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### Here for Life: A Chapter & Stories

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HERE FOR LIFE  
A Chapter & Stories

By

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BA Honors in Creative Writing and English, Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, 2008

Professional Paper

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## I.

### LITTLE YORK

This city's hard not to hear. The sun crowns behind the bar-graph skyline over in Oshawa, on a morning cool and fummy, with a 1970s haze. Downtown, burned-out folk slip from buildings between buildings, wearing dead glow-stick wristlets and Shutter Shades. A few cars ply the main roads, the chief destinations of night—like the airport, a coworker's apartment—no longer chief: the early weekend workers.

But you don't hear that. You hear, with the cracking light, the early hammers of civic development, even before the bugs and birds. It's vans; the internal avalanches of garbage trucks. It's streetcars clacking across the shunts. At a corner—say, Queen St. W. and Dowling—an intercultural young couple rest their heads against bus-stop glass, and a Tamil woman holding seven plastic bags brimming with recyclables nudges the girl to slurp back her drool and get on. On this streetcar is Kevin Mark Clarke, one of Toronto's most famous and outspoken homeless, who has run for mayor four times. He speechifies populist fare till Spadina and removes himself before Yonge, his words having fallen on tired or corked ears.

Move north and sidestep the early beginnings of converging traffic and concrete-busting pneumatics, over the escarpments that demarcate areas once muffled beneath the preglacial Lake Iroquois; traipse through to clamber up the winding tracts of extensive wet ravine; pass the St. Clair thoroughfare—and there's the necktie of Oakwood Village, Vaughan Road, where Dutch Dreams, the famed ice cream parlour, juts at you from the corner like a rainbow caboose. Here's where the 90A busses release gasses at stops; where you'll monitor the expeditious sidewalk conversations of the early-morningers in Chinese, Italian, or

Tagalog.

Vaughan's unsound, adobe complexes—linemen, really—disunite the street from its just-north neighbouring boulevard, Claxton, the tail of Forest Hill, a community of near-to-six-figure salary makers, predominantly affluent, secularish Jews who mispronounce Jewish words: who lay out Halloween candy in punchbowls on refectory tables in their foyers; who hire the nearby carless Filipinos to clean their houses, to quiet their small dogs and kids. Those kids who eventually go off on Birthright.

Really, Forest Hill won't begin till you cross over the Glen Cedar footbridge, below which is the swamp of the Cedarvale Ravine (flanked by a scrunchy white gravel trail, which Hemingway used to stroll, and the austere slopes of the basin, purlieus for drinking teenagers); but the neighborhood's tail is bushier and verdured, in a breezy summer camp way, more so than its JAP-ey head, and its houses older, more stylized—in a New England way—though less expensive. That's where, at the 1:00 point of a grassy roundabout that joins Connaught Circle and Claxton at a stop sign, live Heli and Alon Brickman, and their cattle dog Calliope “of the beautiful bark.”

## YORK, MEGACITY

Masked by a large deodar cedar with sloping branches of blue new growth, their saltbox, from the end of their driveway, might appear narrow, with few front-facing windows except for the bubbled solarium. Follow it around the back and upward, it's clearly a good two tall levels, its basement of presumably average height, its kitchen, appended in the early nineties, thrust out, complete with a view of its expansive backyard, of its derelict pond blanketed in the pink spills

of their small, now bare sakura. And up the porch steps, to the sliding parlour doors, is outlooking Calliope, baying at a flagrant black squirrel staring through the glass, its front paws gesturing a malefic plot.

This barking, along with Alon's sonorous flatulence, wakes Heli before her usual time. She slides out of bed in Winnie-the-Pooh pajamas, moves to the dresser and turns on her husband's shortwave to the atonal bongos of the BBC news. Alon stirs with batting eyes.

After a shower she washes and anoints her face, using a fingernail to work Aveeno into the wrinkles on her forehead, then dresses till she's satisfied with an outfit. The rapid opening and slamming of drawers, the griding of coat hangers along the metal closet rod, the sticky peel of the window lifting—Heli stretches these actions to stir Alon, who stares at the wall in front of him as if he was at a urinal, flanked by two other men. He exhales loudly through his nostrils.

"*T'zareech leh tayelle eem a kelev,*" Heli says: "<You have to walk the dog.>" She pinches and lifts a stomach roll in the full-length mirror. She's gained two pounds this week, after the seder debacle, and has lost good, unimpaired sleep, its effects displayed in and around her eyes. "<And please talk to Sol.>"

"<The Lord of the Brats? No thanks.>"

"<Okay. So you'll see the things I won't do.>" She screams at Calliope to shut up.

The floor creaks as Alon lurches to plod to the bathroom in nothing but loose maroon briefs.

She adds six extra Craisins to her flax cereal. Outside the light's like mist off a sprinkler, and the lack of humming bugs indicates it's colder than it looks. She picks up the cordless phone and reads her son's number off a pink Post-it next to the wall mount.

Sol answers, his “hello” mangled by whatever screams and smokes occurred the night previous.

“Good *morning*, good *morning*, the little birds say!”

#### DOSSIER: SOL

It’s his mother, always, with a reveille like this, and so much lately. He stretches, holding his phone to his working ear. On Heli’s end, he hears a siren’s distant approach.

“Where the hell are you?” he asks.

“I’m *the hell* in the backyard. You should see the pond, it’s covered in the cherry flowers.”

“Blossoms. Nice.”

“Nice for now. I have to get rid of this thing.”

“The tree? Why?”

“Not the tree, the pond. It smells and it brings mosquitos. So, <what’s happening?>”

“Nothing. Just... you know, waking up.”

“Good. Good! It’s good to wake up.”

“You’re always calling too early.”

“I, just, love, to *talk* to you!” Effusive yet goading, in no way sorry for disturbing what was much-needed sleep, begun later than he intended. He watched five-sixths of the *Jurassic Park* trilogy and found, around 4:30 a.m., sleep further put off by strident thoughts. He focused on smoothing out his forehead, having recently discovered this tactic much more effective than the counting of sheep, which was a moonlit mess of a fantasy for him, as when

the fourth lamb made to clear the fence, she'd always fail to do so and stumble, knocking her chin. The drove behind would crowd and bleat, march on her, their legs slipping. The few who'd crossed onto the green would stand in ear-wiggling anticipation—maybe dread.

But that focused death-mask face he kept lost its efficacy since last week's seder, when sound departed his right ear for good. Last night he sat on the end of his bed, commanding his breathing, holding his phone toward the floor. There was no one to call. He cupped his other hand over his deaf ear, recalling the blow, while also considering that now long-lost seashell effect, that with a clench and release of certain fingers in orderly fashion created a tocsin, a ventilating *WHEE-yew WHEE-yew WHEE-yew*. None of that now. Just blunt, muddy silence—his ear forever stubbed by unequalized pressure. He left his room, bypassed Teen Wolf chewing at a hair clump on his hind leg, and went to his desk. He opened Olivia's email from the day before and read the four determined words for the nth time.

**Olivia Reyes** godslivingjoke@gmail.com  
to me

I'm still not ready.

He looked over the draft he'd written earlier that day and saved, without sending.

**Sol Brickman**  
to Olivia

Hmmm. Not ready. I'm obliged to mention that your being "ready," well, ain't really relevant, nor essential, to us meeting. How many moments have I unreadyly faced down, Liv? Moments contrived by you? I urge you to: deal with it.

Try to remember who I am. Sol. Sols. Brick Man. *Et alii*. What a shame it'd be if you didn't get to call me something again.

Reconsider.

Yeah, no. He drafted an alternate.

**Sol Brickman**

to Olivia

Right. Hmm. Mind if I inquire as to why? It's been, what, a year and a half? I can only speculate why you wouldn't be ready—in what way this would be harder for you than it is for me.

Obviously I can't force you to do anything, but so many things between us managed to elude me that I'm hoping you'll reconsider and grant me a meeting, if only for a few minutes, for a coffee, a cigarette, for two shakes of a clumsy lamb's tail. This *is* still just ME. Sol. Before all the shit, you and I were inseparable. It'd be a shame if we never saw each other again. I didn't intend to meet with you and make you feel guilty, or take you through the motions; quite the opposite, in fact.

So. I hope you'll change your mind.

He looked it over. One less “m” to the “hmmm.” He considered for a moment calling it “our shit.” The “year and a half,” the ballparking “what” before it, was posturing. It had been two years and twenty-nine days. And he was conscious of his guilt, still present in this draft—still, a little of it was intentional, and, he thought, necessary. He purposely didn't note his new handicap. With the sag he'd gained in his jowls, the new skin tag on the back of his neck, he didn't need to call more attention to what had changed. Plus, that would land harder in person. He pressed send, then returned to bed, where he snapped his fingers beside his head for awhile.

“Do you not love talking to *me*?” his mother asks now.

“Yes, <Mom>, of course. I fucking love it.”

“Did I tell you about Callie and Romeo and Romeo’s friend Macho?”

“Not yet. Sounds like the cast of a bodice ripper.”

“You’re speaking Asian to me.”

“Just go ahead,” he says.

“Okay, so Romeo is a mastiff, and he’s Callie’s friend—no, he’s her *fiancé*—and together they’re so nice in the park, but Romeo also has another friend called Macho, because they babysit each other sometimes. Yesterday Callie was playing with Romeo, and oh! here’s Macho! and Callie right away felt the chemistry of Romeo and Macho, so when Macho was sitting down she went to him, laid down beside him, put her paw on his paw and started to kiss him. Isn’t this something? Isn’t it like, ‘will you be my friend, too?’ It’s cute, no?”

“So cute.”

“And then Callie goes to a little girl’s stroller, bites her chocolate milk and runs away with it.” Heli hahs so loudly that Sol has to pull the phone from his ear.

“Bites chocolate milk? How’s that even possible?”

“Ach, bites, you know, the can of it.”

“The carton?”

“The carton! You know what it is, so why are you so pushing to tell me?”

“I get it now,” he says, though he got it before. For the sake of his lone ear, he holds the phone an inch from his head. Since the hearing loss, this has become one of his main modes of acclimation: to take in two worlds, the real and transmitted, through a sole aural aperture.

"<So>, what are you doing today?" Heli asks.

"I dunno. I work at five. Well, maybe. I might try to get it covered. I covered Matt's shift last night."

"But you need the money."

"Not really. I got tipped out yesterday."

"Sometimes, you know, I can't understand your choice to work for us. You come to us to pay the tax of your apartment, but you give shifts away. I can't understand you, I can't understand how you can *do* it."

"Well, there's this thing I've got going. I think it's called... wanting to *write*, that's it. Apparently you need time *off* sometimes in order to do so. Who fucking knew? <Mom>, I'm working six-day weeks already, I'm covering—"

"Do you know how much you owe us now?" she shouts. "You *work* if you need money! That's it!"

"Writing *is* work. It's not like I'm laying around picking out navel lint. Fuck."

"<What time is it now?>" she asks.

"I dunno. Nine."

"And you're supposed to...when?"

"Supposed to *what* when?"

"*Wer-erk*," she says, fabricating a glottal stop, like one speaking cluelessly to a deaf person.

"Jesus! Five. I *said* five. I have to clean my apartment, too." Have to, no, but should, but he wouldn't. "I'll likely work."

“Good.”

“Though I’ll have to work with fucking *Dan*.”

“Ai, so you don’t talk to him. He’s in the kitchen. You get the food and you punch the food in and he makes the food. You don’t have to even *see* him.”

“I’m on bar anyway. I’ll see him when he’s thirsty. I’ve gotta go.”

He hangs up. He kicks his blanket off as Teen Wolf hops onto the bed, purring and shoving his head into Sol’s ribcage.

Sol lifts the more obsolete of two laptops from the floor by his bed and rests it open beside him on the mattress. He pulls down his underwear, letting them cuff his ankles, then double-clicks a folder with lists of porn vids he’d torrented during either his morning coffees at Te Aro, or while he worked at his parents’ restaurant, his computer “charging” in the office upstairs. Each is a hetero scene involving a young or middle-aged woman with discernibly synthetic breasts. Ones that begin with her already down to her lingerie, aware of the camera and dancing or splayed for it, have never interested him. No, story is necessary, and if the woman does the debauching, all the better. The most arousing scenarios for him involve the man protesting to the point of indignation, then finally relenting.

Sol chooses a video based on a blunt, predatory desire for a particular porn star, Ivy IV, once-blonde but now brunette, with ample breasts that used to be tiny. This particular scene’s set in a massage parlor (really, he believes, in the den and master bathroom of some porn producer’s house), where the abashed male visits on the recommendation of a coworker. He claims not to have made love in a year because his wife left him for his best friend. This nugget appeals to Sol; he’s suspended disbelief, as he’s seen this surprisingly

memorable guy in many films. Madison, wearing a purple yukata, consoles him, tells him the price for the full shower, bath and mat massage. In the bathroom he undresses, and Madison's shocked by the incomparable size of his cock, and out of presumably sincere awe she must suck on it.

Sol, at this point, has applied a dime-sized dollop of lubricant mixed with one of saliva, and has worked up an erection, his pillow tucked under his back. He maxes the volume, but still can barely hear, so he bends forward in half a sit-up. As the man gets blown, Madison slides her face down to his balls. "Oh, my god, they're so fucking *taut*," she says.

Sol zones out here, considering this ten-dollar term, and imagines that Madison Ivy has applied "taut" to the tightness of things in her life: her ponytail at home, the dock-fastened rope of her boyfriend's catboat; even exclaiming what little money she has at a given time ("my funds are totally taut at the moment"—a colloquial misnomer, maybe). Sol's made analogous observations of authors' frequent use of particular words: Fitzgerald's couples and their "ineffectual" attempts at cohesion; Tea Obreht's "scalloped" patterns and architectures; the "hirsute" chests and the backs of men's hands, or the recurring "haze," in *Lolita*; Melville's "describing" of spouts and schooners; Flaubert's scores of "espaliered," "obsequious," and "unctuous." It's spying the architect's blueprint, Sol's thought—a traceable, unintentional glimpse at failed distillation. He's caught Madison now, and sees beyond her affectedly submissive self, sees someone who might, say, like a few things he likes, think a few similar thoughts—while she slurps the guy's balls as one without chopstick skills does a wonton.

Soon enough he finishes into the Cottonelle, then stares at the absorptive wad, a blueish, diamond-shaped scar of stain that with one thrust he could tear through. The video

continues, but is now an unpleasant spatial element. He shuts the computer and scrunches the wad, holding it on the head of his penis like cotton on the vein. Not quite ready to rise, though, he opens his computer again, returns to the “Downloads” folder, opens the file *Superman I-IV\*1978-1987\**, and slides the scrollbar forward to Margot Kidder falling into Christopher Reeve’s arms for the first astonishing time.

### LESLIEVILLE

It’s already his corner place, swapped for the Delightful Restaurant, now closed, which had advertised “Happy Coffee” in the window. The River Rock’s coffee is adequate at best, served from stainless steel airpots, but the wood tables and garage-style door make for a bright, restful, scholarly atmosphere in summer, when the door slides up and the potted ferns gain colour and sway. Sol’s routine brings him here first thing almost every morning for an egg breakfast with compote and oatmeal (in place of hash browns), fresh local bread, and peameal bacon. He edits the first part of his Bonnie Parker triptych, red-pens only conjunctions and determiners and reporting verbs, not writing anything new, just paring, till what’s left on his plate are two unbroken egg yolks, lunulae of whole grain crust, and one fatty, gnawed knuckle of bacon. He pays an even twelve bucks with tip and sits on the backless bench outside, lights a cigarette and, with the first drag, feels his gut turn over in pain. He forgot to shit before leaving his apartment. He goes back into the cafe, sits on the toilet and digs his elbows into his thighs, his torso heavy. The blood drains up his left leg. When he leaves, he limps until his sleeping leg replenishes about halfway through his walk to Te Aro, where he orders up a blueberry-toned Americano from Miranda, the vacuous but leggy Vietnamese

barista, and while he waits checks his email on his phone. He's begun to rue every word choice in his email to Olivia, its swaggering intonations, and is tempted to send a follow-up. He expects that he's pushed her to some precipice. He imagines her dark eyes heavy from drainage, a ripped ply of toilet paper in her hair, maybe an em dash laceration on her cheek. She's a mess.

He hops on a streetcar headed west, inadvertently directing himself toward Alon's (his dad's eponymous name for the restaurant), although it's hours before he's expected to punch in. He sits on the back bench and sees, above the top edge of his book, the love of his life.

Or of this moment, at least, and there would likely be a few more before the day's end. She's younger than him, maybe twenty-three, in thigh-to-ankle-tight jeans and a black dolman top, with a straight-fall of auburn hair to the neck, and deep-set hazel eyes. He wonders if maybe he's just fallen in lust, but his physical thirst is modest right now, his spent penis dormant in his jeans. Mostly he yearns for the Object to be dependably proximate, for it to be present in a well-lit bedroom of theirs in the morning with hot croissants and a sheeny golden retriever, a weekend crossword for them, a hazelnut coffee for him, an oversized, misbuttoned shirt of his for it that stops just below its ass and accents its raw legs. He, instead of a desire to fuck the girl in question, wants to wallpaper, spoon, sit behind her at Lamaze and file taxes with her.

She yawns and darts those eyes at him. He yawns too. She raises eyelids and smiles at him. She gets off at Jarvis and doesn't look back when the doors hiss open, nor from the street, and she'll never write him a missed connection, and he'll forget her face by tomorrow, when the process will repeat. At moments like this he's grateful for Melody, his only true,

current friend. He recalls last night's dispute with her and his friend Amos at Souza Dal, and begins to regret his behaviour. He wonders if, in the course of the evening, with all the what's and pardons and say that agains, he outed himself. He texts her a *We gotta stop fighting like that*. and reaches the Yonge St. subway and heads underground before receiving a reply. Multiple 10K runners with variegated shirts parading their respective charities board the same car he does, some in groups and some in families, with brown legs and arms and yellow or white headbands, blonde or blond hair, shorts that reveal ribs of stretch marks down some hamstrings. The *Sesame Street*-like chimes (a tied c, then the a, the f) intimate the doors are closing, and the tracks rattle the car. Sol reads the same sentence over and over in *The Beautiful and Damned* without effect, and reaches St. Andrew station before having to commit to more than a paragraph.

## ROSEDALE

His sister Tamar works day. She's been a waitress at Alon's for nine years and has repeatedly declined the position of Manager, despite their parents' requests. She's 4'11" though proportional, with unruly black hair and permanent leggings. When Sol walks in, she's at the System3 screen; she neither greets him nor acknowledges his presence. He shoots past her to the back patio, now devoid of customers but littered with lip-stained latte bowls, empty creamers; even an illicit cigar butt, its attic smell still present. He sits at a back table, smokes and tries to read, then checks his email again and types his name into Google's Advanced Search, with a month's worth of netting. Nothing new. His phone shakes and it's Melody's

reply: *Seriously! Why can't we argue like nonalcoholic people?*, and then another: *\*not nonalcoholic, normal, normal people. Autocorrect for "nomal."* Still, the former applies, too, maybe? He replies: *Ha! Well, it's good to have discourse. Makes for balanced cardinal humours.* She writes *Agreed. Hey! Got home and guess what? Three more ginger artifacts.*

"Ginger" (pronounced, by the both of them, *giNG-er*, in demotically offensive fashion) was in reference to the tenants who previously occupied Melody's basement apartment. Though she'd never met them, she'd discovered numerous "artifacts," which were telling a tumultuous love story she was obsessed with unearthing. Already she'd found a poetic mirror message and some red hair in her shower. Sol responds: *What now?*

*01/02: Three homemade fortunes like for fortune cookies. One says something like You'll smoke a joint today. Another says something about Margaret thatcher. But the — 02/02: thirds ones about the red pubic hair being red like lightning! Like the hair I found!!*

*Fucking gross. You have to write about it.*

*Ha, yeah, I won't write anything, you can have it. Ilk keep you updated. — \*I'm — FUCK. \*I'll.*

*Haha, I figured it out. I'm gonna work soon, so I'll call you later, maybe?*

Sol doesn't call her. Instead, after work, he gets drunk with his coworker Lara, topping off rocks glasses of Riesling while they wait for Jae-ho the dishwasher to finish his kitchen duties. Lara begins to show signs of drunkenness halfway into her third glass, when her eyelids start blinking independently of one another. When sober, she teeters on the edge of pretty, but the years and drinking show what to expect in the next decade or two. She looks good in a summer dress, helmetless on a bike, or when her hair's untidy. Her cheeks over-puff and chap in winter. She looks better with a little makeup than with too much or none at all.

He taps the base of his phone on the table, waiting for a vibration. Jae-ho finishes and waves bye at them, but they hang around. Lara puts on *Rabbit Fur Coat* and they share a cigarette; he knocks his knees into hers. They've made out before, after he's driven her home from work with her leg out the passenger window in his parents' Smart Fortwo while they scream-sang Cilla Black's "You're My World". Lara's a forceful one—your typical attractive person whom nobody's had the heart to tell to relax, to withdraw sometimes. Sol hates kissing her, but does it often enough anyway, in some misdirected attempt to validate himself. He makes her desire him by appealing to her own need for a similar thing.

They start kissing side by side on the booth seat at table 14, and when he starts fingering her, he keeps his face hidden in her neck, both to focus on the act at hand and to disengage. With his ear against her shoulder, her sounds are deadened and far away, above water and resounding. His arm starts to hurt, and he peeks at her, sees her eyes closed in a boozy transport, and the fingering becomes a task he's committed only to complete. When she seems to start coming, his phone vibrates silently in the pocket of his hoodie, just the one time. He removes his hand, licks his middle fingers for show, and she laughs, tugging her top back up.

They split at about 1:30, hailing separate cabs. His almost passes him by, and the cab driver apologizes when he gets in. "The reason, sir," explains the Russian, maybe Georgian, driver, "is I've just been a bit distracted by my daughter, you see, who has only very recently revealed to me not even ten minutes ago that she is to have yet another child, sir."

"Wow," says Sol, pulling his phone from his hoodie. The email, finally, reads:

**Olivia Reyes** godslivingjoke@gmail.com  
to me

I'm not ready, because I have no desire to give you an explanation. I'm not ready because it pisses me off so much that you'd ask for one. I'm not ready because almost everything in your email pushes my buttons, and when we *do* meet again, I'd like it to be nice, to be calm, to be friendly.

I really do wish you well, and hope that you'll understand, it's out of care, both for myself, for you, for our relationship at large, that I say: no, not now, not yet.

"That's amazing," says Sol, sliding his phone into his pocket. "Congratulations."

"Yes, it is a great thing, sir," says the driver.

"I'm thrilled to share this moment with you," Sol says. "Can't imagine how it feels.

Really."

"Oh, sir, it's a feeling of wonderment, truly. They've tried for so long since their first baby, and now another! Another comes!"

"Just amazing."

"She doesn't live in Toronto, so, in Barrie, with her husband and my granddaughter, so. It's just wonderful. Do you have children, sir?"

"Do I? No. I have a cat."

"That is something," says the driver.

"We're both feral children who don't pick up after ourselves." The driver laughs.

"Neither of us have a sense of humour. Nor any sense of conversational protocol." The driver laughs again. "It is laughable, because neither of us can laugh. That's what makes us so fucking funny."

## THE FACTORY LOFT

At home, Sol responds.

**Sol Brickman**

to Olivia

Wow.

To think, all this time I've pictured your life with a narrative analogous to mine, distant, sure, but still there, still determined. I pictured you saturated in guilt but peccable as always, squashing your sins down inside a metal coil in your stomach that would inevitably spring up. I figured I could help you confront that; help myself, in the process, alleviate that large—admittedly vast, elephantine, prodigious—side of me that still thinks about you. You were my biggest love thus far, after all.

But the rub in your ever-so-cunty response is your lack of self-reflection, obliging me to remind you that, after fucking my best friend, you forfeited any right to get angry at me for anything, like asking you to meet—the commonest of courtesies, I'd say.

We'll meet. I think that's an out-of-our-hands certainty. And its opportune? inopportune? timing will likely occur when you'll no longer mean a thing to me—well, that'd be a shame. I'd rather it was sooner. Here's hoping. Till then.

Oh, and I'm supposing this email might have upset you more than the previous one, but please, *please*, feel uncompelled to respond in turn. Your anger? It's unmerited.

In the days ahead, he'll wish he'd phrased only the end differently: "*Your anger's not only unwarranted, it's irrelevant.*"

He masturbates again, to curb the testicular ache brought on by Lara's unrequited duty, and when he comes he's silly enough to think of Liv on top of him with her underwear still on and wedged to the side. Afterward he sits in front of the television with six mini Hot Rods and watches *Bonnie and Clyde*, the Blu-ray copy he'd bought a couple of summers back when he and Olivia were living at his parents' house. He's now pissed at the gross historical inaccuracies. No mention of Roy Thornton, her first husband, no sign of his ring on her

finger, the double hearts tattooed on her thigh, *and we get a load of that thigh more than once!*

“Clyde wasn’t fucking gay!” he yells at the screen. He eats all the Hot Rods, then cracks open his sliding door and smokes a cigarette. Outside, across and below, he views the sawtooth lofts built into the facade of the original building, with their mullioned windows, most of them blinded, except for the one nearly directly in his line of sight. The view into the kitchen is especially bright during these early hours. Along the counter and the stairwell banister, brown rectangular candles are burning, setting a mood that seems intimate. A naked, salt-and-pepper-haired man with a conspicuous erection enters from stage right, heads to the fridge, opens it and grabs an already corked bottle of wine. He pours some into a glass and leans his ass on the marble counter, talking to someone offstage. Sol can’t help but notice the boner’s staying power: it visibly jounces, like he’s flexing groin muscles to some background music. Warren Beattie and Faye Dunaway drink from glass Coca-Cola bottles, probably.

Now from stage right comes an Irish setter, then a blonde woman in a T-shirt with thin, bare legs. Sol’s seen this woman and her dog in the foyer; she’s in her forties, most likely, but looks younger from a distance. The man welcomes her with a kiss on her neck. He pulls the neck of her shirt wide and kisses her shoulder, then lifts her under the armpits, sits her down bare-assed on the kitchen table, and starts going down on her. Sol smokes down to the filter, not aroused but unable to look away. Do they know how visible they are? He doubts it: even exhibitionists would glance out now and then to acknowledge the peepers. The man stops and pours wine for the woman, waits for her to sip, then takes her glass and places it on the candlelit banister. He squats behind her, finds an entry, then starts fucking the woman, who’s reclaimed her glass in the seconds he took to aim himself, but any attempt to drink from it

without wine sloshing down her chin is futile, so she simply covers the rim with the palm of her hand.

Sol moves outside and lights another cigarette. A wet-belching nausea's begun. He shakes from nerves, thinks how he might alert his neighbours at some point, find out their apartment number and drop a cordial, anonymous notification into their mailbox. ("We, your intramural neighbours, thought you'd like to know: you're better than primetime.") But he could also just stop watching them. The appropriate thing. Sanction through nonobservance. He could be happy for two lovers taking in their Friday, or for the cab driver, and not be hypercritical of his naïve, lunch-pail jubilation. He could stop pandering to Lara's need to be called pretty or sexy so as to get her in bed, and he could start sleeping supine instead of on his heart's side, thank Heli for her financial endorsements, could remind her that he loves her, could not let the arugula decay in the back of his fridge, could scoop Teen Wolf's litter box once a day and start wearing cardigans and see an audiologist and stop wearing solely Chuck Taylor's and clean his apartment, could go to the conservatory, take multivitamins with meals and learn to enjoy labour and its tangible bounties and stop wondering *why* she lied and kept it up and why no one had his back. Could, and should.

## Here for Life

In November, Melody stepped from her first shower in her new apartment and saw *my mine = you* scrawled on the mirror in broad, fog-cutting letters. Her eyes checked the door's anchor lock (still vertical). The apartment remained soundless save for the steadfast drone of the Servel fridge. The strokes of the letters were like new, thick and determined. In them she saw slices of herself clearly: her eye and cheekbone, her raw ear, wet cords of hair. The skin on her chest and stomach splotched red from water pressure.

She mopped up the message with a damp forearm and stepped from the steam into the expanse of her home, a kitchenette and bedroom, her bed two shag-carpeted feet from the wall in the 350-square-foot key-shaped apartment, the basement of a three-storey house, with bulkheads so low in parts that she had to crook her neck. Teetering a half-inch shy of 5'5", her hair, like antennules when dry, would sense the ceiling. She learned, when she went out weekends, to step onto her stoop barefooted and slide into heels.

Her eyes were sentinels as she toweled her hair. She wasn't yet comfortable with this solitary living. After most of a year renting the top floor of a Cabbagetown triplex with Alice and Vicky, two pear-shaped partiers with clamorous sex lives and "dishues" ("dishwashing issues," Alice so proudly dubbed her shortcoming), Melody moved out on the pretense of requiring a month-to-month rental plan, since she hoped to whimsically leave Toronto at some near point and didn't want her roommates left holding the bag. Frankly, she'd grown weary of their encroaching habits: Vicky razing the kitchen weekly, devising dinners with seasonal or pop thrusts (autumnal apple-braised pork loin or *pot-au-feu*, pineapple and mint

Kim Kar-Cardamom chicken), or Alice's forty-five-minute showers and early boot-heeled pacing. Their weekend binges of clear-spirit tipping and divvied, double-figured snorts of powders. Melody longed not to hate the people she required for her shallowest of moments, to remove the nettling trifle of proximity, to accept and even desire their company after some basic, measurable distance.

Above her now lived her ad hoc landlord Kenny and his girlfriend Natalia. The couple rented the whole house from his parents and were put in charge of renting out the basement. Kenny coined his own patronym, "Landlord, son of Grandlord."

Natalia was loud-laughing, animal-obsessed, wore wide-necked sweaters and vanilla-chai-scented antiperspirant. Her favourite author was Emily Giffin. Natalia, with hair bleached so blonde her scalp was red, who had a vertical tattoo above her right elbow that spelled "every rose has its thorn."

Kenny rocked a swollen beard and a significant handlebar mustache, resembling Jesus (like so many men do now, Melody thought, but she loved facial hair and how in vogue it'd become [its chic measured by ability rather than execution], even though it had existed for 50,000 years). He sprayed graffiti under the infamous tag of DETH in his twenties and now taught at a community centre, painting murals with high-schoolers and smalltime offenders in need of volunteer hours. He and Melody exchanged friendly texts involving phalli-based spoonerisms (*you rocked at Carcassonne last night* → *you cocked at Rarcassonne last night*) and the occasional science joke. ("Wanna hear a joke about potassium?" "No." "Oh. K.")

The couple had a Dandie Dinmont Terrier called Captain. Through the vents Melody often heard Natalia's whooping at his antics, or his barks and skitters along their powdered-

cork kitchen floor. She would imagine gently sliding her foot under his stomach and jolting her leg high like a placekicker's to catapult his body above and behind her. Some evenings she joined the couple upstairs for a Tassimo latte and a game of Scrabble, Master Labyrinth, or Bananagrams.

She dressed and headed down the street to the converted Wychwood Barns, an artists' residency now and farmers' market on weekends. Square kiosks sold complex preserves and lavish spreads like sage cheddar and leverpostej at extravagant prices. She bought herself a carton of Maroc clementines, shrouded in that bright orange mesh that made the fruit appear more vibrant. Outside she stood idly for a minute or so, anxious of her visible incapacity to direct herself anywhere. Two male dog-walkers passed by while she mimicked a phone call, only stopping when she reached her backyard.

She lay on her futon, nauseated. She took two ginger Gravols and hummed "All You Need is Love" to herself, which she found to be a useful vomiting deterrent, throwing up an action she was mortally afraid of (in the past year, her therapist Lori had diagnosed her as "emetophobic," along with a light case of "OCPD") that for her conjured up an all-too-real sensation of impermanence, like she was midway through the process of chemotherapy. Instead of just purging herself, she'd prolong the nausea, delve into cold sweats and the shakes, feel very alone, until she'd pass out, or, like in the present case, from avoidance end up vomiting a thick, acrimonious sludge that further solidified her fear. After waking from a recuperative nap, she peeled a yellowish clementine and left the peels to dry and scent her kitchen.

She dressed for a third date with Damien, a dubstep deejay and waiter at Pizzeria Libretto. Her friend Sol went to high school with him during Damien's raver days, when he wore alien-themed Spydahunny Phat Pants and had a cheek piercing. Now his style was that of a hip scarecrow: G-Star stamp denims tightening to the ankles, double-breasted Fox plaids rolled to the elbows. The piercing now just a faint chickenpox-style scar. Dates one and two were Americanos at Te Aro, gin rickeys at Sweaty Betty's. Date three, however, was her cultural suggestion of a production of *Glengarry Glen Ross* in the Distillery District, then a couple drinks at the Mill Street Brewery.

He wore glasses for the first time, had his hair slid to the right. He plopped an orange wedge into his wheat beer.

"I do nearly everything standing up," he said, after almost demanding they drink at the bar rather than grab a table. "Mix and read, eat Cream of Wheat. Showers only."

"Right. Hmm. I read somewhere once that Hemingway wrote that way. You know, standing. He'd wake at six—"

"Seriously, I know. My calves are, like, Herculean."

In her apartment (his was supposedly being fumigated), with the lights on, he steered inside her like a kid with a dowsing rod, and she saw on the ceiling, for the first time, a bevy of neon star stickers faded to snot-green, arranged to spell *Redheaded Viking*. Their glow scorched, visible only in the light.

In December the heat blasted and the humidifier rumbled round-the-clock. Melody stayed inside more, overeating kale and quinoa and Hungry Man turkey dinners.

She went to the symphony with Vicky and saw Max two rows down from her, wearing fingerless gloves that made muffled claps when he applauded. It was Mahler's "Symphony No. 1," and she recognized "Frère Jacques" flitting its way through, but didn't discern the number of cellists, or the muted auditorium lighting. Only Max's new pinna ring being fingered by a faceless brunette with a spiral of white swirled into the crown of her head like the inside of a Cinnabon.

At Te Aro "Roasted" on Queen East she was promoted to manager of the new Queen West location, which would open in two months and be named "Crafted." Melody had perfected the minimum requirements of free-poured latte art—rosettas and swans and white hearts of foam—and then some. There wasn't another barista in Toronto who could waggle their wrist and lift and lower the frothing pitcher to paint an owl's deadpan face, a sunflower garden, or a tricoloured Saturn so effectively. She churned out flat whites for thin, haggard but sexy film editors, soy mochas for young mothers and warm ciders for their toddlers.

Her favourite customers were a rotund, fiery-haired female bassist named Tara and a sweet Japanese software engineer named Will. And Sol. He was in almost every morning, spent the bulk of his afternoons seated at the table that met the bar, where he'd plug in his computer and write, get bored and chat, argue with/distract her, make her play LCD Soundsystem or the Ronettes or Barry Manilow. Pick at mole hairs on his forearm in concentration. This was where they'd met. He moved into a loft just up the street and within a week was a regular, came in loud and ebullient and invited the whole staff to his housewarming party, falling over a chair as he bustled out. At the party they sat on his kitchen counter and he piled books on top of her purse: Barthelme's *Sixty Stories*, *Models of the*

*Universe: An Anthology of Prose Poetry*, and his old publishing house's first anthology. He was cute and alive and engaged, yet turned sour at odd moments, making oblique references to why his press was now defunct.

"Let's just... Just, don't date your business partner."

"Ah."

Sol seemed self-assured, unguardedly afflicted. Most of the guys Melody met possessed some essential, emasculated insecurities, although Sol's appeared unconcerned with machismo. He didn't seem to care how other men saw him, nor was he in competition with them. Still, he voiced to her that he felt undesirable, typecast himself as a romantic stooge, a casualty in "the war of the latter-day genders;" yet he was obsequious to women with broad chests and cold shoulders, and he revived steadily to fall again. If anything, he fell short only in comparison to these women he vied for. He chased something Melody lacked or had too much of.

Whereas Max's insecurities had been entirely androcentric. Premature ejaculation, beardlessness, and his receding hairline, which he'd attempted to counteract with finasteride and a tuque for all seasons. With Max's head in her lap, she'd brushed only the hair by his ears and kissed his temples, telling him she'd noticed but barely thought about it. This wasn't so truthful, as sometimes her eyes had fallen on his widow's peak and his brittle hair illuminated like tangled guitar strings in bright light, focused on the delicacy of his haircut, the staid, palm-pressed flatness she didn't want to disrupt, to run her fingers through or tug on when they kissed. She would touch only the back of his head or run her nails lightly over his neck, or cup his face, which she admittedly enjoyed, but when they made out she felt oddly

masculine, unless she lost her arms around him, unless they were standing, when he was taller.

On New Year's Day, Max changed his Facebook status from "in a relationship" to "engaged."

The winter began to drag early. It wasn't brutally cold, nor did the snow choke the city as it had the year before, but it was salt stains on concrete and constant grey, like a perpetual gloaming or early morning, without the low dialogue of birds or the movements of water or anything active but wind.

Kenny dumped Natalia in February, and through the vents Melody got thunderous female and—by the muted gaps in argument—suggestions of silent, quailing male. She imagined Kenny sat there staring inanimately, maybe scratching Captain's neck lightly under the collar.

Natalia dropped by. They sat at Melody's kitchen table and talked about exes and general men. Melody couldn't help but oversimplify for conversation's sake. Natalia wasn't much interested in her active opinion, so Melody listened, adopted the epithet of Listener, heard but didn't really listen, and she thought of Max and her first boyfriend Alex and the other Xs that had manipulated their way in and out of her life. Instead of relating to Natalia, applying her own experience, she said nothing specific about the boys who were so far-reaching and present, and instead talked like they were all the same.

Melody showered after work before going out one Friday and saw a strand of red hair, long and tortuous along the tile wall. It took multiple attempts to pluck it off. She placed it on the rail of the tub, and when she finished showering, wiped the mirror with her face towel.

In March, when Damien began dating a girl he met at an ill.Gates show, Melody reorganized her favourites list on her iPhone. She moved friends who were always busy to the bottom, deleted friends who'd dissolved into their romances, and prioritized the few who'd IMed her on her birthday. Below Sol and Kenny were Mom and Te Aro, then Smile, her nickname for her sister Leah. "Smile" was bestowed when they were kids, when Melody kicked a loose tooth free from Leah's mouth.

She started managing at Crafted. The customers were younger and better looking. There was an ingress of raw denim and wafts of patchouli. They ordered untimely iced Americanos. She no longer piped out milk rosettas or tonged scones, but instead scheduled and catalogued and invoiced. She stuck Te Aro labels to bags of balanced and bold espresso beans.

She headed to meet Sol and his friend Amos at Souz Dal, a bar on College. She saw the *SEX FOR LIFE* ad on the streetcar, but thought it read *SEX FOR LOVE*, and beside it, *HAIR FOR LIFE* read *HERE FOR LIFE*.

The three of them sat out on the enclosed patio in the back, where Sol could smoke. The Sunmaster heaters blasted blue flames on high. Deviating from his normal chattiness (which in turn caused him to nurse or forget his drink), Sol quietly downed two double Jack-and-gingers and only then let loose his growing contention that literature was the only

medium of art where superficiality couldn't find footing, where the artist had to be "kosher, bona-fide, honest-to-goodness." Quickly the conversation devolved into gender prejudices, intemperate slings, and when Melody attempted to be nonpartisan, Sol called her on her hypocrisy, dubbed her a "plaster saint." She went inside to the bar and ordered a gin-and-tonic, scanned her phone and tried telekinetically to lift the redness from her face. She knew what Sol had referred to. They'd been at Ronnie's Local 069 in Kensington Market once, and a sylphlike blonde had been conversing across the table with Ashoka, one of Melody's coworkers, about how often she frequented the gym. Melody sat to Ashoka's left and texted Vicky—who sat on Ashoka's right—rude comments about the blonde. Melody rolled her eyes and smirked when the blonde expressed her love of a late-night jog, or her favourite brand of sports bra. At one point she looked up to Sol, across from her, arching a cynical eyebrow. She received a text moments later from him saying *Cool it.*

When Melody got home she went through pictures of her trip to London with Alex when she was twenty, when her hair was dyed raven black and she'd had that first eczematous outbreak on her forearm. She was pounds thinner. Ready for bed, she found three homemade fortunes in the corner of her inherited dresser. One said *You will smoke a joint today*, and another said *Margaret Thatcher has nothing on you*. The third said *Your pubic hair's like red lightning.*

She started finding artifacts outside her apartment. One night in the Junction she stupidly downed a very late whiskey shot, and in the bathroom, skimming girl-to-girl insults and

geographical pleas for peace, she read *FUCK THAT GINGER DICK*. and under it, in different pen and handwriting, was written *they'll all be extinct in a hundred years anyway...*

In April she called the TSO customer service line and bought two tickets to the season closer, Beethoven's "9<sup>th</sup>," then lay on the couch and watched *Teen Wolf* and *The Secret of My Success* on Demand.

Leah saw Max. In Trinity Bellwoods Park. He was thumbing messages into his phone, laid back in the lap of a girl with a spiral of white in her hair.

"His head's shaved now, and he's got this faggoty piercing. He looked like a douche."

"Hmm."

"Are you browsing Perez Hilton or something? You seem distracted."

"No," she said. She was double-checking the date of Beethoven, she said. Leah got upset and Melody called her sensitive. "Can I go now, Smile?"

Sol hadn't answered her calls for weeks, but she saw his name pop up now and again momentarily on gchat. His statuses were typically esoteric, like "Fuck you, Littlefoot," and "I'm such a moon." She called her mother in Victoria, told her she had no one to take to the symphony. Her mother suggested she call Max, and Melody hung up, cracking a wedge of plastic off the receiver of her ringless rotary dial.

She smoked a clove on her stoop, sitting between the wet spots on the step, ashing into a Maxwell House coffee tin, which had come with the stoop, and at the bottom, shrunken and embrowned, were the lipsticked filters of Belmont Milds and a half-sucked peppermint candy with a lone red stripe left over. In her bathroom she took an eyeliner pencil and wrote

*Listen, Stiles, do you know anything about a rash that's going around?* on the wall below the towel rack.

She accompanied Tara to a Drake Hotel afterparty and was shocked to see Kenny, the first time in weeks, smoking pot on a couch. His beard and hair had grown even longer, cushioning his pudgy face. He appeared Amish, or Tolstoyan. She waved, and he inhaled smoke with wide eyes and waved back. When she took her jacket off later at home, she found strands of Tara's hair knotted in the silk lining which married the collar to the back.

She got blonde highlights and a trim the day of the symphony, and as a motion of friendship offered up the second ticket to Damien. She waited for him on the sidewalk, side-scrolling aimlessly through her iPhone app screen, but he didn't show. In the aisle, she glanced around for Max. The chorus lined the balcony behind the stage, the women in black dresses and the men in shawl-lapel tuxedos. When they sang their faces reddened, and the red faded like dominos when they stopped.

In early May a stint of warm weather melted the late snow and revealed pavement, so people mashed together on Crafted's back patio under Activair heaters, were catered blankets and complimentary croissants. She rode the streetcar home one evening while the sun settled in the West, the pink cirrus clouds hovering through the window like disks on the horizon. She sat sideways on a single seat, and across from her sat a thin black girl with horn-rimmed glasses and her boyfriend, a pudgy white guy with thin flame licks for hair. The window next to his seat, slid open, brought cool air to his face, his eyes closed, head bobbing in lassitude. His girlfriend stared at him, unabashed, scrutinizing the contours of his stubble, the in-dream-

like flutter of his eyelashes. For a while. Melody couldn't help but stare at the staring girl, before the girl closed her eyes a foot from his face and moved in slowly, kissing his cheek under the ear. Melody rested her forehead against her knees.

The vents stopped breathing hot air, and gone were the filtered sounds of Captain's claws and Natalia's laughing, but Melody occasionally heard the knock of a canvas against the floor, the lilts of a Frank Zappa song, or creaking, slow-shifting placements of feet in the kitchen. She stayed home a lot, left the house once a day for a Starbucks drip coffee or a takeout order from The Stockyards. Maybe she rented a movie, sequences starring specific actors, like Meryl Streep, Jack Nicholson, or Paul Newman, and watched them flit through decades as various simpatico characters. She focused in on their stubbled cheeks, the cracking of their crow's-feet, the extension of marionette lines, their skills at dramatic nictation. By the muted gaps in movement above her, she got thunderous suggestions of silent, lonely male.

In July she found an apartment in Parkdale closer to work, a one-bedroom with a large den and 8-foot ceilings, concrete floors, nobody above or below her, for a couple hundred more a month. She knocked on Kenny's door and brought him Pairs in Pears, a new addition to the Bananagram game family. It came in a green, pear-shaped zipper pouch. They played a game and she told him she'd be moving out September 1<sup>st</sup>. Kenny nodded and smiled in behind his beard somewhere, tried "bustiest," which Melody called him on. At the Barns the next Saturday she saw him standing next to a fruit stand, circling one piece of change around another in his palm. The sun washed over the floor through the clerestory windows, and in

the light Kenny's Brillo hair seemed like rusty steel wool. He saw her and waved. She waved back and mimicked a phone call, but then fake hung up and approached him.

Max emailed her in August. She read it on her stoop, shaking in the sun, smoking another clove cigarette. It was conversational and shallow, asking how she's been, saying he'd read about a white-blond barista named Melody commenting on the iPad in a *NOW* article, thought it might be her, wondered if she changed her hair. It was, she wrote back. A while ago, she replied. How are you? I'm great. Leaving Toronto in August for Seattle, getting married, and he stopped smoking pot, played the didgeridoo now, said cheers at the end of every email now. She closed her final response with hopes that he was doing well and wished him luck. She expected she wouldn't hear from him again.

She copied the emails into a word document and removed the names. She inserted some red-haired details, some about rose thorns, "there" bloodletting flair. She printed the emails and lay them out in a waving timeline on her bed, then cut them in the shape of speech bubbles.

She ran the hot water in the tub with the door closed, wrote *stop smoking pot and shave* on the mirror in swooping letters. In the closet she left behind the lid of a shoebox with a pig in glasses and a tie illustrated on the underside, *Gregory Peccary* written in red Magic Marker. She removed the homemade fortunes from the pocket flap of her Moleskine and hid them around the house. In the cutlery drawer, the bathroom cabinet, the gills of the humidifier. She pasted a speech bubble behind her sliding closet door, one in the pantry, the storage compartment of her stove. She dropped a few used Tassimo discs into the Maxwell House tin

on the stoop, and let a few strands of hair catch on the ceiling's heating duct grills. She thought in some ways this might help.

## We'll Contain It

I'm pressing the chicken down with the spatula when my neighbour Thom Cunningham yells my name. I untie my *David* apron and throw it on a chair, then climb the porch steps and see Thom across our adjoining fence on his porch.

"Smells good," he says.

"Chicken breasts and prawns from the restaurant," I say.

"Smells good," he says again. "Me and Lola, we're gonna drop in sometime, try out that famous duck confit."

"So what's up?" I say.

"Well, Luke and I were thinking maybe after you eat you guys might like to take a walk to the ravine with the dogs. Kick a ball around or something."

"Oh. Not sure. Andy always starts his homework late, so..."

"Yeah, I hear *that*," Thom says. "It's Saturday, though."

"Yeah, but I gotta supervise the floor for brunch tomorrow. New bartender."

Thom holds up his hand. "No worries."

"Look, we're sitting down in about ten. Maybe we'll drop by afterward."

When the Cunninghams moved next door, three years ago, I was sitting out front with Roger Rabbit, our Border Collie, tightening the training wheels on Andy's bike. They drove soundlessly up their new driveway in a white Lexus. Lola stepped out from the passenger side, tan and full-figured, a pair of bug-eyed sunglasses resting on top of her head. Thom took

Luke from the car seat and waved at me. “Welcome,” I shouted. Luke hooked his bottom lip with his finger, staring at RR, who sniffed the air between us.

We had a few dinners, at their long dinner table they’d bought with a reclaimed wood tabletop. Thom was an engineer and writer. Blue tape ran along the baseboards. I just knew they had no mortgage on the house; that all they charged, if anything, was their Behr eggshell enamel, their under-mount cabinet lighting, their vessel-style bathroom sink.

Luke was four and Andy was five. There was no separating them. It was sleepovers and backyard sprinklers, then searching for Lego pieces through Luke’s giant storage tote, or playing his Super Nintendo. They did all this even after Lola and Evie had a row over our hedges that straggled over their driveway, beyond our property line. Lola finally called the city. Their dog, Taffy, kept crapping on our lawn, and when we had a staff party, the police came by with a noise complaint. One of our chefs got drunk and smashed a bottle in their driveway. Despite all this, the boys remained the best of friends.

I go back to the grill and find the breasts charred and smoky, the prawns orange, the red peppers splotched back. I yell “Soup’s on,” and hear Evie yell for Andy. She comes out to set the porch table and doesn’t even look at me. I tong the prawns onto a plate and we sit to eat.

I ask Andy if he wants to go for a walk with Luke and his dad after dinner. He props up on his knees, contorting his body backward toward the Cunninghams’ porch.

“Can we make a fire?”

I look up to the sky, to the light, cloudless blue going yellow and pink toward the ravine. “We’ll see,” I say. “First eat.”

Evie hits the plate hard through the chicken with her fork. She peels the prawns for Andy, tweezing the intestinal tracts with her fingernails. It's like it's just the two of them. Andy slumps in his chair and piles the skins on the side of his plate. He keeps knocking the leg of the table with his foot. "Stop it," I tell him. Evie says "Relax." He nibbles Romano petals from the salad. "Use a fork, please," I say. The phone rings and Evie gets up to answer it. When she comes back I ask how's business.

"They're letting Steph go early," she says.

"Why?"

"Because it's slow, I'm guessing," she says.

"You don't ask?"

I hear the Cunninghams' screen door slam and Luke out calling for Andy. Andy steps to the fence and leans on it. "My dad said we can make a fire!"

I leash up Roger Rabbit. Andy dribbles his soccer ball and won't put on his jacket. I tell him we won't leave till he does.

Lola answers the door. Her brown face is puffy, and her big clothes hug nothing. The boys greet each other in that awkward way kids do when they're excited. Thom trots down the stairs, his shiny hair jutting out the back of his Texas Rangers hat. "Glad you changed your mind," he says.

The boys walk in front with the leashes; Taffy, the Cunninghams' Bernese-and-Collie mix, towers over Roger Rabbit. The boys run to the boulevard in the centre of the street, stop and investigate a used roman candle, which Roger Rabbit bites for, then gets distracted by a

urine stain at the base of the tree. Thom and I walk behind, squinting in the sharp evening sunlight.

“So we’re looking at houses in Rosedale,” he says. “Not far from your restaurant.”

It’s a smart move, if you can afford it. Rosedale’s a residential neighbourhood with forests for backyards, tire swings on sequoias; houses there go for a few million at least. All the old rich live there, people with deep pockets and short arms, plenty of whom are our regulars. They demand tomato wedges with their salads rather than slices, flax bread instead of baguette. They drink still water with lemon, no ice, and never tip more than ten percent.

The boys drop the leashes and enact a lightsaber battle, Andy with a stick and Luke with the roman candle. They make the sounds. The soccer ball rolls behind and I pick it up along with RR’s leash. For Andy’s birthday we bought him a Game Gear and a *Super Star Wars* game. He plays it for hours on end, justifying the time by saying he can’t save his data. Now he’s asking for a Super Nintendo, like Luke’s. He spent Christmas (which we don’t celebrate) over at their place, and I’m not sure what he was expecting, but all he got was a red model Corvette.

“We really love this area,” Thom says, “but we need a bigger place. Family’s going to be expanding.”

I’m thinking who needs more than 3000 square feet and three floors, plus a ceramic-tiled patio, when it registers that Lola’s pregnant. “Ah,” I say.

“Luke doesn’t know yet, so mum’s.”

“Mazel tov,” I say.

We come to the bridge that stretches over the ravine, as the sun begins to set. Plane

contrails streak above the trees. Dusk is falling to the east, and the bridge feels like a divider between dark and light, like those rare times when you find yourself in sun at the edge of a rain cloud.

We see a pair of mothers with strollers, and kids racing down the bridge. A group of teenagers sit against a concrete light fixture in the centre of the bridge, smoking a joint.

“Luke? Andy? Stay to the left,” Thom says. He glares at the teens as we walk by. The one with the joint hides it behind a cupped hand, but the smoke curls up around his wrist. I sneak the teens a click and a finger gun, but when Roger Rabbit goes in for a sniff I jolt the leash. I hear them laugh once we’ve passed.

At the end of the bridge, stairs lead down to the ravine. Andy and Luke run for it and I yell “Slow down.”

“Lola says she can tell it’s a girl,” Thom says. “Says she didn’t glow like this when she was pregnant with Luke or something. She says it’s a mother-daughter thing.”

The staircase’s narrow, widely-spaced planks are still wet from afternoon rain and smell like balsam. The dogs try to rush down, but Thom and I hold them back.

“What about you and Evie?” he asks. “You done with all that?”

“Maybe,” I say.

At the base of the stairs is a gravel path that tees left or right. Left takes you along a forestial trail that Evie, Andy and I bike often, ending at the Forest Hill Village, where we get bagel sandwiches with cream cheese and chives, or hot chocolate. Right takes you into the expanse of the ravine, in the middle of which is a long strip of sand for lawn bowling. The local kids call one of the hills the Killer, because of some rumour that dozens of people have

sledged to their deaths there. Last winter Andy sprained his ankle on it, trying to ride his crazy carpet.

We head right. I let Roger Rabbit off his leash and he runs into the wetland. He'll wade in the swamp, snapping at water striders. Thom doesn't unleash Taffy; instead he picks up the slack from the leash, wrapping it around his hand. Taffy stops often, perking up and looking toward where Roger Rabbit is. He closes his mouth and frowns his slobbery lips, opening to a black-gummed dog smile. Thom looks back and pulls on the leash.

"So what do you think?" he says. "How about a fire?"

"Sure," I say. I'd hidden a half-bag of marshmallows in my jacket; I just like telling Andy 'maybe.' It's like when I go to Video 99 and rent us a movie. I'll pick one of his favourites, but always tell him it's *The Godfather*. He knows it isn't, but he enjoys the surprise, and if it's a movie he really loves, like *The Princess Bride* or *The Goonies*, he gets so excited he cries. The lie's always worth it.

We walk past the dog park, where the path meets the top of a hill. At least a dozen dogs are fenced into the main area where owners toss tennis balls. I turn around and stick my thumb and pinkie in my mouth and whistle for Roger Rabbit. He comes bolting up the path, his tongue flapping, and shoots right past me. A handful of dog owners throw me looks.

"Don't let the dog police catch you," says Thom.

"They never do," I say, but I spend the next few minutes following RR, walking, not running, offering invisible treats he ignores till he finally takes interest in a used Kleenex. I leash him back up.

We walk toward a small clearing with picnic tables, log benches, and three fire pits.

“The sunset’s amazing,” says Thom.

“The colours are bright like that ’cause of dust particles and air and soot particles,” Andy says.

“Wow,” Thom says, “cool, Andy. I did not know that.”

When we reach the benches and the pits, I see a sign with a red slash over a lighted campfire. “The hell?”

“That’s new,” says Thom. “Jeez, sorry, boys. Looks like we’ll have to forgo the fire.”

“How come?” says Luke.

“Not allowed,” says Thom, pointing at the sign. “We’ll make a fire at home.” He looks at me. “You guys are welcome to join.”

Luke runs to the first pit and stops, scrambling old ashes with a stick, then dashes for the second pit. Andy tightrope-walks a log seat bordering the first pit. Luke crouches at the second pit and grabs old cinder clumps, bursting them in his fists. Then he’s up, eyeing the last pit. “What’s that?” he says, pointing.

Andy shoots past him to the dark mound that, in the settling darkness, looks like the silhouette of a Roman tomb, or the Lincoln Memorial. “Dad, come here!”

“On my way,” I say. My ankle hurts from my failing Birkenstock insole, which was blue when I bought it and is now brown.

The boys squat around a heap of papery something. Thom makes it to the heap first, touches the boys’ shoulders and moves through them. When I get closer I see it’s stacks of bills, set up like reams of paper on a warehouse pallet. Thom puts his arms behind him, palms

pressed against the kids' chests, holding them back.

I drop the soccer ball and count the pile. There are five or six hundred stacks of bills, all American hundreds, a paper band around each bunch reading "\$10,000" in green ink. The money isn't fresh, the edges are ripped. Thom's pinching the bridge of his nose with his middle finger and thumb; his other hand palms his forehead. He closes his eyes. He's counting.

Andy leafs through a stack.

"Put that down," I say. I look around. There's nobody around except a man with a shopping cart a hundred yards off. "First off," I say, "what's this doing here?"

Thom holds up his finger. "Just... okay, six," he says. "Just over six million." I look for a tripwire or a string near the base of the pile, or a net.

"This has to be a joke," I say. Thom stands up, nodding his head, his hands on his waist. Luke sways on the spot, his finger tucked under that lip, his stomach sticking out. Thom pulls his son's hand out of his mouth. Andy turns in a circle around his stick, staring at us. My heart beats so quickly I'm scared I might choke.

I grab a stack off the top and examine it closely. There's still enough daylight that we can all still see each other, but the details on the bill are too difficult to make out. I pull out my lighter and hold the flame over the bill. Thom looms over my shoulder, smelling of fabric softener. The bill looks like a normal hundred, with Ben Franklin's droopy eye and the wide view of Independence Hall on the back. Then I look below the Federal Reserve Seal and see it: THIS NOTE IS TENDERLY ILLEGAL FOR ALL DEBTS. The treasury secretary's signature reads H. Ollie Wud; below it, in small cursive, FOR MOTION PICTURE USE ONLY.

“It’s fake,” I say, showing Thom the writing. He squints and his face drops, but then he laughs.

“They were filming over at the tennis courts last week,” he says. “They must’ve been here as well and left this for a gag.”

I thumb through the pile. “Down a couple bills are just blank pieces of paper,” I say.

Andy starts yelling “Fifty dollar bill? Fifty dollar bill! Fifty dollar bill! Guys, there’s hundreds of fifty dollar bill!” and then he laughs. “It’s like *The Goonies*,” he says, looking at me.

“Fuck,” I say. “Fuck!”

“Hey, take it easy,” says Thom.

“Right,” I say, “‘cause it’s not a fucking letdown.”

Thom claps his hands. “Okay, guys, time to head home.”

Andy comes over with two stacks of bills. “Can I keep these, Dad?” he asks.

“One,” I say. “You can take one.” I light a cigarette.

“I didn’t know you smoked,” says Thom. He does know. After that staff party I started flicking my butts into his backyard. Evie was upset that I was still smoking, but she liked when I did this. One morning when I was going out to walk RR, I found an envelope on my front stoop with my name on it in black print, filled with the butts.

Andy stares at my cigarette, and I stamp it out. I think about how the restaurant’s day-to-day and unrewarding, that the art to it’s gone. It’s not sustainable. Evie’s tired of reading the restaurant issues of *Toronto Life* and *NOW* and never finding our place listed.

“Shit, I could use a drink,” I say. Thom nods, hands pocketed, teetering on his heels.

“Shall we?” he says. “What say you?”

“I say we start a fire.” I stand up and point at the money pile.

“Probably not a good idea,” says Thom.

“I say we burn the whole thing,” I say. “Why not? The kids’ll love it. Right, guys?”

The kids, sitting next to the dogs and ripping out tufts of grass, look up.

“Want we’ll burn the money?” I say. The boys say nothing. “It’s just fake,” I say.

Andy says “Yeah!”

“Yeah!” says Luke.

Thom looks at me the way he’s done a few times before. “Sorry, guys, we can’t.”

Luke’s at Thom’s side, grabbing his arm and hopping on the spot. “Yeah, Dad, let’s do it!”

“No, Luke, we can’t. It’s too dangerous. It could start a bigger fire.”

“Gimme a break, Thom,” I say. “The pits are way off from the trees. We’ll contain it.”

Thom tells the kids to hang on and takes me aside. He rubs his palms together and looks between them and the distance over the top of my head.

“I think this is wrong,” he says, “and now you’ve got my kid excited. It’s incredibly undermining.”

“Well,” I say, “he wants to do it.”

“Of course! He’s an eight-year-old. Kids his age, they wow themselves on... jeez, I shouldn’t have to explain this to you.” He must be wishing he’d never asked us to come for a walk, wishing he’d never moved to this Jewy neighbourhood in the first place.

“You don’t have to explain anything,” I say. “It’s just not a big deal.”

“It’s a big deal because it’s—” He takes a step forward and my stupid instincts make me

step back. I slip on mud or grass or whatever the hell it is and fall on my tailbone. I feel my Dunhills crush in my back pocket.

Thom offers me his hand. I wave it away and lift myself. The heels of my hands are smeared with dirt and my tailbone aches. I feel the heat rise in my face, the way it did the time Thom told me, “You guys have to understand, the hedge tips onto our driveway and scratches against my car and cuts weekly holes in Luke’s clothes. Now, we can settle this like adults or we can get the city involved, but enough of the bullshit.”

The boys are watching us. “Dad, you okay?” says Andy.

“I’m fine,” I say. Mud cakes the seat of my pants. I wipe myself off the best I can.

“We’re gonna head home,” Thom says. “Luke?”

I lean in to Thom. “Leave if you guys want,” I say softly, “but Andy and I are lighting up the whole fucking thing. You want, you can help us keep it safe.” I show him my lighter.

“Luke!” he yells. I slap some mud off my ass.

When they’re gone, I grab a bunch of bills from the top stack and pocket them, making sure they’re all real fakes and not blank paper. Then I bring the BIC down to the bottom corners of the pile. The edges of the stacks start to furl, but there’s no whoosh or anything. Andy gathers some kindling and, with the right arrangement, I get the thing started. I pull out the marshmallows from my pocket, smushed together under cellophane. I hand him one and grab one for myself. We twist them over the small fire till they’re speckled and brown, then slide off the layers and roast them again. We do this till the fire’s orange and so hot that our cheeks feel it. Till we’re all aglow.

## The Lemma

Ah! how they still strove through that infinite blueness  
to seek out the thing that might destroy them!

*Moby-Dick*, Chapter CXXXIV

The smallest feline is a masterpiece.

Leonardo da Vinci

### I.

My cat Ippo died on a tropical Thursday evening in 2010. For the rest of that week I considered his face, that bewhiskered little face, caught in a terrific yawn, and thought of him sniffing my neighbour's dog's wet nose, and imagined him wrapped inside the duvet like a kilted sausage, and in the car on a trip, waking with tight pupils, poking through the carryall to catch the live world through the window.

The following Monday I popped in on Franck Chanteur, which my volunteer work had me do weekly, but sometimes I visited when I didn't have to, because Franck was a blast. We played Go, or he read me his essays, and he was always full of beans and competitive, and had curious modes of expression. Also, he gave me Ippo in the first place.

He lived in a single shotgun in Toronto's Beaches, tucked behind this red bay-and-gable with trained ivy along its face. As I made my way up his walk, I could sense the world pressing on without Ippo, as if he'd never carried any weight. I thought, *world, change all you want, 'cause I won't.*

This kid, always this kid, was on Franck's porch trying to poach something, a sliver of wood from the door or a paint chip, but today he was laying something down—a doll leg, it turned out—and spraying it with WD-40.

“Oy,” I yelled. The kid upped and turned around. “Get the hell away.”

He sidestepped me and ran down the walk, ditching the leg and can in this blue holly bush. He stopped at the edge of the yard.

“A tripod fried his arm, you know,” he said.

“Little pyro, get going.”

The boy stuck out his tongue and rubbed his bare arm, like he was shedding off sweated skin.

I knocked on the door. It took Franck a good minute to open it only as far as the chain allowed, baring one of his milky green eyes and a stubbled cheek. An orange kitten balanced on top of his head, sniffing the brass chain.

“Beat a retreat, Pierrot, give ground. It's Uncle Gil.”

“Hi Franck.”

I heard him remove the chain from the track. The door opened wide to Franck in a tight-fitting flannel shirt, cherry-patterned stockings that covered his calves, and the same boxers I always saw him in, with ‘Saturday’ repeated along the waistband. Pierrot dug his claws into Franck's surviving sideburns.

“Watch your tread, eh? Clowders swim between your legs.”

Cat tails were up and bent at the top like periscopes, their owners slinking to food bowls and the circumvolving litter box, which self-cleaned and flushed into a six-foot pit Franck had

dug himself. “Keeps protozoa at bay,” he told me once. “FeLV and toxoplasmosis are the leading concerns among this brood.”

I set the meal trays on his coffee table. “Good spread today. Tortellini soup, mushroom quiche. I got you carrots, peas, some red grapes, two dinner rolls, couple margarines, milk, orange juice, and—check it, Franck—sugar-free cheesecake. You’re all set.”

“A divertissement?” he said, dropping Pierrot.

“Not today.”

“I’ve a new briefcase board. The pieces are clamshell and slate. You can be slate, I’ll allow it.”

“I can’t,” I said. “I’ve gotta get home, purge the house of all things Ippo.” I wouldn’t come out and just say it. I’d gone to Franck’s on a Monday, though meal deliveries were usually Tuesday. Franck wouldn’t pick up on this discrepancy, but he’d pick up on Ippo. He was an old man, like a dad.

“What’s the felid done now? Finally catch the laser?”

“He died.”

“Fuck-fuck yes!” shouted Franck, instantly clapping his mouth. Then he lifted his ear from behind with two fingers, as if listening for Ippo, or the rattle of the Go stones.

“The hell, Franck?”

“Ah-ba-ba! My friend,” he said, touching his heart. “No, *Hippopotame* was, for aye, a real peach. Son of Ruby the Calm, yeah? No forgetting that vision: mottled tortoiseshell with the lilac-cream backcloth. She always plumped herself above a heating duct to siesta. Well, fuck. How’d your calico crony meet the author of our world?”

“Run over,” I said.

“Sit. I’ll brew you a mug of Spring Snail.”

The den was lived-in and fusty, with its crowded shelves and freestanding ashtrays, dust loitering in the sun like noise. Franck brought me a lukewarm tea and spent some moments rummaging behind stacks of *The Old Farmer’s Almanac* and *American Scientist*. He found what he was looking for, a dictionary, then sat across from me. For the remainder of the conversation, he jotted notes in the margins of a page somewhere within the range of ‘D’.

I lifted the infuser and set it in an ashtray full of old, dry tea bags. Franck’s knee jiggled. He gripped his left bicep.

“Kafka, down,” he said. “So, Ippo faced the tread. Were you nearby?”

“No. I was inside watching Nick at Nite. I missed it.” I clapped my hand over my eyes, verging on tears. “Near tears for the little guy,” I said. “And he was always so dismissive.”

“Come now, Gilgotha. Swap that loss for devotion. Ippo lives on, if only in stills and vids.”

“Neither! I have neither! All I’ve got are these two miniature portraits a friend of mine painted for me as a birthday gag: one of Ippo and me getting married, and one of us posing with our first kitten.”

“Dear peer, I’ll tell you, I’m distraught, I’m despondent, I am doleful. Oh! Here.” Franck moved to an old glass bar cart near the fireplace and popped open his only bottle, an 18-year-old Sazerac Rye. He poured two fat fingers into a couple of waxed paper cups patterned with Smurfs.

“Now.” He held up his cup. “To the best river horse of the bloat. May he be mantled comfortably beneath a frothy, hereafter pall.”

“To Ippo,” I said. We drank the ponies together. He smacked his down on the coffee table with a foamy clop and wheezed. I thanked him.

“Don’t fret, my pet.” He took his seat and twiddled some hairs on his bare leg. “Should I say? I’ll say. This day’s one I’ve personally licked lips over.”

“What? Why? What a thing to say, Franck.”

“Get me wrong, why don’t you? Don’t even *try* to figure it! ‘Loss is nothing else but change, and change is Nature’s delight.’ You, the sometimes solipsist, wonder if you’re this system’s sun, or a whisking dot from its ellipsis. Or, hey, maybe the centre sphere in Newton’s cradle?”

“I don’t wonder any of that,” I said.

“Today’s weighty, bud. Henceforward, it’s a matter of time till you meet it.”

“Meet what?”

“Yep. You know diddly of what’s to come. Recognize these?” He slapped his inner thighs. “My great white pins? Never been much of a trouser man; I like the inner breeze. Contrarily, if I were to quiz you on my arms, their tinge and glabrous finish, what might you say?”

“I’m not sure.”

“He’s not sure. You’ve never *seen* my arms, ninny! My right’s all right, indeed,” he said, undoing the cuff buttons on his left sleeve. “However, sinistrally, I’m left with scarred bark.” Franck gathered the sleeve over his shoulder, showing me, from the top to halfway down the

forearm, this raw, pink, roomy burn scar, raised and sunken here and there. “Invisible ink treated by event.”

“Holy shit, Franck.”

“I’m au courant, I’m well informed! I’ve faced things myself, you know, and I’ll forewarn: I’m this here fragmented ‘I’ because. With a fitting crystal egg, I’d parallel our respective stumpers. Sans one, I’ll have to use the yarn.”

“You’re talking in that overwrought way again.”

“ $3H_3OH$ , as it’s notationally known. Your everyday methanol caused this. In ’76 my métier was as an exterminator in Dearborn, Michigan. You might recall that, around then, *Vespula germanica*—the German yellow jacket—began impinging on the North American east coast, overwhelming the common Eastern variety, *Vespula maculifrons*. Folks, sure, wanted their weenie-roasts and garage sales Apocrita-free, and the considerable hires were so often slow to show that I made a good deal of money there for a time. This one gig was a doozy of a nest burrowed behind the vertical flat of a concrete stair outside a home in Springwells Park. The vespids came in and out of the world through a dime-sized hole they’d cleverly burrowed at the base of said stair. Perfect for slipping a hose in and pumping what some today might say was a toxic mixture of methanol denatured with about six-percent gasoline and barely diluted, which I protected against by wearing gloves and a surgical mask. So, while the mixture ran its course, I, in the interim, in my rash way so characteristic of the decade, smoked my flake tobacco—the pipe lip thrust under the mask—and raised my face to take in the sun. As you might predict, an ember or two caught the wind, made their way to the scene. Ignition. Boom. Fortunate me, somehow the flame didn’t run down the hose, but instead propelled it

outward. So I thought, hey, something on the other end was combating its undoing. Fair enough—wouldn't you? So I bent down to reinsert the hose.

“Here's the thing with methanol. Anecdotally, it's called 'invisible fire.' Who could tell, in the light of early afternoon, that an indiscernible spout of flame was aggressively disgorging from the tiny hole at the base of the stair? Not me. So my arm, as I'm sure you've reckoned by now, lit up like the bush on Sinai. At first there was no pain: just a hot breath on my neck, the faint smell of cooking pork, and a heat haze shimmering above my arm. Once I realized I was actually on fire, I hit the grass and spun about frantically.

“But! And here's the fitting fly in the unfortunate but otherwise credible ointment: one li'l bugger, maybe returning from a fortuitous spin around the neighbourhood, decided to add to my suffering—to avenge his burning brothers, perhaps, or maybe just to feel included. He landed on my now crackling but otherwise doused appendage and stung it like he meant it.

“My tale doesn't culminate there, though my periphrasis may. I've told you this now neither to proffer up self-depreciation, not court your concern. It's not the burn that reasons my relay: it's that, in my supine state, incurring the wrath of wasp and fire, I encountered the Lemma.”

“What dilemma?” I asked.

“The. *The* Lemma. The first and, truly, *only* word. It lives without a cradle, without semantic allusion. It's the sacrosanct qualifier, the indivisible monad, the first whisper in your ear and out your mouth.”

“Huh. What, someone said it?”

Franck sat at his writing desk.

“No, it wasn’t verbalized. It was simply there. My view was skyward, where liling wasps afire spun to the ground like maple keys. That’s when the sensations in my arm returned, and before I could scream came the susurrus: the gradual release of air from swelled cheeks; a sibilance from a god, or the goad from a subtle serpent. Either, an emollient for this nymphalid moulting its now-dried cuticle.”

I enjoyed Franck’s eccentricity almost always, but I saw, in the thick of this moment, something unstable. His eyes were crossing, as if they were trying to centre in on the blind spot above his nose. He tapped Morse code on his elbows. My desire to leave suddenly trumped my desire for company. There were, though, cats and grounded mugs from the den through the kitchen to the door, and a quick escape proved difficult.

“Franck, great story,” I said, rising. “Big experiences and lessons learned. I’m sorry about your arm. Thanks for the tea. Your food’s probably cold. I should go. I’m gonna go.” Franck stood too and stared at me, his stomach bulged like a child’s, his fists clenched. He pointed at the chair, so I sat back down.

“Not a jest, bud,” he said. “I’ve spent years ransacking compendiums and glossaries, lexicons, thesauri, trying to rediscover the Lemma’s comprehensive graphemes and runes. I’ve tracked the London boxcars, scoured the alleys of Queen East, for the one graffito that might, even kinda, through its sprawls and sweeping sprays, transmit the Lemma’s name. My locution and word power come a bit from my momentary fusing with the Lemma, but also from the study I’ve done since in its pursuit. Each synonymic choice is my bid to recreate its constitution with the configuration of my lips.”

“Wait, you don’t even remember the word?”

“No! It split immediately, my man! I doubt anyone ever *could* remember it, despite one supposed anomaly. In the years since I’ve come across, by ways of articles, tittle-tattle and such, only three more who seemed to have personally encountered the Lemma, and the first two were unable to get a fix on the word either. OK!” He opened a flip-top compartment in his writing desk filled with at least two dozen black-banded notebooks. Squares of graph paper with Roman numerals had been taped to each spine. He grabbed the ones labeled *XI* and *CIII*.

“Others are other places,” he said. He opened the first notebook. “Right. The first I confronted was in 1982, a female Tokyoite with arc burns on her shoulders from a metro car mishap. I read about her in the summer issue of *Odd Episodes*, which I’d been subscribing to for years. It read she earned, along with the burns, a fleeting but undeniable view and understanding of all things, without confusion or incomprehension. Once I met with her, with the aid of a translator, she fought through moony sobs at her kitchen table, so pumped to encounter another recipient of such divine, transporting ken, and said...” He finds the quote with his finger. “Here. ‘I heard a whisper, the squelching of wet leaves, and a sexless voice call me back to the safety of the womb with a single, monosyllabic utterance.’ Moments following, she remembered only the sensation, like the residue of a dream. Next!”

He opened *CIII*.

“1985. A Topekan boy on a plane from Missoula to Denver suffered second-degree burns on his right leg and buttocks when a steward accidentally spilled coffee on him at the very moment his older sister was issuing a playful bite to her brother’s left hand. The boy, afterward, lay languidly on his mother’s lap during the emergency landing, but once in the ambulance spoke of ‘God’s word.’ He and I shared juice boxes and a natter, and he likened the

experience to 'being at Chuck E. Cheese's with all the tickets I want and the best kinds of prizes.' He said then that 'it was a word, like the only word ever, speaking at and through me. Like pudding in heaven.' He asked if I understood. I was like, 'uh, *yeah.*'"

"I've really gotta go," I said, standing up again. Franck ran to me and grabbed my wrists.

"Think you're apart. Nothing to do with *you*. A pantheon of burn victims, and you're sear-free. But this isn't about that. You're yourself devoted to something lost. The gambols and purrs of your perished puss."

"Let me go."

"Appearances and dissolutions are, at the very least, analogous. Whatever one loses is reflected in something undesirably gained: like my temper from a wasp sting, my arm's skin from knowing the Lemma. *Your* Ippo, your in-the-cards adventure. You twig? This here's my crisis, my man. Whether with a limited vocab or a catholic one, the Lemma's nature can't worthily be recounted through language, though know unequivocally, it's the most communicative of things. I can't impart the fucking word itself! This isn't an issue of choice: the Lemma's my coinage for symbolic reasons, to convey its essence rather than its elusive, syllabic makeup. I'm *forced* to use a caption, viz. Lemma, as well as an enumeration of words, to try to gloss upon that whose definition time and again has been named and defined by man, but has never been captured or contained. Backward, no? Just imagine an astronomical glimpse of the universe, its expanse of luminous, heat-centred freckles, as a visible tally of the notion of infinity. Its abstractions of distance and time and life are visually knotty and removed and intimate, like the characters of the Great Coral Reef, or the morphological strands of Utah's Pando. The Lemma's effects are all notional: ideations of being and its

meaning, existential projections, a conceptual slide show played in the heart of the brain. Gillup! How acquainted are you with your own face, reflected in all the imperfect, glaucous-tinted mirrors in the world? Your own mind in a nutshell? Does memory preserve Ippo, or distort him? Or is it simply erasure? From *'emet'* to *'met,'* 'truth' to 'death,' the wiping away of the aleph from the forehead destroys the Golem. In the aftermath of Ippo's death, with the sustaining of a burn, you'll see things as I've seen things, and they'll be *your* things. I'll posit right here that your coming experience of the Lemma will be radically different from mine, but its effects likewise concurrently absorbed, like levels of radiation. Remember that, afterward, in the years that follow, when you speak or write about them in succession, which is all you can do; otherwise the cluttering speech, or the copious layerings of ink, will obscure any meaning whatsoever."

I wriggled free. "Cool. Awesome. I'm going, Franck." I headed for the door. Four proclaiming mews marked my departure.

"You'll meet the metonymic Lemma, my pet," yelled Franck, now a drunk, disembodied voice from inside the house. "Either now or anon. Your fallen tom's its harbinger!"

## II.

I kept up the deliveries, but I'd leave the trays on Franck's porch and knock, then run. I didn't have grounds for doing this, really: Franck had always been an odd duck. His entire fridge was covered with magnetic poetry in Yiddish. He seemed to enjoy a limitless supply of sofkee and

century eggs. For all his intelligence, he'd say the weather was minus something "with the windshield factor." He wrote essays about "processed morality" under the pseudonym "Beatrice Hashem."

There was something, though, that rattled me. At the time, I was a freelance subtitle editor for films and TV shows that were being released on video. My job was to clarify and elaborate on English phrases, idioms, spelling, and punctuation, so that translators could render them correctly. After that day at Franck's I spent a lot of time focusing on words I came across and repeating them to the point they became meaningless: "fork," or "bacon," "bike." The constant scrutiny of language made it all seem hollow.

Two months since I'd seen Franck, the call came that he'd been hospitalized and his meal deliveries were, for the time being, suspended. I considered his cats, so I dropped by his place to see if anyone was housesitting.

I knocked; when no answer came, I walked through the unlocked door. Franck or someone had cleaned up: his books and magazines were neatly shelved or stacked against the wall, his ashtrays emptied. The place was clean and smelled like synthetic apples. The cats were somehow not hungry. Franck had left Post-its on nearly everything. Each book on every shelf had summaries stuck to the covers (Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*: "Lushly, sweetly malevolent;" J.I. Rodale's *The Synonym Finder*: "Commandingly compacted, replete and homiletic, albeit finite."), and his assortment of Great Chinese Teas were arranged by taste and recuperative qualities. His will—left on the laid-out grid of his briefcase Go board, his clamshell and slate stones acting as paperweights—left the house and its contents (including the cats) to me after his death. I called the hospital and was informed that Franck's

condition was critical but stable, and that he spent most of his time sleeping. Apparently the tumour in his brain had fully metastasized.

I scrimped for a few weeks, taking on hefty bills for cat food and litter, with barely any freelance work in the pipe. I felt ashamed of having never visited Franck these past months, and of wanting to offload the responsibility of caring for his—count them—eleven cats. According to the Post-its, they were Pierrot, Kafka, Halderman, Hamlet, Leibniz, Merricat, Booga, Hank, Karen, Errol, and Tigrou. My favourite was Tigrou, a single lilac tabby with a pretty dichroic eye (I learned that word from a Post-it Franck had stuck to the little fella's food dish), who may or may not have been related to Ippo. I renamed him Tigger.

On Tuesdays, after my other deliveries, I'd go to Franck's with a meal tray I'd sneak for myself. Whomever I spoke to at the hospital said his condition was deteriorating, that there was no point in visiting him; he wasn't lucid, and seemed to grow cross anytime someone entered the room. Unless I had a calming effect on him. I told the girl I didn't, but I figured I actually did.

I read some books. I found an essay Beatrice Hashem had written called "Lithp Lithp Lithp: Semantic Satiation's Efficacy Re: Impediments". I became a big fan of the oolong option, Big Red Robe. One afternoon I brought the teapot to the coffee table and sat on Franck's old settee with Tigger, taking bites of what might've been Franck's Chicken Cacciatore, his bean confetti rice, his hermit cookie. I petted Tigger with my free hand. The other cats lay around the room, seemingly unaffected by my favouritism. I stroked Tigger between the eyes and behind the ears, feeling the rattle of his purrs, till his autonomous tail whipped and knocked the oolong pot, nearly sending it and its steaming contents onto my

foot and ankle—but I caught it. Tigger, out of fear, I suppose, bit my left hand, sinking his teeth in below the pinky. He didn't cower or recoil, as Ippo might've if he attacked. I yelled, and he flew from the room. I looked at the bite. Two punctures stared like coal-red eyes.

I placed the teapot back on the table. One single bead of hot tea was couched in the lid's air hole. I lifted the lid and replaced it. The bead disappeared. I held the pot above my head, tipping it slightly. The base of the pot burned to the touch. Then I poured the scalding tea onto my wounded hand.

It was a screaming kind of pain. The skin went white around the bite holes and loosed the blood, and there, in that blood, I came up against Franck's Lemma.

Or mine. The Lemma—the most intimate of questions and rejoinders, the assertive, potential expression of my identity—was it anyone's? I don't know; I can, though, imagine the self-indulgence the lucky experiencer enjoys. The implications such a miracle has on one's personal narrative!

The blood discharged, from one hole in a quick-sliding rivulet down onto my palm, and from the other in an inflating pellet purpled with water bubbles. In the red pellet, in the way light casts off a swollen balloon, I saw an iridescent alphabet of unknown origin. The macro fabric of letters bared the richest, unmottled ink, layered and drafted by every calligrapher who ever lived with every fine-tipped pen or rigger brush that ever existed. The script itself I read and scanned from left to right, right to left, taking in its diacritical marks and ligatures, its uncial majuscules, its sans-serifs and serifs, its cogencies and obscurities. Then I heard it: murmured, enunciated, like an incantation or mantra, or the refrain of a song, an impetus born from the mitigating morpheme, the modal verb (*I must and can and will and dare do all*

things impossible), from the series of logograms undifferentiated yet distinct, in no particular order yet ordered each and every way. It was the subvocal polysyllable, the voiced monosyllable, the sentence and the novel. I experienced that familiar hypnogogic fall amid snatches of manic, discordant shrieks and soothing speakings, and was told who I was and where I stood in relation to everyone else and where they were standing and why, was advised to stop waxing and eat less bacon and go to space, was described the inner machinations of tyrants, saints, adulterous boyfriends and slavish wives, the itchy-footed, backseat-driving autonecrophobe and the blank, tranquil mind of Mahāvīra. Through the Lemma I read and heard each word in every language, learned their homonyms and roots, their conjugations and orthographies. I deciphered the signature of a schizophrenic teenager in Mumbai, the chirography of American psychiatrists and European poets, the algorithms and obfuscated codes of the CP/M and MITS Altair, was vouchsafed the true intention of the Rohonc Codex (ultimately, a chronicle of the Vlachs), saw, through a spheric portal, a preschool Dixie cup, my name written on the flat-bottomed paper beneath a portion of apple juice (a visual bonus for finishing your drink), and I heard spoken words practiced in bathroom mirrors, read the lips of a nervous lover stepping to her squeeze's plate, the hand signs of a scuba diver guiding his tourist group, heard you swear at your parents, saw your name in bulbous letters on a caricature sketch, heard God's first word, Ippo's first mew, and I said the Lemma out loud over and over and felt with my tongue its matter-exploding, shazamming power, and I bawled, knowing I'd somehow chanced upon—in its perceptible, unattainable form—the meaning of all meaning.

And then it was gone. The pain swarmed my hand, which I ran under cool water for twenty minutes and wrapped in a dish towel I found hanging from the stove. I tried to remember the Lemma, to mouth its forgettable components, but the pain was overwhelming, so I decided to go to the ER. I told the nurse I'd seen truth without any affricates or rounded or articulatory vowels, and she checked my eyes with a flashlight. They wrapped my burn loosely in gauze and told me to take some ibuprofen.

I spent the next few days living at Franck's, transcribing Miley Cyrus's vernacular for a *Hannah Montana* featurette, substituting her "likes" and "blings" with "certainlys" and "vulgar bijoux." I was fired, and in three or four days I finally slept, welcoming those vague, timorous views of the world that returned in time.

*P.S. (March, 2012):* I visited Franck at the hospital once before he died. He was a husk of himself, narcotized and glassy-eyed, perking up only once, when I mentioned Pierrot. He died on an inclement Friday in November, peacefully, with easy breathing and a final sigh, though the day before he was reportedly screaming Latinisms. I ended up selling his property to a Vancouver couple who certified it under the Ontario Heritage Act, and most of the cats I gave to the neighbours (the redheaded boy got Pierrot). I kept Tigger.

In the year or so since my encounter, I took all of Franck's notebooks (the bulk of which I found, organized neatly in annular fashion, in the perforated basket of his washing machine) and read through them carefully. He'd told me the Lemma accounts of only two other people, but he had mentioned three. I perused over one hundred notebooks before I found the third, in *CXLI*. It read:

2 November, 1993. Met with Carl Daneri, young man who was struck by lightning at an air show in Hamilton, Ontario in July, and who, three months thereafter, experienced the prospective formation of a Lichtenberg figure (a fractal) down his left pectoral. Bizarre! Intravenous treeing *at a subsequent date*. For two days, Carl entered an infrangible, trancelike state of bliss. He'd responded to my *Globe and Mail* classified: "Seeking another for informal, colloquial exchange (regarding the immaterial, inexpressible universe), an exchange which, if memory would only serve, could be accomplished with a solitary word." Daneri kissed my hand when we met. He knew my name, the name of my coming cancer (suprasellar meningioma), and claimed he recalled the Word itself, that he was still somehow retaining its primary effects. I begged him to disclose his Word's true formation, to write it down or say it aloud. Daneri (whom his girlfriend described was "generally spacey, but a sweet, sweet lunkhead" before the experience) declined, not because he was secretive, he said, but because he couldn't predict the sonic effect on our primitive ears. I asked him, did meeting the Lemma require some sort of zoological or entomological strike? He said he knew nothing of this; that the Lemma didn't seem to reveal itself to anyone, but rather it was always present, and to see it, you just needed to calibrate your emotional frequency. He showed me his lightning scar, its rooting strands, and attempted to

demonstrate his newfound knowledge of the Bible's misleading opening line: God *separated* rather than *created* the heavens and the Earth. The Hebrew word for "create," "*bara*," once meant "locationally divide" [*Gil here: this theory's since been presented by Catholic theologian Ellen Van Wolde*]. The universe obviously existed before its own narrative, the Lemma itself before the universe, and every encounter with it is diluted by the palpability of the material world. He likened this to Aaron's golden calf, Islamic aniconism, Daneri's *own* Lemma and mine before his. He spoke too, of *you*, Gil, of the coming death of your yet-unborn kitty, and your Lemma, all of which I'm to lead you to. Your Lemma, Daneri said, will be false as well.

I gotta say that, thanks to Daneri's disappointing conjecture, I felt a return of enchantment to my life. I'd feared for some time that my Lemma was false. The true Lemma wasn't a tease; it wouldn't—likely *couldn't*—leave you.

I tried investigating my Lemma's fraudulence, using Franck's extensive library for research. I started by seeking out Daneri, but he was long dead (Alaska, grizzly), so I looked into the name itself, which Franck had coined. Why "Lemma"? In mathematics, a lemma is a transitional theorem, a proposition that undertakes the explanation of a larger solution. I still don't much get that. There's also the botanical lemma, part of a spikelet, specifically the lower bract of a grass floret. No.

In psycholinguistics, though, a lemma (pl. lemmata) is a conceptualization of a word before any sounds are assigned to it, before consonants or vowels are attached. This lemma exists as the first stage of language acquisition. (Think of Franck's own Lemma: before he named it he knew it, but after he forgot it, he could only try to represent it.) I found the following in a late notebook of Franck's:

I know now! My unutterable Lemma's a bouma: a recognizable cluster of letters that form a temporary proxy for the Word, its contours and kerns somehow redolent, in their ascenders and descenders, like an earthbound likeness of Elohim.

I'll go with the lexical Lemma: the heading which indicates an argument or subject in an encyclopedia or dictionary. From this lemma blooms compounds, connotations, and suchlike.

My example:

**kit·ten** | 'kitn |  
noun  
1 a young cat.

This designation further fudges my indefinable experience, and the falseness of my Lemma's more and more explicit. Though there's a fun distance there: the lifelong pursuit of where, and if, the true Lemma resides, or resided. In the years since that singular moment in which I

read and recited all things, I'm losing Franck and the Lemma's ornaments to forgetfulness.

Even with Tigger at my side, there goes, to the deterioration of time, the qualities of Ippo.

## Be Minus

Ori bought a humidifier since, at night, his imaginary future wife Moira gets cotton mouth. Her morning head has been heavy, there's been blood in her snot. Now she breathes easily. Now she lets him spoon.

Moira's late twenty-something, slightly older than him, an amalgam of choice features with a light complexion and changeable hair. Her standard ensemble, whatever the temperature, is a men's-sized button-down, high-waisted jeans, and dirty sneakers without socks. She *can* wear other things. She isn't real; he trusts he knows this.

On the steps of his building, he reads her notes from his notepad.

"Man is the only invention constantly reinventing himself," he says. Moira stands on his skateboard, making circles with her arms. "I hear new horns, but never new notes." The skateboard careens down the sidewalk. She blows a raspberry.

"You just don't like quotations." She eyes him in a way that says No, I just don't like woolly generalities.

Moira's default is faceless and moldable. The pipe dream of the steadfast wife—the in-it-for-the-long-hauler—first appeared in high school, at the height of his insecurity, in an Adirondack on his father's porch. An Eve Light dangled from her mouth while she braided her hair over her shoulder. Her newest draft sports non-prescription Harold Lloyd glasses, colours her hair red and crimps it—like Hillary Gyle.

Ori's a graduate assistant at McGill, teaching a secondary unit to an English prerequisite, *Introduction to Literary Study*. The classroom's windowless with a green blackboard so seldom

wiped down that it harbours rests of chalk dating back to the eighties. The boys hide in hoodies, while the girls, in sweatpants of various fits and colours, always seem to be coming from or going to the gym. All have a nimble, gamer style knack for dual-thumb texting. Some seem to need more sleep. Two months into the term, Ori's become accustomed to leaning over a student, hands clasped behind his back like a butler, and shouting the sleeper's name into his ear.

The stereotype persists: girls are better. They do their work, participate; they're contrastive, enthusiastic. Hillary Gyle speaks often, gets fervid. "The rub, of course, is that Ahab's reflected eyes stare *back*." She says this looking right at him, her green eyes resolute, and he notes her mound of red curls, her snaggletooth, her retro, ironically worn stonewashed jeans and fashionable poncho.

Regarding her fabulous couture, she's said, "I'm acquitted of all things hipster, see, by real-world responsibility. Try being a junior at nineteen with a husband and a stick shift. Shit's bona fide, son." She brings Ori Stash teabags and burns him albums by AIDS Wolf and Cults. He gives her check-pluses on all her assignments, lends her *Reds* and "Why I Write". He looks forward to class, if only to see her cross her thighs, wipe rheum from her eyes, to watch her curls levitate.

They drink together: at the Copacabana, Casa del Popolo. Shots of fernet and Gentleman Jack. They make frequent trips to the repurposed cigarette machine—the distroboto—for a toonie-priced zine or sassy fridge magnet. They smoke shisha at hookah lounges and drink eight-dollar draught Hoegaardens in chilled tumblers. "Kevin and I are open non-monogamists," she says. "I mean, we fuck other people." She talks about her

husband so often—his dyslexia, his *Dexter* obsession, his kinked dick—that Ori thinks she’s posturing. He offers advice, the avuncular kind, and maintains this attitude until she introduces him to Kevin at Sala Rosa, and then Ori gets fulsome, self-mocking, and has a hot flash.

“Hillary and Ori”. Or, *When Hillary met Ori*. Yeah. A tale of patience and fortitude. Red flagless, ultimately perfervid. When he tells himself their story, Moira rubs his earlobe, or runs her fingers through his hair.

But his job demands responsibility. Her final essay (on the Heathcliffs, both Clair’s and Catherine’s) is slipshod in a passionate, Panglossian, undergraduate way. He’s let her grow overconfident in her analyses of the assigned work, as she’s allowed him to execute drumrolls between her shoulders, to pinch her knee skin. He gives her paper what he thinks is a generous B- and writes *come chat me up*.

His office is barely an office, more a corner of a large room partitioned like a bento box. She shows up carrying a Ninja Turtles gym bag and smoking an electronic cigarette. She sits and tugs down her black chiffon blouse, through which he can see the bivalves of her white bra.

“You’re getting your bearings, I think,” he says. “Who doesn’t love the Huxtables? The parallels need development, though. This grade isn’t irrevocable, Hills. Know that.”

“I dunno,” she says. “I guess I thought it was your kind of thing.”

“It is my kind of thing! It’s my kind of thing!” He grabs her fingers like a bunch of Q-tips. “It’s my kind of thing.” She withdraws from his grip. “Next time,” he says, “we’ll work on it together. Yeah?” She slaps him in the face.

“Fucking right,” she says, and walks out.

By the end of the week, she’s filed a complaint. Ori sees the dean, who keeps his fingers steepled throughout the meeting, like they’re glued together. He loses his TAship and gets put on “indefinite suspension” for three days, after which he’s terminated, less than four weeks before graduation. He considers this the painful bridge before the gospel uplift of the refrain. He writes on the wall by his bed in permanent marker, “I did not defile Hillary Gyle,” and Moira puts her hair up.

He installs a chin-up bar in his bedroom doorway. He culls mulberries from the tree by the street. He reads Carl Sagan, *Gone with the Wind*, Lorrie Moore, Roland Barthes. He watches *Dead Man* and gets a William Blake quatrain, “The Question Answered,” tattooed on his forearm. He surpasses his Internet bandwidth cap two months in a row. He watches the filmographies of Julia Roberts and Ernest P. Worrell and eats twenty-four boxes of Sweethearts, licking at the “Be Mine” and “Miss You” text till the hearts are platitude-free. He gains seventeen pounds.

He writes in his notepad “Love is my disease,” later crossing it out when he discovers it’s an Alicia Keys song. Google Instant suggests that love is patient, strange, a battlefield, or a dog from Nebraska. Ori’s father, freshly divorced from his second wife, says love is an oversized carpet. “Maybe it meets the corners alright,” he says, “but the sides are all squiggly.”

“What’s Hannah say?” asks his mother over the phone. “Or does she have to say anything?” She’s suggesting that Ori’s twin sister’s thoughts on love have “minded the gap,” a baffling phrase she invented for the bond reputedly shared between twins. There’s never been

such a bond between Hannah and Ori. He's four inches taller and wider, with more freckly skin. Hannah likes *Us Weekly* and red wine; Ori likes apple juice and Jane Austen. Yet anytime some harmony between them occurs—a jinx, for instance, or a comparable gesture—the phrase is invoked. “I don't know what love is,” his mother says, “but it should come with a defibrillator.”

Hannah is understanding and tactful. Her probing takes the form of emailed TED talks called *What Youth Need to Thrive* and *Generation Y — Worry?* She texts him quotations like “He that is down needs fear no fall,” and “I believe laughing is the best calorie burner.”

Over fish burgers at Patati Patata, she says that what love is doesn't matter. She dusts off her palms. “On to life. Why aren't you eating?”

“I *said* I didn't want it. You ordered *for* me.”

“It's a fish burger,” she says. “Your thing.”

“Not anymore. I'm a veg-in now,” he says, pronouncing it as if it's a protest, a demonstration.

“Do you mean vegan?” she asks.

“I *mean*, if an extraterrestrial being exists that hails from Vega, or the Lyran constellation, he'd be called a *Vay-gan*, spelled V-E-G-A-N, so it seems only right to retain the affricate 'g' in the contraction, rather than impose the velar.” It pounces on him, his incredible loneliness. He hadn't realized.

Hannah pulls out today's *Gazette* from her purse. “Here, dork. The good old-fashioned classifieds.”

“No. No, I’m taking time off. I’ve got my tax refund.” He sees the ‘Livestock’ section.

“And I can’t afford an Arabian mare right now.”

“Part-time at Eurodeli, look. You love their meatballs.”

“You are what you eat,” he says.

She snaps her fingers at a passing waiter. “*Un Brio, s’il vous plaît,*” she says.

“Don’t snap at people, that’s fucked up.”

“Did I snap? Did I do that?” She smiles it off. It confounds him, the way she doesn’t flail socially. She’s like a bear at the zoo: a conventional enough animal exoticized by unconventional surroundings. She dresses tastefully in standard business attire, neutral colours, keeps her hair conservatively long, makeup moderate, goes to movies and potlucks and rarely a party. If he’d turned out a girl, if they’d been identical, he’d still be nothing like Hannah. If he was anything like Hannah, he wouldn’t be living here.

The next week she packs for Toronto, to visit her premed boyfriend, Sigmund. Ori agrees to look after Xanadu while she’s away.

“Remember to kiss her,” Hannah says, carefully niching a dozen St-Viateur bagels in her roll-along. “Play thirty and eighty with her.”

“The hell’s that?”

“Thirty and eighty? *Wha?* Xanee, puss puss,” she sings. She makes sounds from her mouth like a spray bottle. The bell on the cat’s collar jingles when she comes into the living room. Hannah lifts her up. “Pick a number between thirty and eighty.”

“Thirty,” he says. “Eighty.”

Hannah proceeds to kiss Xanadu behind the whiskers, peck after peck, till she reaches thirty. Xanadu pushes her paw into Hannah's chin. "You just wait, babe. Mother and child reunion. Oh," she says to Ori, "Nina's in from Ottawa for the month and needs a place to crash, so she'll be here tomorrow."

"You serious? *Nina* Nina?"

"She'll actually take care of Xan, but check in, okay? Please?"

Nina's thirty-six; she was their neighbour when they lived in Toronto, and babysat the twins when they were young. Ori remembers gripping her soft cotton shirts. When their womanhoods dovetailed, Hannah and Nina became friends.

Two days later Nina answers the door, braless in a white tank top that says *Dukakis You Rockis* in fading bubbled decal. Her hair looks like a Truffula Tree.

"Ori Povich. How goes?"

"Oh you know."

"I do. I do know. What's up?"

"Hannah's got my DVD."

They walk into the kitchen. He can see her areolae through her shirt. Scarves of cigarette smoke hang in the light. Nina grabs a small bottle of Tropicana from the fridge and shakes it.

"How's Ottawa?" he asks.

"The same. Like Epcot, you know. Clean. Except for the store, of course." Nina manages an adult 'sex-cessories' emporium. "Last week this busty old lady comes in with a film crew, right? She keeps crouching in different aisles while they film her. I'm like, 'She's

gonna pee, she's actually gonna pee.' Obviously I kicked them out. They must've figured, hey, we'll piss on your carpet, it's cool, check out her tits! They said the movie was called *Vidi, Vici, Veni*, which, I gotta say, is moderately clever." She recaps the Tropicana. "You got fat."

"Awesome non sequitur," he says.

"It works for you. That cuddly bear thing. You sort of look better than ever."

"Thank you."

"Aight, go find said disc. I gotta apply for this grant."

He administers Xanadu's flea medication beneath her collar. While he scoops the litter box, he thinks, *pride yourself on subtlety, on your means to minimize your emotions, practically sort them out, and not overtly, sentimentally, or prematurely express them*. He scans Hannah's sparse film collection in the bedroom and picks *Love Actually*.

"Found it," he says to Nina, holding up the case. She's slouched on the sofa, eating a grape Lik-M-Aid and staring at her laptop. He looks around. "Hannah clean up for you?"

"I did," she says. "Least I can do. For me it's a thing. I get in a brown study and in an hour, bam, I've figured life out."

When he gets home, he removes his shirt and searches the classifieds while Moira pops his backne. He wants to get in a brown study.

He spots an ad on Craigslist for housekeeping. "Thrice a month (three afternoons, three hours each). Pay depends on experience." There's an address, but no phone number. Early the next morning, he puts on the most understated outfit he can assemble: a hoodless yellow

sweater and grey sweatpants. He wears his glasses and doesn't style his hair. Moira wears a summer dress patterned with strawberries.

It's a row-house triplex on Durocher, common to Mile End. The basement and ground-level apartments are rented by Indira Nair, a single mother with strong green eyes and a Death Star-shaped mark below her bare shoulder. Ori's seen such scars before, on East Asians he met at school and youth hostels; it's from being vaccinated for smallpox. She answers the door as if she's expecting him, and leaves it open behind her as she paces down the hall.

"I'm at work too much to be punctilious in my cleaning, but I *am* a punctilious person," she says, "so know that." Her accent is that wonderful Indian English with the trap-bath split. She shows him the cleaning agents, sponges and paper towels, the vacuum cleaner and mop. She ends the tour in the open-concept kitchen, fanning out a stack of magazines on the breakfast island, as if she's tidying up for him. A labradoodle shivers on a mat in the corner. "That's Alba. She urinates everywhere, so you'll have to usher her outside when she starts to raise her leg. The nanny brings my daughter home after school at four, so vacate by then, please. Until next week?" She sticks out her hand, agrees to pay him \$90 per visit, and asks nothing about experience.

The week's a slow-cook. He craves a run-in, but has to wait. These new feelings seem worth-defining, like his entropy's for some purpose.

Moira becomes hostile. He seldom sees her, but she makes her presence known, emailing him the Amazon page for *The Sensuous Dirty Old Man* and downloading torrents for

*The Accused* on his computer. She kicks over the humidifier, assigns letter grades to the quotes in his notepad—nothing higher than a B-

He returns *Love Actually*.

“I thought it was something different,” he tells Nina. She’s leaning against the door jamb, a Blow Pop in her cheek.

“What, *Love Notionally*?” She grabs the DVD. “So that it, man? Avoiding a late fee?”

“Just so you know,” he says, “that form of address, ‘man,’ when spoken by a woman to a man, is completely emasculating.”

She pulls out the Blow Pop and licks her lips. “How so?”

“Because,” he says, “it signals that you’re not interested in me romantically or sexually. And that’s fair. That’s totally fair.”

“It is fair,” she says. “In fact, it’s the kindest action a person can take when they feel the encroachment of another’s unwanted affections. It’s meant to graciously spurn.”

She curtsies. Ori feels the heat in his cheeks, the sweat in his fists. “Right,” he says. “See you.”

Something like that. The question answered. Whatever happens, he’s undesirable, so he reminds Nina to give Xanadu her flea medication and bolts. He walks home against a strong, eastern, mythological wind that he knows intends to subjugate and break him, but he slants forward against it.

The next week, he finds the key where Indira said it would be, in the fake rock. Her reckless faith in him—a male housekeeper, a registered harasser—inclines him to act responsibly.

The place has gone to shit. A half-dozen pairs of muddy shoes on the welcome rug, a pall of smoke from something burned at breakfast. The Playmobils strewn across the living room rug are coated in what appears to be honey. Spots that look like toothpaste lead like stepping stones from the bathroom into the kitchen, then up the carpeted stairs. To test his cleaning mettle?

He sets about learning the house. The ground-floor bathroom is virtually anechoic, like a recording studio, and a framed needlepoint hangs above the toilet: *Relief Found Below*. He checks the medicine cabinet and finds a supply of Flintstones vitamins (the chalky kind), jumbo-sized Band-Aids, and an almost full bottle of expired co-codamol.

The basement's been given the suburban treatment: staticky olefin carpeting, snooker table, exercise bike, one of those old big-screen Magnavox's, a Barbie Dreamhouse. A half-a-family room. A drawing of the name "Vama" with stars bordering it hangs above the Dreamhouse. Moira spits on Barbie's hot tub and rubs it in with her thumb. They go back upstairs.

He drinks the dregs of Indira's morning coffee; maybe she added something weird to it, like salt. He watches the main road through the window. Lost in a brown study.

He takes a co-codamol and sits on the living room couch. Moira's in an armchair reading an issue of *Femina*; she holds a hand out like Diana Ross. Across from him on the mantelpiece is a photographic timeline: framed pictures of Indira pre-, with, and post-Vama. The leftmost Indira is lipsticked in a minidress and pumps, hunched over a shin-level table spooning soup. Ori gets up and grabs the frame. He smudges a line down Indira's bare leg

with his thumb and rubs his sweatpants where the fly would be. Moira gasps and runs up the stairs.

“Hey!” he yells. He follows her into Indira’s perfumy bedroom, where Moira peels off her dress and whips it at a framed poster of *Le Chat Noir*, then slithers under the duvet.

“What’s eating you?” he says. She’s a silent mound of shapeless creature. He dog-ears the duvet, and Moira’s lying there, her arms out, palms facing the ceiling. She gavels the bed with fists; her perfect breasts jiggle like egg yolks. Beside her a women’s suit—tweed blazer and pencil skirt—has been laid out.

“Don’t get all mad,” he says. “I had an itch down there.” He lies on the bed and curls up against her. The co-codamol kicks in like a numbing firework, and lying there is the greatest thing he’s ever done. Moira turns away from him. He spoons the curly bracket of her while trying to access the vague memory of a woman’s bare stomach.

“This is all I want,” he says, reaching over her to the tweed blazer. He lays it over her naked torso, as if he’s matching the colours to her skin. Her back’s still bare, a smooth thoroughfare with a prominent centre line, and her skin, once like milk, is now like café au lait, as if she has a well-preserved, decade-old tan.

They’ve never kissed. He’s made it that way. Moira’s always been the future, not the now; a notion of prospective desires. She’s been his coach and sponsor who, one day, will guide him her way. But today she’s something else: today she’s all he has.

“Put this on,” he says, sliding the skirt up her bare brown legs. She arches her body, compliant. Now she’s business casual.

Again he fits up against her, the bum of her skirt, nuzzling his face into her dark, dark hair. He releases his boner from his sweatpants and tucks the waistband under his balls. He gnaws the rough shoulder of the tweed. The material of the suit chafes him and makes him grind harder, like he's scratching a bug bite. He honks her breast.

He comes onto the left cheek of the skirt; some of it drips onto the sheets, and he tries to wipe it up with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. He smells it; it's faintly popcorny, like urine. That's not right. He lifts his head and sees Alba near the door, peeing on the jamb.

"No!" he yells. The dog U-eyes, still spurting, into the hallway. He scoots her downstairs and out the back, where she lies down, contrite, by a lone tulip in the garden.

When he finally starts cleaning, he's surprisingly efficient, evacuating a room only when it meets his standard of cleanliness. He takes a butter knife to the toothpaste on the carpet, whittles down the fibres, then uses baking soda and vinegar to get it out. He licks a few of the Playmobils clean and soaks the rest; he vacuums, mops, washes the duvet. He scrubs Indira's suit, then takes a hairdryer to it. He airs the place out. When he's finished, he takes the cheque Indira had slipped in a pink envelope and leaned against a pillar candle. The memo says "housework" in black pen, in a mad, busy script he finds atypical of women, as if, with all she's taken on, she's commandeered Man's hand as well.

He holds the door open for Moira, her defaults reset. He returns the key to the fake rock. He'll never come back to 403 Durocher, and never cash the cheque. When he descends the front steps, he suspects a gap's been minded, or gaps, really, all connected to create one big gap, a moat, converging at him in the middle from all points, each point another like him.

He pulls out his notepad and writes 'no safety in love.' He shows it to Moira. She hangs her head, relenting, as she sees, for the first time, the lineaments of the man she'll have to love.