imagined her walking the line where linoleum edged the carpet in the living room, the same way she’d walk atop those concrete parking blocks like it was a gymnastics balance beam. “Sixteen-year-old boys...Let me tell you,” she laughed again, machine-gun-fire, the imitation of laughter. “Thanks so much...See you then...You too. Have a great day, thanks again, buh-bye.”

I composed my face so that I would be able to say, “You don’t need to tell *me* about sixteen-year-old boys,” in as neutral a tone as possible.

But instead of continuing her not-laughter, she looked at me like I was a peeping-tom and said, “Sorry.”

### 3

One night, I was walking downtown to meet Cosmo and saw in the shop window across the way this gangly-coked-out-freak. Thin enough to be an anorexia advertisement, with these horrible chicken-scratch-looking wounds everywhere, worse than the homeless people who slept outside the Salvation Army. She had black matted hair like a neglected dog, there were shapes sprouting from her left eyebrow, it looked like she hadn’t slept in weeks. *Ugly* was the first word I thought. I stepped out of the way to dodge and so did she.

It was horrible. Seeing yourself objectively like that...I...don’t wish that on anyone.

I left later that night. It was serendipitous, the first car that stopped, a mini-van with twin kayaks strapped to the top, was headed to Sauble Beach for the weekend. A nice middle-aged, middle-class couple wearing jeans and matching green sweaters behind the wheel. They wanted one last adventure before it got too cold until April. It was mid-November but summer was holding, there was no sign of frost, let alone snow, yet.

They thought I was trying to escape an abusive boyfriend and I let them. I spent the whole ride counting the number of cars we passed—two-hundred-and-forty-seven, but I had to start over twice—until I saw the Mr. Freezie’s Dairy-Matic. We had pulled into the only Tim Hortons for thirty kilometres but the neon-pink-upside-down-ice-cream-cone across the road brought me back. I knew it immediately, even though it had been years and the shop was closed for the season, it was like finding a lost pet at the animal shelter, even if your cat was half-starved and hated you, there was that same relief and recognition.

I had to negotiate with them to stop. They seemed perplexed, like they had already altered their plans to include me and now didn’t know what to do. Not necessarily creepy, just concerned. They followed my directions with bemused skepticism until they reached a novelty mailbox shaped like a high-heeled-shoe, prostitute-red with my family’s last name in gold cursive across the side—there was a compartment in the toe to place or retrieve letters, almost an afterthought. I had to take out my wallet and show them my health card, two years expired, to prove that my surname and the one stenciled onto the shoe matched, before they would let me out. *You look so different*, they marveled, squinting between the healthy stranger wrought in green, thirty pounds heavier sure, essentially a circle with dark

eyes, but beautiful, almost, and the person trying to escape their vehicle. It was no wonder they were struggling with the rectification.

4

Claire kept spiraling a shape the size of a toonie over and over on the back of my shoulder. I stretched back to look and could only get as far as her knuckle.

“What is it?”

“It’s your name...*I think.*”

“What do you mean *you think?*” The more I tried to stretch around the more I felt like that cliché about a dog. It was both terrifying and relieving to think that she could see parts of myself that I couldn’t.

“Well, it’s *AL* in these shaky block letters, kinda like when you see words written in blood or lipstick on a mirror in horror films. Then the *MA* is in...sort of pointillist cursive I guess...did you go from a nickname to your full name or something?”

“Oh. Aha. I wish I could remember. Honestly, I might not have noticed it if you hadn’t told me. It was a long time ago.”

“So, how many do you have?”

“Hmmm?”

In response to my noise she started tracing the slightly raised lines on my arm, creating patterns that didn’t exist out of the ones that did.

“Oh. I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?”

“I’ve never counted. Besides, I don’t have a mirror big enough to see them all.”

“Well. They’re...”

“Awful. I know. We don’t need to talk about it.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

“Really? See...I feel like an ex-cutter, like I was slicing into myself for years hoping for someone to pay attention or notice...but it didn’t work and now... I’m condemned to wearing big sweaters and turtlenecks for the rest of my existence...I don’t relate to my body in that way anymore. It may as well belong to somebody else. It’s a map of choices I wouldn’t make again.”

“Well. They’re not pretty...but...” She negotiated my hand into hers and extended my right arm for her examination. There was a garden of sorts. Crude animals, a stick moose with lopsided antlers, a cat that could’ve been a dog or a weasel, silhouettes of seagulls like a child’s drawing of a beach. A pineapple the same size as the moose, and trees that looked like clouds climbed until they met a rough patch of pink on the inside of my elbow, it felt like the underbelly of a lizard if you touched it. The remnants of a rose that was lost to infection, under the pink there were still faint blue scratches, almost recognizable. She leaned down and licked a drop of perspiration off the pineapple, leaving a thin shiny film that glittered if I moved my arm into the light. It felt like I’d swallowed a bunch of pop-rocks and was now fizzy everywhere, like I’d just been handed a pipe with a full bowl, like something more important than gratification.

She sighed as she untangled herself from me. “Listen, I’ve got to get home, before I’m missed.”

“You’ll be missed either way.”

“Stop it.” She was already collecting her belongings, buttoning up her blouse and fastening the skirt that reminded me of dreams of Catholic school around her waist. “What’s with that face?”

“Nothing. I just thought we’d have more time.”

“Well.”

5

Eventually, they let me go. After continuing all the way down the lane they let me out in sight of the front door. I had to walk around towards the back, smiling and waving so they would drive away and not stay to watch what I was about to do. I didn’t have a key, of course. But there was a spare. Under the grate in the barbeque, if the location hadn’t changed.

It hadn’t.

Nothing had. It looked the same as it had the times I spent the summer here, only now there were more leaves on the ground, and the unironically kitschy herd of plastic flamingos surrounding the property had faded considerably, they were the colour of pale roses instead of 80’s work-out clothing.

They had shut everything down for Winter already. No water—from the iron-rich well that spat out liquid that looked alright but smelled worse than old pennies, menstrual blood, and decomposing raw meat—no electricity, no heat, no plumbing. Not even TV or Wi-Fi.

I really didn’t have a plan. I hadn’t been thinking anything more specific than *get out*. Now that I had gotten, I didn’t know what to do. I hadn’t spent a full-day sober in years, but I was more concerned about how I was going to survive without freezing to death or poisoning myself.

At first I spent most of my time shivering. It could’ve been withdrawal or the weather. It took some getting used to. I adjusted. I had to shit in the woods and bury it. Eventually, I found a Coleman’s

portable stove and almost-full can of fuel in a closet and used it for dual purpose, to heat up the emergency cans of mini-ravioli saved in the cupboard, and myself.

After about a month I was ratted out. I was eating raw ravioli out of the can over the sink—I ran out of fuel a few sleeps before—when I heard a key turn in the front door. A neighbour who lived here year round had heard strange noises and thought a wild animal had gotten onto the property and was rummaging around, he called my dad about it and asked if he was going to check it out, otherwise he—the neighbour—would have to do something about it. I thought my dad was going to kill me, kick me out and call the police, or worse, be seriously disappointed in me.

Instead, he told me I looked sober. Made me promise not to tell Mother about this, and got me this place. It was the kindest thing he could have possibly done. He said he felt better, even if I was so far away, knowing I wasn't still glassy-eyed and panhandling in the lap of a long-haired man. Before he went back, he took me to get re-registered into classes, I was only missing three credits, but if he hadn't been there with me, looking so earnest and parental, there's no way they'd have let me in.

I've been at Shores since the semester started in February. It had been basically the same thing every day, walk to school, History, Environmental Science, Lunch, English, walk back, homework, sleep, repeat.

Until one day, on my walk home, I decided to pick up some strawberries.

\*

It was recitation day and none of the day-staff of the LCBO were familiar to me. This was good. For years the green lights and glass bottles signaled the depths of adult depravity and moral weakness, now I knew better. I only needed enough to calm my hands, so I could hold the book



without betraying myself. I bought a mickey of Prince Igor and started behind the garbage bins near the auditorium.

Instead of class I threw up.

This didn't slow me down. I started walking in a line until I didn't have to focus for it to be straight.

There was a car. Alone in the rows of empty driveways. Gold, shiny, beautiful, but not-even-close to new. The jungle-cat frozen mid-pounce on the hood was too scratched up to look like the status-symbol it was.

I was sobbing before it clicked.

It was the middle of the day and everyone was at work, so I was free to cry as much as I needed. The squirrels passing by regarded me as a loud nuisance, but the birds kept chirping like I wasn't there. I don't know how long I stood there making imitation-chainsaw noises before she came out to quiet me. She looked unprepared, like she had just been asked to speak extemporaneously on Newton, or to juggle twelve bowling-pins at a county-fair. I was struggling to form the words. After several mangled cat screeches, I managed to sound out "It's not faaaaiir."

Her sigh sounded louder than my howls.

After a beep and several simultaneous clicks, she opened her car door and reclined into the driver's side.

"C'mon."

She leaned out of her seat and stretched until she managed to open the passenger door from the inside. The interior was complementary beige leather and paneled fake wood that looked like

melted vinyl records; I got in before she had the chance to change her mind. The pine-tree-shaped air freshener said *new car* but smelled like her instead. I tried to make eye-contact through the rearview mirror but she was focused on something behind her.

“Where are we going?”

“I’m taking you home.”

I started up again, only now it was worse. She made a joke about me sounding like I was strangling or trying to fuck a cat, then apologized.

“Well. You’re not going to throw up, are you?” She was looking at the graveled side of the road, there was enough space for a car to stop and let someone out, but not without attracting attention.

I shook my head and tried to monologue, but I had caught the hiccups, so no matter how long I held my breath, every thought or half-thought was punctuated by a cross between a terror-stricken gasp and a Goofy-snort, which made the whole thing feel more comic or pathetic than anything else. It wasn’t a good look for me.

“We could go somewhere else, you know—”

She continued down the hill, driving like we were just popping down to the shop, as I plotted.

“There are lots of places—smaller than this—we could—inhabit a ghost-town. We could—find a place that’d be perfect for two—or four—There’s Toronto—Millions of people, no one would notice us—I could work for the YMCA, they have people there with DUIs—even ones who manslaughtered children probably—they’d hire me for sure. It’ll be really *nice*—”

She missed the turn that would’ve taken us to my place and I buoyed.

“Relax. We’re getting something to eat. You need something that doesn’t smell like battery acid.”

It was all county roads until we hit the Pho restaurant and its expansive empty parking lot, Malcolm had only gotten its first Indian restaurant last year but the population was still too white to sustain the popularity of more than one ethnic cuisine at a time. The whole place was set-up for a dinner service that wasn’t going to happen. She sat across from me fidgeting like one of her coworkers had just walked in. She hadn’t said anything since she thanked the waiter for the water and our steaming bowls of rice noodles and rare beef in muddled brown broth. After two glasses, I had enough to think again.

“Well, this is awkward.” Claire looked like a truant child about to be reprimanded; wearing leopard print leggings under a muumuu so blue it could have a prescription for antidepressants, her shoes were house-slippers.

“Do I want to hear this?”

“Probably not. Listen. I really like you,” her voice softened for this admission. “You’re idealistic and fun and smart and beautiful...”

“But?”

“But—There’s no way for me to do this without sounding cliché or terrible is there?”

“You don’t want to see me anymore?”

“Well. See, there’s the problem, it’s not about want, of course I want—It’s about...everything, life, responsibility, obligations. Ben and James. Not to mention Joe...It’s so much more complicated than just wanting something.” She was tearing apart the cardboard coaster advertising Miller Lite and

making eye-contact with the perforated edges she was turning into confetti. “I just wanted to let you know that this meant—this means—a lot to me. I know this probably just sounds hollow to you right now. You’re upset and have every right to be. I’m not saying that what we did was wrong or anything. It was stupid, not wrong. I don’t regret it, I wouldn’t say that. You’re—Well. You’re probably the most stupid thing I’ve ever done, and I should be at home making dinner right now but instead I’m here, making a fool of myself talking absolute nonsense to someone who isn’t even going to remember this in five years when you’re waitressing in B.C. or in college getting your electricians license, dating a new boyfriend who isn’t addicted to meth or whatever. It’s just not sustainable. As much as I could wish for an act of domestic terrorism or earthquake or freak tornado to hit us right now so that none of the other stuff would matter. I have to be realistic.”

The waiter manifested at our table with Styrofoam cups and lids.

“Are you all finished?”

“Yes, I think so.”

## ALICE AND MELISSA

My ex-girlfriend's name is Ryan. Or Alice. Or Changrui. Depending on the legal document or internet forum you ask. We had broken up six weeks earlier, but you have to buy pot somewhere, so we still saw each other once a week. This was back when it was illegal, so she couldn't just drive to a dispensary to avoid keeping in touch.

Every Wednesday, 5 PM, she and her little red Chevy Malibu with heated seats but manual windows would wait, four-ways blinking in the no parking, pickup-drop-off zone in front of my building. Waiting for a half-q of Girl Scout Cookies, or Green Crack, or Alaska Thunderfuck. Whatever I had at the time. She wasn't picky. About a lot of things, it turned out.

This time, her knuckles looked white that's how tight she was gripping the steering wheel. Perfect 10-2 position. There weren't any new bracelets dangling. Ring-free piano fingers tapped an uneven staccato against imitation leather.

"No new sparkles? What, your date didn't go well?" I said as a buckled up, for safety.

The expression on her face was somewhere between having her palm read for the first time and that split-second before you vomit.

She didn't use the word rape, she didn't have to.

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It was only three months, but whenever I smell burnt rice or animal fur I think of her.

She said, "You're not...surprised? Or offended that I'm a sex-worker?"

"My roommate, Sutton. I should introduce you sometime. She's like you. In both senses of the word I guess. Actually, she's nothing like you. You just have being trans and a hooker in common. She

said to me, when I asked why she wasn't a McDonalds drive-through girl or something, "Who's going to hire a three-hundred pound transgender woman?" And I guess she's right. I haven't seen any, you know. She works online. Pornhub, I think. I haven't seen her videos, I don't know if it's size, or feet stuff, or what, but she makes more than enough to cover her twenty of the rent. Super quiet too. She's the best roommate I've ever had, actually."

"You know, I've never met anyone else like me before."

"Well, don't get too excited. Her daddy—her actual father, died in a car accident when she was like twelve, and there was this big-lawsuit. I don't know how much exactly, but she's the only person I know without student debt, and she's spent \$70,000, at least, on her body so far. It's incredible. I'm like so jealous. She's more of a girl than I'll ever be able to be."

"I look forward to meeting her."



Alice was a guy when she first started harassing me. A barista at the Christian coffee shop in the basement of an Episcopalian church I sporadically visited with my laptop. I ran an amateur cooking blog to make my tips seem less auspicious in light of the whole illegal drug thing. Chicks rarely sold pot, white chicks especially, so I was a novelty for most of my customers. It got me a lot of repeats, considering I don't drive and wouldn't let anyone up to my place to pick up.

My roommate and I split the rent eighty-twenty, a compromise because my career was more illegal than hers, and even though she was the twenty, she worked from home, and likened constant visitors closer to the plague than just a minor inconvenience. I considered The Toasted Roast my home base.

Everyone smiled at me there, not like at home

I actually said to Alice, “Just so you know, I don’t usually like men.” Can you believe that? Yikes. Wearing her knock-off-green apron and blue jeans instead of the ostentatious furs and knits that occupied her closet. Of course, she hadn’t told me anything yet. She was just the butch barista who undercharged me for my morning iced tea or late afternoon cappuccino. I didn’t even tip.

When I asked her what she liked about me she said it was my inconsistency. Most people ordered the same thing at the same time on the same day. I was different.

Somedays, I’d show up at noon in my pajamas and stay until close, nursing a single glass of iced lemon zinger. Others, I’d be in strict business casual, like I was about perform secretarial duties at a shareholders meeting. One Tuesday in December, I showed up in a yellow sundress in the middle of a snowstorm, ordered one of those knock-off Starbucks blended things then disappeared into the flurries.

She said, “Anyone that...brave. I knew I had to talk to you.” I didn’t have the heart to tell her it was apathy, not bravery, that led to me dressing myself like a Sim on random. I wanted to see myself like she saw me.

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“Do you know what a trap is?” She asked on the way to her place, a room in the basement of a house, where she still lived rent-free with her parents.

“It’s like a genre of music, right? Trap-music. Like that song about being in love with the coco.”

“What? No. So you’ve never heard of a trap?”

“Unless you mean like a pit that someone’s dug into the ground and covered in a tarp, so that unsuspecting fools can walk over it and get stuck. Otherwise I have no idea.”

“Well that’s closer... It’s like a thing. It’s an anime word. Have you seen...nevermind. Of course you haven’t. So. Some people pay other people to get tricked like... Uhm. So there are places on the internet where guys want men who are pretending to be or rather dressed up as women. It’s like being a cam-girl but a bit different I guess. I have a uniform. I’m pretty good.”

“So you pretend to be a devoted butterfly for half an hour and that’s enough?”

“I usually wear my Japanese schoolgirls’ set. With knee-high socks.”

“You haven’t read—Okay. Isn’t that like, racist or something?”

“I don’t think that’s the word you’re looking for.”

“Okay. Like, identity fraud, or transphobic, or something? Like do they know?”

“Well, the whole thing is you’re not supposed to know, but that’s just a facade, it’s pretend, if you advertise on a place selling traps, you’re kinda dumb if you don’t know what you’re getting into. In that context, a real trap would be if you decided to trap, a girl pretending to be a guy pretending to be a girl. That’d be a real trap in a place selling traps. It’s the equivalent of those women who hire fake-kidnappers, and murderers, and rapists to schedule a fantasy appointment that wouldn’t be hot if it was spontaneous and real. Besides, I’d probably get murdered if I showed up to someone’s house and they didn’t know.”

“Isn’t it pretty dangerous? You hear all the horror stories. Like 90% of true-crime is hookers and chicks who fuck the wrong men that get murdered.”



“Being a lipstick lesbian won’t save you if your number’s up. It’s silly to live life forgoing pleasure for the fear of the far off potentiality of pain. That’s ridiculous. I shouldn’t have to tell you. You smoke.”



I liked Alice because she was someone who looked up. Not in the metaphorical sense, but literally. Every so often, I’d catch her glancing at the sky, not in a worrying way, searching for rain, but hopefully, sometimes wondrously, at a cloud, or Billboard for Sheryl Crow’s performance next month at the Casino. I didn’t like her when we argued. Or when I argued, to be specific. There was nothing I could do to get her to debate anything with me. Like she got taught hostage negotiation instead of communication skills. Like she thought in order to talk me off the ledge of whatever I wanted her feedback on, it was safer to just monotone “Really?” and “I hadn’t thought about it like that.” Until I burned myself out and she would finish with “You’re probably right.”

That and she was crazy beautiful. At least six feet tall. She towered over everyone and made me feel like a grateful shrimp in her company.



Sutton occupied the whole couch. She was watching Survivor or Big Brother, one of those endurance-testing programs where they gauge what the craziest thing you’ll do just because you’re on television. After someone ate a live tarantula or fell from a tightrope walk over a highway overpass, the commercial break signaled it was time to pay attention to us.

I introduced Alice as a friend and skipped out for a Tims and smokes run.

When I got back I could hear Melanie Martinez singing about how fake syrup looks real and trips to Wonderland from Sutton's room. Alice sat in the empty space she left behind. Reading an old Cosmo issue that was left on the coffee table.

When I asked how it went Alice just shrugged and stage whispered, "I don't think she likes me."



Once, I woke up in the middle of the night to escape the suffocating heat of intimacy and sneak a smoke, but she was already gone. This was her parent's basement, it's not like I could go wandering around looking for her. I just mimed puffing in the dark and waited for her to come back.



Looking at her naked made me feel jealous and inferior at the same time. I didn't hate my body except for when I thought of it in comparison to hers. I knew this wasn't what was supposed to happen. It was supposed to be fun. Desire. Infatuation. Sparks. All that jazz. But I was encapsulated with fury because she was smoother than any airbrushed cover model, and she even didn't do anything but take Xanax, estrogen, and pot.

I had even spent more money permanently altering myself than her. In a fit of teenage stupidity I had gotten "we're all mad here" on my forearm in a font big enough to be read across the street from the streaked windows of a city bus. Once I recovered by turning twenty, I turned my diatribe into a flower garden that mostly obscured the curly serifs buried beneath. Not counting the price of organs on the black market, my body was worth \$900, \$40 for the first one in a basement that smelled like wet carpet and the liquid inside a glow-stick, \$860, tip included, and seven hours, for Stacy

at Killer Ink to cover up that mess with rhododendrons and forget-me-nots. Not sharing a tattoo with every other white alcoholic abusive ex-boyfriend in Ontario: Priceless.

Alice was au natural. As far as anyone could be.

She said, “Okay, look. I know I should like her.” She was talking about Sutton. “But, she actually tried to make me feel bad about not hating my body. Can you believe that? I think it’s something wrong with your North American rigidity when it comes to any sort of identity. To her being a girl means spending \$20,000 to get porn star tits and then only wearing v-necked blouses to support the decision. I’ve actually been doing some reading. On the internet. And there’s this thing, in Thailand, called ladyboys, they have a special name for them. Something like Katherine. Anyway, it’s sort of like your Western idea of transgender, without all the body hating and dysphoria. You don’t need to mutilate yourself to have a female identity and live quote-unquote like a woman.”

“I don’t think Sutton would consider what she’s chosen to have done with her body, like mutilation.”

“You know what I mean.”



Nine years my senior, but she acted like a middle schooler. She would only espouse opinions when naked. Or showing off her gifts. Or if I’d so far refrained from making any comment, positive, negative, or neutral, on the topic until that point. She had lots of thoughts about money. And sex. And gender. And presents.

“Wow. This is beautiful.” Her closet felt like touching clouds. Every brand I couldn’t afford dangled from velvet hangers. She had a rabbit fur scarf that just went on and on. Walls painted the

same creamy off-white as the rest of the house. No posters taped up. No framed pictures stapled into the wall.

I remember, before we descended the stairs there was a framed photograph of three strangers in an ornate frame where the television would usually go. A middle-aged Chinese couple that looked conservatively put together and a young man in a suit, he looked about thirteen but much too chubby and short to have been Alice at any age.

“My little brother. I was in Mexico when the picture was taken,” Alice said when she caught me looking.

The rest of the basement aside from Alice’s room was used for storage. Cardboard boxes stacked on giant Tupperware containers labelled with words like “Winter Jackets” and “Heavy Sweaters” and “To Donate.”

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She actually said, “It’s because...you’re not a very nice person.”

“What?”

“I can’t be with someone who doesn’t like the way I argue.”

I couldn’t believe it. Twenty years of existence and I had never been dumped. I didn’t know what to do. I put my smoke out on her dashboard and left the car. She followed me for three kilometres, not driving away until she saw me slam the front door to my building.

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I was shaking when she told me about her date. She sounded so nonchalant. Like nothing was wrong. I didn’t pay too close attention to her story (all her Johns might as well have had the same

name) until she mentioned he brought a friend without telling her, and then blacking out fifteen minutes after accepting a glass of water. Her next memory was waking up the next morning.

Like a guitar chord snapped. Or someone pressed a button.

I could only come up with pragmatics and euphemisms. I asked, "Did they use anything?"

Her "I don't know" meant probably no.

"Okay. You don't have to go to the police. But you do have to go to the hospital. You don't have to get checked out. Or tell them anything. What's important is that you go to the emergency room and tell them you might have been exposed to HIV. You can tell them it was me. They have pills. Preventative. In case of...you know. It's real. I saw it on a medical TV show. Bloodletting and something-something. But they only work if you start taking them as soon as possible. Windsor is the HIV capital of Ontario. I saw it on this big red banner downtown. And like, I know you don't know, but the kind of shitty people who would do something like that. You never know. Please. Tell them it was me."

I got out after that. I offered to go with her. I'm not a monster. But she insisted. If I was this bad in the car, imagine how much worse I'd be in the waiting room. She promised she'd go. That she was on her way there as soon as she left the no parking zone of my building. I wish I could believe her.

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That was the last I saw of her. I should have yelled at her. Followed her to the hospital. Made sure someone wrapped her up in a shock blanket and kissed her forehead. I should have.

I still look for her in garishly dressed men, and women too tall for their own good.

## IDENTITY POLITICS

Fine, I lost her cat, but it wasn't my fault. Of course, this is just typical, she left for three days and everything went to shit. The more we paced the more I felt like a hamster in one of those plastic balls, or a disillusioned beach-goer or mall-walker. All directions and no path.

It had been two weeks and Grace swore this was the last day she'd go trudging out like this. We had to give up. Lifesaver's Park (God, what a name) marked the line between the bourgeois townhouses, landscaped and brightly illuminated, and the large stately homes, gutted into apartments, and rented disarray. The east end of the park was manicured, swing chains un-rusted, slide like a castle enclosed by grates with little holes so no one could fall out, the ground that low-impact plasticine-esque foam so kids could jump even from the top of the monkey-bars unscathed. In the middle was a baseball field, older, rusted, the remnants of home base a scratched gray diamond under years of scruff and dirt. As we continued west it got worse, a dog run uninhabited but littered with shit, literal shit, the day warm enough that you could smell the run-off of mostly digested kibble and chew toys, burnt marshmallows, bacon, and vomit. The edge was lined by benches we couldn't get too close to because of the people sleeping on or inhabiting them. We dodged grocery carts filled with people's entire lives guarded by men with beards or young women with green hair and facial piercings. Used needles and cigarette butts grew faster than grass around here. Despite this being a residential neighbourhood, cars sped by like someone had just cut them off on the Red Hill Parkway and they were determined to tailgate the offender all the way home.

“Blackie!” I shouted into the distance, in between kissing my teeth and trying to imitate that chirpy noise cats make when they’re happy. I worried across the street to the bush-lined catwalk in between a long row of houses, wide enough for a motorcycle and sidecar or a couple people trying to find a cat but not much else. The backyards were lined with pine bushes impossible to see through, in the closest one an animal that used to be a dog but, from the noises it was making, had now clearly mutated into part chainsaw part rhinoceros.

“Blackie!”

“Would you stop that?” Grace was ten feet ahead of me, half-heartedly examining each bush we passed, pulling apart branches, peering through gaps in worn wooden fences.

“Psst. Psst. C’mereeee. Psssssst. C’mon out so we can all stop looking for you and eat some tuna. Wouldn’t that be nice? A big bowl of tuna all to yourself? Blackie!”

“I’m serious. You can’t say that out loud,” she stopped walking to stare me down, her black boots extended from her thigh to the heel that made her tower over me, she looked like a statue of Nancy Drew from this distance with her trench coat and paisley sweater-dress, young and innocuously conservative.

“It’s his name,” I said.

“I’m just saying, it’s a slur, and people live here,” she gestured to the houses swallowing us on both sides, bed sheet or marijuana flag curtains obscuring the windows that weren’t boarded or tin-foiled over.

“Nobody calls anybody a blackie, not anymore, it just doesn’t happen, darkie, maybe, if you’re watching a bad old movie, or, you know, the n-word, but Blackie’s just his name.”

“It’s not.”

“You haven’t called him Matilda since you found out she was a he.”

“His shelter name was Gucci, what do you want from me? You can do what you want, but it’s not going to help. He doesn’t know his name. Let alone where he lives. We’re never going to find him like this.”

“Look, past the tracks, there’s a path, looks like a walking trail. Let’s check it out. If I was a cat, I wouldn’t want to be anywhere near all these cars. It’s where I would go if I was Blackie,” I said, pointing to the tree line back towards where we had just left. Grace sighed, rolled up her coat sleeve to her elbow, and checked her watch.

“Okay, but only for a little bit, we don’t want to be out here when it gets darkie.”

The forest extended all the way up to the rocks. A set of stairs that looked like it was made from recycled cheese graters followed. Side paths worn by dog-walkers and wildlife diverged from the concrete trailhead as soon as we were surrounded by trees.

“Now what? I don’t see anything anywhere,” she said staring down at her as of yet un-scuffed boots. The ground everywhere had that glossy sheen of fresh rainfall, pristine but gunky footprints emerged from the path diverging to the left, all going. I followed to find an illegal dump rusting into a pseudo contemporary art display, Excess. An old Windows desktop precariously perched on an overturned washer and dryer set, garbage bags distended and disemboweled spilled used diapers and more plastic from the holes clawed by raccoons or possums. Orange tape surrounded a shattered mirror, and pieces of what looked like an old fishing boat held more shopping carts filled with cans too warped or flattened to get the five cents back.



Paw-prints, not attached to the boot-prints, too large to be anything soft, furry, or domestic, trailed towards the escarpment. Grace pointed them out and said, “Coyote. You can tell because there aren’t claws on every toe.”

One of our neighbours lost their dog last month, a mid-sized beagle, the posters were everywhere pleading against thieves, his name was Charlie and he was sweet, friendly and knew his name, but after weeks of silence they found a hunk of fur and bones the same colour as his coat.

“Ah. I don’t think he’s anywhere around here. Let’s go back. I can go out again after work tomorrow or something.”

“Let’s just hope he’s got more sense than you.”

\*

We started out as roommates. Three years ago I was reveling in the desperation of the Craigslist Roommate Wanted pages. Strangers calling out to mirrors hoping for some recognition or just a mutually beneficial arrangement. I was sleeping on the couch of my sister and her boyfriend’s apartment downtown. They never said anything, but would do things like invite people to stay over without telling me, or talk about getting rid of the loveseat in exchange for a really nice dining room table and a couple of armchairs.

I found the most specific want ad in between “Looking for room to have sex with girlfriend,” and “Free room for straight guy.” There it was: “Roommate Wanted: You have problems relating to other people...” Unlike the dubious offers that promised free or heavily discounted rent in exchange for nudity or sexual favours, this ad seemed closer to a missed connection describing a specific individual. I thought it was someone begging for their ex to move back in. It couldn’t be for a stranger. “...so you

spend a lot of time on the internet. You've seen *The Mask* and *Bruce Almighty* and *The Truman Show* but don't really like Jim Carey. The last time you really had a good night's sleep was at your best friend in high school's house where you two giggled in her twin bed until collapsing into her pillow. You've never gone skinny-dipping because you're too afraid someone will steal your clothes and you don't have enough hands to cover yourself up. Your favourite flavour of ice cream is pistachio but that shade of green makes you sick. You prefer the sound of silence to ambient noise music or prog rock. You miss talking to people but when you have the opportunity you don't know what to say. If you need a sympathetic space my email is [tantalusbites@gmail.com](mailto:tantalusbites@gmail.com)"

She toured me after we met at one of those social media fad coffee shops. This one had a wall mosaic of shattered espresso cups, tea plates, and spoons and the menu was written entirely in French and cursive on a chalkboard wall which spanned the entire far wall. We sat talking about the weather in chairs recycled from old tractor-trailer tires and duvet cotton. After ascertaining my incompatibility with her creation she invited me back to check out the place. It was nothing really special, she insisted, an old house split three ways, but she had a whole floor to herself right now. It wasn't a money thing, she just didn't like all this space. Too much quiet. She adopted two cats just so she wouldn't have to hear herself think all the goddamn time. She worked alone so she didn't really have that perpetually drained social battery anyone in the service industry could attest to the second they were off the clock. I waitressed at the Garden Bistro in downtown Burlington and the house was on a bus route, and she was only twelve blocks away from Emily's place, in the direction closer to my work to boot.

“Finally got a friend there, eh?” A black man with months of facial hair and no shoes said as we approached the house. He was sitting on the third stair from the top where he smoked, probably so he could be close enough to hear the specifics of the television that was incomprehensible fuzz from down here. The side of the house had two twin doors, one fifteen feet above the next, a wooden roller coaster staircase separated them from the ash that danced every time he coughed.

“That’s just Rick, he lives upstairs. There’s a couple downstairs, too; they’re a bit noisy sometimes, but who isn’t? Rick’s great though,” she said as she waved him goodbye while opening the side door. “Super quiet. Spends most of his time out there. You’d think there’s a ghost upstairs that’s how much noise he makes.”

When she said she was a food stylist I imagined fancy restaurants and soft cakes with decadent teal icing but found plasticine ice cream cones and a kitchen filled with imitations instead. Nothing kept. Nothing looked as good as what you could design. The real thing couldn’t be photographed to look as real as something she made at the dining room table. Her portfolio was mainly close-up shots of fudge running down the side of a vanilla ice cream sundae, a single maraschino cherry glistening on top, almost out of frame.

\*

“Grace, Grace, Grace, please. Listen. I’m so sorry. This is how it happened. So it was after you got picked up for your trip this weekend. And you know how bored we get here without you. Chester and Blackie and I were sooooo bored. I already cleaned all the dishes, put away the paint and oil and stuff, reorganized the CD collection, updated our Netflix queue, cleaned up the papers in the office, I

even made the goddamn bed. There was nothing to do. But I know you said I could use the car if I needed it, so I decided it'd be fun if we went for a ride. I know, I would have just stayed home if I thought anything at all would happen. It was fine. They were a bit meowy at first. You know them. Mmmrrraaaaooowwogghhrrr. The usual. They were in the back seat, I had them all set up with the blanket and their pillows, they were having fun too. Blackie was looking out the window at all the birdie's and Fatty—Chester, I know, I know, napping like the cutie he is. But then! Blackie! He nudged the car window button with his paw. If I had any idea he could've done something like that I would've locked it. But before I had the chance to do anything he hopped out. Chester didn't give a shit. Of course not. It was getting dark and I wanted to get them in quick before I couldn't spot him anymore. I just parked in someone's driveway and took off into the bush I saw him dive into. I hopped a fence into a backyard and saw him. He tried to get away, little bugger, but I caught him. He stopped struggling once he realized it was no use. I didn't tell you because it had taken, what? half an hour and I thought the whole thing was finished. Chester didn't do anything. I really didn't notice anything was wrong until you came home. Until you kneeled at him and said, *who's this?* in a voice so pleased to make a new friend. I thought it was Blackie. I promise. Honestly, I don't know how you can tell the difference. They look the same to me. I don't know where he is. The first day you left, Friday? Saturday? Whatever the first day was. Do you think I'd be here with this cat if I didn't think it was Blackie? I don't want to just kidnap random animals. I'm sorry. I don't know who this one belongs to. Chester didn't know either, he didn't meow, or hiss, or anything."

\*

Trying to re-watch a few episodes of Veronica Mars on a Tuesday evening but we kept hearing noises coming from downstairs. We paused the TV to hear it more clearly. I couldn't make out any words clearly except *Bitch*, the tenor was like listening to rocks fall down a cliff, vibrant and clanging. The sound of a glass breaking, or a vase shattering, or someone throwing a plate, and a scream. Clearly a woman's scream. Then silence. I checked Grace's watch; it had been two minutes of absolute silence. The couple downstairs, Adam and Hannah, would listen to country music, throw parties that left patches of liquor-vomit spattered throughout the driveway, have loud, screaming, pig-sty-hollering, fuck-me-daddy sex until two in the morning, but I hadn't heard anything like this before.

"Did you hear that too?" I said.

"Of course," she said.

"What should we do?"

"Oh, I'm sure it was just an accident, she dropped a plate and slipped and fell or something, you're just jumping to conclusions. I'm sure everything's fine." She looked convinced. Like the things about the real world that fill the news—cruelty, want, domestic violence—weren't even in the realm of possibility. We lived in an area where reality spat and bit and shuffled moodily along. But what's an eye chart to the blind?

"Should we go down and check?"

"Why would we do that? I'm sure we'd just be bothering them."

"Even if it was just an accident, shouldn't we still go down and check? Make sure she's alright and didn't hurt herself?" I stood up to begin my trek down the stairs but Grace didn't move. "Are you

not coming with me, what if it is something? Wouldn't you feel bad if I got murdered because you didn't come with me?"

"I don't want them to think we're ganging up on them."

"Let's go, if you're right we'll be back up in a minute anyways."

Before knocking on the door, I put my ear to the wood and heard the murmur of quiet conversation. For fear of sounding like a police officer, I did the shave-and-a-haircut knock as forcefully as I could and waited.

Adam opened the door shirtless and breathing heavily, he only cracked it enough so that you could see his bare chest and neck chain, unkempt goatee and bloodshot eyes.

"Hi, is Hannah here? We'd like to see her, if we can."

"Yeah? One minute." He went to shut the door behind him. I pushed back, meeting force with force until, reluctantly he acquiesced and let us into his mess. An uninhabited dog crate consumed most of the space in their entryway; it was loaded with clothes, mostly denim fabric, and work boots, the steel toed beige ones. Hannah turned the corner out of the living room. Adam had his hand around her arm, his thumb and pinky overlapping around her elbow. They walked to us together. Behind them, on the dining room table were piles of papers and a small hand axe. The carpet beneath us was stained until the colour turned a vague grayish brown, ours upstairs in the bedroom was beige.

"Hey guys, what's up?"

Grace started, "Oh, nothing, we just heard some noise upstairs and wanted to make sure you guys were okay, Stacey's worried you might have hurt yourself—"

“No, no. I know what I heard.” I approached Adam who was leaning against the wall. “I don’t know what you did but I want you to know you can’t do it again. Only shitty fucking people do things like that to someone else. Pick on someone your own size.”

Adam spread his shoulders and stretched, his shirtless body glistening with all his muscles. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. We were just cooking, alright? I dropped a pan and knocked over a cup.”

I tried to look around him but couldn’t see the oven, there was no broken glass but neither was there the smell of anything cooking. The place smelled like cigarettes and malt liquor.

“I just want you to know if you do anything to hurt her I will fuck you up.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Yes. I am saying that if I hear anything from here again, and you end up hurting her, I will literally fucking murder you because that’s what happens when you try and hurt someone.” He was at least a foot and a half taller than me, and the last time I tried to do a push-up I failed. He looked down at me like I was a flower or something else pointless and in his way. “I could call the cops right now, she’s probably bruised somewhere. I’m not afraid to call the police.”

Hannah stepped in-between us. “I really appreciate your concern but it’s not necessary. Please. You don’t need to do anything. I’m fine. Everything’s okay.” She held Adam’s clenched fist.

“Are you sure? It’s not a problem, really.”

“You don’t need to worry. It was great of you to stop by, but we’re actually in the middle of a movie that we’d like to finish, if you wouldn’t mind.”

We could hear the lock click shut behind us. As we retreated upstairs Grace assessed my behaviour:

“I really don’t think you helped at all.”

“No? Then why do I feel so much better?”

\*

I had just finished a long shift where bottles of house wine were half-priced and now just want to sleep. Blackie has been gone for a month and a half now and we’ve stopped talking about it. All of our conversations are perfunctory and usually related to dinner. Who’s making what tonight, why was all the yogurt used to make pristine blueberry muffins hard as a stone.

“Are you almost done? Don’t get on the bus, I’m picking you up. I’ll be there in fifteen as long as the lift bridge is down. And guess what? I’m bringing a friend who’s going to be very excited to see you.” She didn’t leave a pause for me to interject. “Are you there? Hello?”

“Listen, forty minutes ago someone elbowed me into a plate of fettuccine alfredo. I really just want to collapse right where I am, can you please drop them off before you come and get me? I’m not really in the mood to do anything that isn’t horizontal and unconscious—”

“Stacey, what the fuck? Listen to me it’s—” I hung up so I didn’t have to hear the rest.

When she pulled up in her red Nissan Leaf she occupied the driver’s seat and empty air the rest. She rolled down the window as I approached. “Be careful when you’re getting in, he’s still a bit spooked.”

“What?”

“The cat?”



“He’s in there? You found him?”

“Weren’t you paying attention when I told you on the phone? A friend of the woman whose cat you stole called me. She lives just down the street and it turns out she had been feeding this black cat who’d been meowing about her backyard for the past month and a bit. She was about to take him in permanently until Miss pregnant cat lady told her friend about how some kind strangers “found” her lost cat while they were looking for theirs. I almost didn’t get him back; she liked him so much. But he walked over to me meowing and she let me have him. He’s just still freaked out so don’t be loud or do anything to startle him. Poor guy.” I go to sit shotgun but he has wedged himself next to the foot heater, I maneuver as carefully as possible and lean down to pick him up. He preempts me and hops into my lap. He is so small. Almost like when he was a kitten. Impossibly miniature.

“Are you sure it’s him? He’s so small...” I say.

“He’s been outside since May. Of course, he’s hungry, he lost all his muscles, poor buddy.”

“Did you take him to the vet and check his microchip?”

“No need. It’s him. Remember six months ago, when he knocked over that vase, he sliced open his right back jackrabbit foot and the fur still hasn’t grown back yet, little dummy.” She pats his head and points to the grey line extending from the bottom of his paw two inches up. He starts purring and she beams at him, scratches him behind the ears, under his chin, kisses his nose.

I lean into him and put my arms around the small black circle he’s curled himself into. The fur on his back bristles as drops of water fall from my face and I sob.

\*

It was a year before this whole business with the cat. We had gone out to see the new Tarantino film and when we came back there was an ambulance and a police car in the driveway. We parked along the side of the road and Ricky was smoking on the stairs. He smelled of beer and sweat. When we asked him what happened he kept shaking his head. "It's crazy, I didn't hear nothing at all. Nothing."

An officer guarded the side door like a bouncer. We had to show her our ID to prove we lived here. She urged us to go straight to our rooms and not to touch anything downstairs or in the hall. She wouldn't say what happened, only asked how well we knew the tenants downstairs, how long had we been gone, do we have any receipts, what was our normal schedule like, had we heard or seen anything strange or out of the ordinary in the past few nights.

The sirens weren't on when the ambulance drove away. I couldn't sleep.

A little while after the ambulance left, I was walking home from the convenience store to buy milk or something. Out of the dark he trots over to me meowing. A black cat so perfect and pristine I was amazed to even be looking at him.

"Blackie! What are you doing out here? Did you try to follow me? Bad! C'mon, let's go back inside now, it's chilly out here," I said as I picked him up. He meowed and purred as I held him to my side. "I know it sucks when you're having fun playing but you're an inside cat." I carried him across the threshold, deposited the milk in the fridge, and fell asleep.

The next morning there were two cats in the hallway. Same fiddlehead tail, same glossy whiskers, same white spot right under where their Adam's apples would be, both declawed, both boys, both neutered, they both made the same noise when I picked them up to establish this last fact. They could have been the same cat copied over, like a perfect Xerox. They didn't acknowledge each other

and neither performed any act of affection like purring or nuzzling against my calf. Chester equally didn't care about either of them. They were the same cat, only not. I sat cross-legged on the floor in front of them for a suspicious amount of time.

A choice.

I picked the one to the left and carried him to the door.

## LOVE, LOVE, LOVE

“If I can’t keep it, at least let me call it by name.” -“Changer” Anais Mitchell

Holding six feet of pig intestines, watching Celeste retch and vomit into the nearest garbage bin because of the sound it made when we had to snap its ribs (a sickening, almost hollow, *crack*), I knew I was in love. Measuring the intestines was step sixteen out of forty that we had to finish in the next fifty-five minutes of class. But for her, I would gladly gut at least twelve preserved fetal pigs. Barehanded with clear sinuses, if I had to. Thankfully, this wasn’t a real test of the breadth of my affection, just my biological anatomy skills. This was hard enough as is. I don’t know what smelled worse, the citrusy yet meaty acid emanating from the abused plastic bin she leaned over, panting, or the pickled and slippery antiseptic smell of the surprisingly heavy intestines I had managed not to nick yet. Others hadn’t been so lucky. The whole room had a soupçon of shit from all the careless teenaged fingers gripping scalpels for the first, maybe second time. I had read that love takes your senses by storm, but I never imagined it would be like this.

Books were home to me in a lot of ways. A place that I could always inhabit and feel welcome. And they taught me more about the way life works than my parents or teachers ever could. Grown-ups were too reticent to talk about the important things, like love, and sex, and why I was the only girl in my Kindergarten class who wanted to marry Miss Frizzle someday. Books were the only things that treated me like an equal. Like my feelings, no matter how naive or misguided or silly they might seem, actually mattered. Dystopian at first, but we don’t live in an increasingly regimented oligarchy that routinely conducts mistreatment against the most vulnerable of our population, so it was hard to get

into, and I mostly gravitated towards Fantasy and Romance. *Twilight*, being the best of both genres, was my favourite. I considered myself an expert on Stephenie Meyer's entire bibliography. My most prized possession was my computer-printed copy of the 264 existing pages of *Midnight Sun*. A semi-illegal draft from Edward's perspective of the best love story ever written. The only possible improvement would be Sapphic. But Bella and Rosalie hooking up is an illogical and impossible dream. Unfortunately. And since Fiction's just real life made special with magic powers and fancy turns of phrase, I figured it wouldn't be too hard to make it happen for myself. The most difficult part was going to be the gay thing.

In search of my happily ever after, I found Celeste. Perfection personified. Openly bisexual and aggressively emo. My exact opposite. She shed her coon-tails like a caterpillar's husk during the summer and started 12th grade with lilac purple hair. Her totally cool, definitely not creepy, uncle had posed as her guardian at the appointment booking, and she was the only person in our grade to have a tattoo, until people started turning eighteen in January. It was a half-naked mermaid covering her whole upper thigh. She got sent home for dress-code violations any time she wore shorts above the knee. Instead, she put Band-Aids over the nipples. She was my ideal in every way possible. My future wife. She just didn't know it yet.

I didn't know where to start. There isn't any guidebook I'd ever seen called *How To Approach a Known Homosexual*. No Cosmo quizzes to determine whether you're in love with your female best-friend. The only lesbian on TV was Ellen, and she was already married. If it's a possibility, it's definitely not a common occurrence. If these stories exist, they're found in sections of the bookstore I'm too insecure to enter, or they're too couched in metaphor for me to realize their existence right in

front of me. Sherlock and Watson don't count. Holmes is canonically asexual if you're paying any attention whatsoever. I'm getting off-track.

Celeste.

I only knew Celeste through rumours until fate, acting through Mr. Brendanawicz, partnered us up. I didn't mind her groaning in the distance as I finished identifying and measuring the internal organs of Bertha, Celeste named her before the nausea started, because it meant that after I had washed as much gunk and residue from my hands as possible, and after she had finished gargling, she leaned in closer than I dreamed possible and whispered a promise that she was just hungover, not a complete wuss. She even brushed her hand against my neck.

Sarah Partridge, my best friend, my metaphorical blood-sister, I'd even pick her over most aliens, said, "Meridith, I think you're really off your rocker this time."

"What do you mean by that?"

"At my house, my dad tells me that I'm off my rocker anytime I make an unreasonable request. Like when I said I was going to run away and get a snake tattoo on my neck, or whenever I ask if he can pick up Cookies and Cream instead of Butter Pecan ice cream while he's at the store. Well, you're not just off your rocker, you've thrown it against the wall and smashed it into little pieces. Just look at her. And look at you. If we had a Mathletics-debate club you'd be a member. You get excited when there's cool homework. She hangs out by the rocks. With Boys. I love you, but it's just not possible."

I said, "But she's gay! I heard Lucas in Calc last week, he said to Kevin that the only reason he thought Celeste was hot was because at Noah's party over the summer she made out with a girl who goes to Notre Dame. On Noah's bed. Paige or something. It's true! They fist bumped each other. Guys

don't lie to each other about those kinds of things. They lie about how many orgasms they've given their girlfriends and that it's only like that right now because they were just in the pool."

Sarah said, "Whatever you say. I'll support you. Now can we get something to eat? We've wasted half of our lunch break on your feelings. And I'm starving."

\*

Purgatory was too nice a word to describe high-school. Hell's much closer. An overheated, poorly ventilated box with sweaty children forced into undersized desks for six hours and forty minutes a day, five days a week. H-E-Double-Hockey-Sticks, indeed. Even prison has air-conditioning, but not there. Only the library and the gymnasium had any sort of air circulation. So you could smell every boy who doused himself with chocolate-scented-Axe instead of showering after his workout. It was unbearable to visit your locker between classes without holding your breath. No wonder I liked girls. Only the science lab, with its rows of sinks and Bunsen burners and my luminous lass of lilac, had any appeal to me anymore. If I wasn't with Celeste I was drifting through time and space. The years before I met her became hollowed spaces in my mind, filled instead with the H2O EXTRA ICE written on her Starbucks cup on the mornings she'd be late to class. And the way she snorted a little bit anytime she laughed at an unintentional innuendo during class.

I started occupying the seat next to the one Celeste usually picked. If it bothered her, she didn't mention it. Almost every morning she would sheepishly grin at me, mime a writing utensil with her left hand and hold her hands palm up like that kid in *Oliver Twist*. I started dreaming that she had a perfectly packed pencil case sitting unused in her locker, she only asked me to borrow a pen because of

the sparkle she felt when our hands touched woke her like it did me. I only wished we had Chemistry together, instead of Biology.

The first time we shared my laptop to play Science Jeopardy nothing happened. The next time, she asked if she could log onto Facebook real quick and check if she had any messages. After spending the rest of class scrolling through other peoples' lives, she forgot to log out and left me to my devices.

I tried to do the right thing. I really did. I wanted to log out immediately. Maybe make one of those funny statuses first, change her profile picture to a webcam shot of me winking mischievously at her with a caption saying, *Be Careful!*

I didn't touch anything at first. Just scrolled through the pictures saved in private albums, and made it all the way to the beginning of her timeline, finding out that her natural hair colour is acacia wood brown, all the way back in middle school.

I didn't mean to peek through her private messages. I swear. They just came up on the screen. Like they were sent right to me. A tirade from her presumably straight best friend, Stacey, about prom. Neither of them had dates yet. Stacey's list of potential boys that might ask them seemed endless. Noah had two exclamation points next to his name. I wonder if Stacey knew about his party, and the girl she kissed.

Celeste rejected every boy suggested to her. Kevin was too lanky. Lucas too short. Noah had really greasy hair. She wanted to go with someone interesting, someone new.

That was something I could make happen.

After I caught Sarah up, she wore the same expression she had when I first told her that urban legend about the lady who inadvertently killed her poodle by putting it in the microwave to dry its hair.



She said, “We’re going to McDicks and you’re buying me fries if I have to listen to anymore of this. I’m not a shrink and if you’re going to treat me like one... I better be full of strawberry milkshake and nugget grease first.”

I told her about a long time ago and a girl named Nathali. She was a Russian who went to middle school with me. Pale as all get-out. But with the most fantastic red hair. No freckles. Dark, dark eyes. Like a fictional character. We started talking right around the time I had finished reading *Eclipse*, it was the most recent *Twilight* out at the time. She was weird. Like not the kind of weird that we are, but strange weird. She’d be out of school so often I was sure she’d moved to Alaska, switched schools half-a-dozen times that year. And I’d never see her outside during recess either. And worse, during gym, she’d just sit out to the side, no matter if we were playing badminton or dodgeball. Her accent wasn’t quite right, but it was close enough. When I told her my suspicions, she played along. She had me going for at least a couple months. I would follow her around, taking notes like some kind of mythological anthropologist. I was half in love, half mindless. Whatever it was, it ended when I asked if she would bite me.

Sarah said, “So? Why are you telling me this?”

I said, “She wasn’t a vampire, she was just an unusually beautiful twelve year old. And European.”

\*

I said, “That’s not what you told Stacey.” After I asked her to prom and she said no, because she liked Kevin. I wondered if she was lying to me because I hadn’t done one of those elaborate prom-posals that were all the rage at the time. I had already witnessed one in my World History class

where Mike and his golf-team buddies interrupted the whole class for fifteen minutes because they snuck in the back window during our screening of Gandhi with oversized helium balloons that spelled out P-R-O-M-?

Celeste said, "I know, I'm probably the only other gay chick you've met around here. Borington isn't Provincetown. And that makes you think there's some kind of kinship between us. But I'm sorry, that's just not cool to do. I wouldn't let my boyfriend or girlfriend invade my privacy like that. And I'm not going to put up with it from you. It's, like, sweet, that you've got a little crush on me. But you don't know me. Go on the internet. Find people with similar interests. Connect. That's how it works. Being gay can't be the only thing we have in common. Just cause we're the only two paisley fish in a striped aquarium, doesn't mean that we're meant to be together. It just means you need a bigger pool. I don't know. Move to Toronto. Make a Craigslist ad searching for someone willing to co-rent a loft that you'll blow all your OSAP money on like Stacey's cousin did. You'll figure something out. And besides, I really do like Kevin. Stacey's just stolen the last three guys I've liked, because as soon as I tell her their names she gets like, freaky obsessed. It's a problem. Anyways, what were we talking about?"

I didn't know where the story was supposed to go from here.

*MISSED CONNECTIONS AS QUEER CANADIAN LITERATURE*

*Missed Connections* is a collection of short fiction, linked by a refinement, a clarification, of change. Characters are constantly in flux, negotiating queer spaces and existences as they're enacted through the lives of young women across Southern Ontario. The stories take place between 2009 and 2019, a decade during which perceptions of the queer community proved likewise malleable.

Before I begin talking about other writers and texts, queer and straight alike, I must clarify. It is not my policy to call anyone by a name that they have not called themselves by first. Surely, there are a larger number of queer writers throughout history than those who self-identify by the terms we're familiar with today. That being said, I can only talk about queer representation in texts by authors who self-identify as such, as it is not fruitful or especially helpful to engage in speculation and hearsay. Not while there are openly queer texts to discuss.

I'm arguing that my creative writing project *Missed Connections* (a collection of nine semi-linked stories) is operating as both Queer and Canadian Literary Fiction, which seem to have separate standards, considering the lack of inclusion or discussion of Queer Literature in the context of Canadian Literary History. My collection upholds both the literary goals that people like Northrop Frye, Douglas Glover, and Margaret Atwood talk about when they talk about what makes Canadian Short Fiction worth reading, and also as destabilizes performances of gender and the rigid binaries that Judith Butler problematizes in her Queer Theory texts like "Imitation and Gender Insubordination," *Bodies That Matter*, and *Gender Trouble*. Some questions I address in my essay: Why is Alice Munro in every anthology of Canlit, but Jane Rule is only included selectively? Why aren't more queer stories anthologized? Is it because they're not as good as the stories of Alice Munro, or Marian Engel, or Carol

Shields? In some cases, yes. But there are lots of collections of fair and equal merit that don't get acknowledged outside of specifically Queer publications, anthologies, and awards. This seems to be the opposite of what Frye argues for in *The Educated Imagination*, which points to literature as the best way to forge connections and allow people a glimpse into windows that might be inaccessible to them outside of the realm of fiction. That's what I'm hoping my collection of short stories does.

In my essay I will be looking at *Missed Connections* through the literary values and standards of both Queer and Canadian Literature, as described by their respective theorists, viewing *Missed Connections* as a text aiming towards a unification between the two genres. Working towards a rectification of the problem of disparity between them as the situation stands now.

### **Gender Representation and Queer Bodies/Narratives:**

Butler asks in her 1999 updated preface to *Gender Trouble*, “how do normative gender presumptions work to delimit the very field of description that we have for the human?” (xxiii) In practical terms, that amounts largely to texts that don't represent normative heterosexual cisgender being; in the words of Richard Landon in his Foreword to *Queer CanLit: Canadian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Literature in English*, such texts have been “ignored, censored, and largely forgotten” (8). My collection of short stories hopes to expand any prescriptive ideas of what a specific sign (lesbian, bi, queer, trans) or gender performance is supposed to mean. *Missed Connections* includes two straight, and four queer-spectrum protagonists; seven of the nine stories explore narratives which centralize queer experience and highlight the strange obligatory nature of the performance of gender. Only two stories, “Vernacular” and “One New Message” deal exclusively with heterosexual concerns. The characters in *Missed Connections* are queer, straight, asexual, trans, bi,

amateur criminals, and teenage goths, and express the variance contained in all these titles.

“Stick-N-Poke,” follows Alma, a high school drop-out and recent recidivist, as she struggles to express her agency in a world fraught with rules restricting the potentialities of what it means to be human.

“Identity Politics,” explores the consequences of a lack of recognition through the loss of a black cat and the subsequent pursuit of his return. “No Silk Roses,” complicates any easy depiction of queer living as it follows a straight teenager’s reluctant acceptance of her mother’s newfound bisexual relationship.

*Missed Connections* expresses the apparent randomness of it all, that, as Butler claims in “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” “there are no direct expressive or causal lines between sex, gender, gender presentation, sexual practise, fantasy and sexuality” (1496). This is best expressed in the first story, “Ephemera,” which follows a militant lesbian’s sea-change when she finds herself falling in love with her straight friend’s drag performance. Even though Andrew wears “Dolly Parton ringlets” (5) and resembles a potential stereotype of a woman, there is an authenticity, a realness, that surpasses any preconceived notions about the nature of the capacity for desire.

The anthologies that have so far focused on collecting and showcasing queer writing seem to prioritize the subject of queer stories being told over the quality of which stories that are being chosen. There is, of course, good reason for this. In James Johnstone’s and Karen Tulchinky’s 1995 introduction to the first volume of *Queer View Mirror*, they mention that “our stories, our histories as lesbians and gay men continue to be underrepresented and misrepresented in mainstream commercial media” (15). In many minds it is better for there to be a plethora of mediocre writing, than a small amount of good stuff. This problem of being underrepresented in popular and mainstream media is

reiterated in the 2017 anthology edited by Ivan E. Coyote and Zena Sharman, *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*, which exemplifies the struggle to find queer identities represented in the status quo. When the editors sought the definitions to the words ‘butch’ and ‘femme’ they “passed over the *Oxford English Dictionary* in favour of the internet” (25). This highlights the fact that queer lives and values are not easily found and represented in the academic ivory tower.

But the standards for queer literature are not unilateral. Whether Lambda, the biggest queer-spectrum literary award, should accept works by non-queer-spectrum authors was a subject of much debate and controversy. Diane Anderson-Minshall writes in a 2011 article, “For its first 20 years, the foundation accepted submissions for the Lambda Literary Awards based solely on a book’s LGBT subject matter. That policy changed in 2009, but Judith Markowitz, cochair of the foundation’s board, noted that the LGBT-only policy sharply divided the queer literary world” (n.p.).

But award recognition does not necessarily equate to good literature. Despite winning Amazon Canada’s First Novel Award, and the 2019 Lambda for Transgender fiction, *Little Fish* by Casey Plett lacks the lustre and vibrance of language required to make a story sing. One of the biggest problems in *Little Fish* is its lack of concrete setting and environment. While the description of the protagonist’s grandparent’s funeral being “simple and quiet, at the EMC out in the country” (13) may be evocative to anyone intimately familiar with that particular church, non-natives to the book’s setting are left struggling through the protagonist’s woes to find any sentences that could fulfill even Atwood’s “childish longing to be amused” (xii). Almost every description within the text follows along those lines. Acronyms are a poor replacement for creative use of language.

That being said, the stakes for queer and straight literature are very different. During her 1993 introduction of Jane Rule and Timothy Findley during a panel at the Vancouver Writers Festival, Frances Wasserlein stated the importance of seeing yourself represented in literature when she says of Findley and Rule that these authors are “part of the reason that me [sic], and many other young women and men are still alive, and still vibrant and contributing members to our various communities” (“A Conversation with Jane Rule & Timothy Findley,” 00:00:48-00:01:08). Whatever the stakes of literature are for straight people, when it comes to sexuality, they certainly are not life or death. Butler concludes *Gender Trouble* with the notion that “the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated” (203).

But there is a catch to this, Butler remarks in *Bodies That Matter* that representations and performances “cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since productions are not owned by the ones who utter them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors’ most precious intentions” (185). A proliferation of bad writing showcasing the variance of queer experience can have the opposite effect and turn a careful reader away from picking up another queer text, or discourage a discerning editor from including queer writing in an anthology that is supposed to represent the best literature.

Queer Literature still has a long way to go if it is not able to do both—explore the unique perspectives and stories that queer identities bring to the world, and make language sing with its careful attention to detail, use of time, metaphors and similes that allow language to “produce, out of the

society we live in, a vision of the society we want to live in” (Frye 60). That is what all literature should aspire to.

### **Canadian Literary Standards:**

What makes a Canadian story? Atwood complicates any easy answer in her introduction to the 1986 publication of *The Oxford Book of Canadian Short Stories in English*; she answers the question: “What, if anything, distinguishes a ‘Canadian’ short story from one of any other kind?” (xiv) with, “Individually considered, probably nothing. There is no essence of Canada that, sprinkled on a piece of prose fiction, will magically transform it” (xiv). Nevertheless, you would be hard-pressed to find an anthology purporting to show the best, or a representative selection of Canadian Literature that doesn’t include Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Marian Engel, or even Atwood herself. What do these writers have in common, if it isn’t some magical essence of Canada? I believe that it is literary skill. Precision and control over creative language is not something that is innate in white straight Anglo-Saxon men, and a select few women. It is accessible to anyone who reads enough books and decides to pick up a pen, or open a blank Word document.

Glover, speaking about the literary values of short fiction in an essay titled “The Anatomy of the Short Story,” claims,

Story form is an object, a translucent, shimmering thing with words tacked to the surface of its swirling involutions. The words glitter with their own reflective colouration; in them you see the momentary reflections of other words. Wires as thin as gossamer connect the words with more words on distant parts of the structure where they set up new colonies with flags, banners, replicas, and maps of the whole. Spin the form and the same words appear in flashes,



the eye registers their rhythmic insistence. It is wonderful and miraculous to watch. Yet with all its surface complexity, it is a structure I recognize, a story. (23)

What all this beautiful language amounts to in technical terms is, according to Glover, “plot, image patterning, thematic passages, and backfill, as well as elements of time control, scene writing, subplot, and that mysterious thing called shape” (24). And there is no one I can think of whose “words glitter with their own reflective colouration”(23) as much as Alice Munro.

I based the organizational structure of *Missed Connections*, upon Alice Munro’s collection *Runaway*. *Runaway* includes a linked triptych, composed of “Chance,” “Soon,” and “Silence,” which all follow a singular protagonist, Juliet, as she moves through her youth, to the loss of her husband, and alienation from her only daughter. My collection includes a suite of four linked stories, starting with “No Silk Roses,” which is a parallel story to “Catfish,” the first story in a triptych following Suzy in “Catfish,” “Vernacular,” and “One New Message.” While only these four stories are linked by characters, the rest are linked by sensibility. While Alma from “Stick-N-Poke” and Meridith from “Love, Love, Love,” may never cross paths, they are connected through their youth, their chimera like perspectives, and the linguistic tie, of some form of the word “literally,” appearing in every story in the collection at least once. The rest of the stories in Munro’s *Runaway*, while not linked by character, location, or plot, are linked by insistence, a repetition, a slow clarification of resonances that appear slowly and all at once like an optical illusion. “Tricks,” the second last story in *Runaway*, is only palpably lifelike and believable in the context of us having already read “Runaway,” which among other things, explores the loss and serendipitous recovery of a pet goat, and “Chance,” highlighting the utter implausibility of occurrences through Juliet’s meeting and subsequent marriage of her husband. In

*Missed Connections*, “Love, Love, Love,” and its ambiguous ending of “I didn’t know where the story was supposed to go from here” (129) is understood only through the variance and potentialities found in the other stories. *Missed Connections* ends with the idea of a beginning, where anything is potentially possible.

Glover describes in “The Style of Alice Munro” one of the features that makes her writing so vibrant:

Munro forges her style in the furnace of opposition. She plays with expectation and denial of expectation; she insists upon difference. My sense is that she doesn’t compose so much by reference (to a notational reality) as by dramatic antithesis. A statement provokes a counter-statement or a counter-construct, subversion, or complication, and the sentences, paragraphs, and stories advance by the accumulation of such contraventions. (1)

Throughout *Missed Connections* subversions and differences accumulate, from an offhand Gertrude Stein reference, “a dog is nothing like a monkey” (7), to more complex expressions of difference, such as Leslie’s problematic description of her friend in contrast with other gay men:

Unlike most white gay men I’ve had the misfortune of encountering, Sam is cool. Sam is gay, but not faggy, which is a relief. He doesn’t have that lilting impossible stereotypical voice (a documentary I saw once claimed it’s intentional, like a big Gay calling card). If you called him on the phone you’d think he was a plumber or a slaughterhouse technician, not a location scout for some of the plethora of films shot in the city. (3-4)

Sam is set up and described in opposition to a common stereotype of what a gay man looks and sounds like.

Another example of character built through difference is Alice in “Alice and Melissa”:

I liked Alice because she was someone who looked up. Not in the metaphorical sense, but literally. Every so often, I’d catch her glancing at the sky, not in a worrying way, searching for rain, but hopefully, sometimes wondrously, at a cloud, or Billboard for Sheryl Crow’s performance next month at the Casino. I didn’t like her when we argued. Or when I argued, to be specific. There was nothing I could do to get her to debate anything with me. Like she got taught hostage negotiation instead of communication skills. Like she thought in order to talk me off the ledge of whatever I wanted her feedback on, it was safer to just monotone “Really?” and “I hadn’t thought about it like that.” Until I burned myself out and she would finish with “You’re probably right.” (104)

Over-and-over, Melissa describes Alice in opposition to herself, so by the time we witness Alice breaking up with Melissa, while it comes as a surprise to the protagonist, to the reader it is the only inevitable conclusion.

But formal skill is not what makes good literature worth reading. It is the moral imperative.

Northrop Frye in *The Educated Imagination*, states,

Literature keeps presenting the most vicious things to us as entertainment, but what it appeals to is not any pleasure in these things, but the exhilaration of standing apart from them and being able to see them for what they are because they aren’t really happening. The more exposed we are to this, the less likely we are to find an unthinking pleasure in cruel or evil

things. As the eighteenth century said in a fine mouth-filling phrase, literature refines our sensibilities. (42)

“Alice and Melissa” is a story exemplary of this refinement of sensibilities, a politic of kindness, in which an innocuously villainous narrator learns the value of kindness in retrospect. Frye also states, “all forms of irony...stress the complexity of human life in opposition to this simple world” (48). While all the stories in *Missed Connections* take an ironic form, this is best exemplified in the story “Catfish,” where the complexities of the argument are the opposite of what might be traditionally considered. The moral imperative of “Catfish,” is also kindness. Kal, a trans youth, decides to re-enter the closet to maintain a sense of personal safety within his family unit, and ends up abandoned by his queer community that was supposed to support him, Kal explains the importance of this to Suzy when he says:

You understand right? Please tell me you get it? I just don’t want you to be mad at me and lose everyone because of this. I told my friends at school, you know. *My friends*. The people I’ve gone to the past three prides with...They said I was crazy for going back in the closet. My dad’s reaction was better. At least *he* didn’t know any better. They were my friends. And they said they wouldn’t talk to me again until I changed my mind, can you believe it? My friends. (44)

The importance of community and kindness is the moral lesson to be taken from this story. It just goes to show that “there are moral standards in literature after all” (Frye 41).

Frye states that “the book itself is a literary form, descended from and related to other literary forms: everything else follows from that. The constructs of the imagination tell us things about human life that we don’t get in any other way. That’s why it’s important for Canadians to pay particular

attention to Canadian Literature, even when the imported brands are better seasoned” (53). This is what makes the particular lack of attention to queer writings in the context of Canadian Literature concerning. How is queer writing supposed to improve, if it isn’t read, discussed, and easily available without having to specifically seek out queer content?

### **Intersection Between Queer and Canadian Literary Values:**

In my readings over the past two years, I noticed something strange. A split between the quote-unquote Gay/Queer/LGBTQ+ Canadian readings I was doing, and my reading of the Canadian Short Fiction literary canon as anthologized by Oxford, and Penguin, et al. Mostly, I noticed how little overlap there was between the two in theory not dissimilar genres. Only two writers appeared regularly on lists of both queer Canadian writers and anthologized Canadian Writers: Jane Rule and Dionne Brand. But even that was not consistent. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* and the first volume of *Canadian Literature in English: Texts and Contexts* make absolutely no reference whatsoever to queer writing, or any queer writers. It is not until the second volume of *Canadian Literature in English*, that any female queer prose writer gets mentioned, and even then it is only Brand who is considered significant enough for inclusion. It is only mentioned that Brand writes about “women’s love for women,” (629) and “links lesbian and feminist consciousness” (631), the selection of her poems included in the anthology focus more on the intersection of race and gender, than any sort of “lesbian consciousness.” Anthologies are not alone in the neglect of meaningful queer content as part of the discussion on Canadian literature.

John Metcalf’s massive tome, *The Canadian Short Story*, gives ample space to Munro, but makes no mention of Rule, Brand, or any gay writers or their stories. As if they never existed, or are not

worth including in the history of the Canadian Short Story. And despite Nick Mount's claim that his goal in *Arrival: The Story of CanLit* is to "tell the whole story" (1), he doesn't mention LGBTQ+ writing at any point in his storytelling. I do not fault him for this—it just shows the uneasy place queer writings have in the story of Canlit.

Only *Queer CanLit: Canadian Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Literature*, an exhibition that ran for one month in 2009, sponsored by the University of Toronto, makes any attempt to look at the scope of exclusively Canadian queer content and representation. The queer anthologies, such as *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme*, and *Queer View Mirror 1 and 2*, despite being published by Canadian indie press Arsenal Pulp, focus on drawing work from across international borders, linking the queer experience across English speaking countries around the globe.

### **Conclusion:**

According to an article published in the *Toronto Star* entitled "Canada's Queer Writing Community Finally Gets the Respect it Deserves." Queer Canadian writing has received more recognition than ever before; this is based on the fact that three of the four wins in Lambda's fiction category in 2019 were taken home by Vancouver's Arsenal Pulp Press. This may be true, but that is not necessarily saying much. I have already spoken about the literary merits of *Little Fish*. Queer literature should be aiming higher. When Rule and Findley spoke about the importance of representation, it was a given they were creating excellent work; the censorship they faced was on the merit of their representations of "alternative sexualites," not their literary value. That they are still being anthologized today testifies to the literary value of their work.

But which of their stories are being anthologized, and therefore taught, also matters. The 1986, and 1995 anthologies of Canadian Short Fiction published by Oxford each included a story by Rule and Findley, but when Atwood and Weaver revised the anthology for their 1995 edition, they swapped out the existing stories, which included queer content/narratives for stories that explore clearly heterosexual narratives. Now, whether a story is made queer by its authorship or subject matter is still a subject of debate.

In 2011, Lambda altered their submission guidelines, after a controversial decision in 2009 to bar from consideration for their awards any text not created by an LGBTQ+ author; in 2011 they argued that it is not the author's merits, but the literary merits of the text that should be considered when deciding whether a text was eligible or not. Anyone has the potential to create an excellent work of queer fiction. If that is the case, then gay people have the ability to write straight fiction. According to Karl Jirgens, "it is impossible to escape making a political statement through any kind of imprint, be it large or small press or periodical. Virtually everything involved with publishing forms some kind of political comment. What is being said, what is not said, even the type of paper on which the words are printed (recycled?) all become forms of political statement" (n.p.). Judith Butler claims that "there is no political position purified of power" (xxviii). Considering both of these opinions, it seems a strange and politically charged decision to replace Findley's "Dinner Along the Amazon," an excellent literary piece of fiction with prominent gay characters, with "The Duel in Cluny Park," which pretty much follows its title exactly; similarly Rule's "Slogans," which looks at a tender platonic relationship between a straight woman with a terminal illness and her lesbian college best friend, is replaced in 1995 by "The End of Summer," which is an excellent story about a woman contemplating leaving her

husband, but one that could have been written by almost any of the straight women also included in the anthology. The addition of Brand, another queer female writer, and her story, “Sans Souci,” which features no queer content, does little to soften the blow of this loss.

Why is it important to have queer stories written by queer authors included in anthologies of Canadian Literature? Frye offers that “one of the most obvious uses...is its encouragement of tolerance. In the imagination our own beliefs are also only possibilities, but we can also see the possibilities in the beliefs of others” (32). To include only straight authors and possibilities in anthologies that get taught perpetuates and limits the possibilities, prescribing that the only commonly acceptable possibilities are straight ones.

*Missed Connections* is but one stone skipped into the pond of Canadian Literature, adding one more possibility to our collective history of storytelling.



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