How Our Calls Cross the Ocean: stories

by

Megan Gannett

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

English

Department of English & Film Studies
University of Alberta

Abstract

This collection comprises a short story, a novella, and an essay in fragments which explore themes of queer love and friendship, grief, outdoor adventure, adolescence, settler colonialism, memory, and the writing process. In “How Our Calls Cross the Ocean,” the narrator mourns the death of her son and navigates an intercontinental relationship. In “River,” a young woman recalls a canoe trip that nearly ended in disaster, and comes to grips with her teenage self. Finally, in “Notes from the Insides of Other People’s Kitchens,” I reflect on my fiction, critically and creatively, engage with open questions about storytelling, and dialogue with writers and creators who have recently influenced me. How do we find the courage to connect deeply when we are hurt, and how do we move forward while honouring the past? When someone calls to a part of us that has not yet emerged, what do we do? What are the possibilities for a decolonial settler story? And how do I, as a white Canadian telling stories, ground the relationships between people and peoples in their relationships to place? I ask these questions and others in the context of my reading. I attempt to learn craft—and a philosophy for creating—from writers I admire, including Alice Munro, Sally Rooney, Chrystos, Eden Robinson, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Lee Maracle, Dwayne Donald, and Céline Sciamma.

This work is dedicated to the women I come from.

Acknowledgments

I lived in many beautiful places while completing this project. They belong to the Cree, Métis, Blackfoot, Lekwungen-speaking, Musqueam, Tsleil-Waututh, Mowachaht/Muchalaht, Duwamish, Skagit, and Secwépemc peoples. I also drew on memories of my time spent living in Aotearoa, on Māori land. To all Indigenous people and nations, who collectively take on much more than their share in moving the whole of us forward—and on whose sovereignties a healthy world depends—I extend my respect and thanks.

To everyone who fought against racism, laboured for public health, and sustained my basic needs in 2020, thank you.

A huge thank you to my supervisor, Thomas Wharton, for invaluable mentorship and conversations. Thanks to the rest of my Committee—Christine Wiesenthal, for encouragement and all I learn from you; Natalie Loveless, for the generosity you brought to my work; and Christine Stewart, for going above and beyond as a Chair. To Keavy Martin, Eddy Kent, Marilyn Dumont, Katherine Binhammer, Dorothy Thunder, and the countless other impactful teachers I've had in EFS and Native Studies over the years, thank you. Thanks as well to Kim Brown, and all who make the university go round while I'm watching YouTube, probably.

From the Bousquet/Gannetts of the east coast to the Fawcetts/Wolf Gages of the west, I send love to my far-flung family. You all nurture me in different ways. Those of you who have passed on are no less with me. Parents, thanks for everything and then some. Sister, where did I find you? From walks by the ocean to reading my drafts, you are a joy. And thanks to the amazing LGBTQ+ role models in my life.

To my friends, thank you. Austen Lee, Rachel Narvey, and Caitlin Burrell, you make writing an emphatically unlonely place. Thanks to Faith Wiley, Laura Wylde, Anna Rea, and the Rossland crew. Jocelyn Brown, for excellent feedback. Madeline Whetung, for proposal-writing advice. Rebekah McKinnon, Nick Smith, and Ashwinii Premashankar, for humour and kitchen chats. For gifts of shelter and so much more, I thank David Boulding, Margaret O'Donnell, Ken Peterson, Cheryl Uyeji, Georgia Gardner, Mark Bantz, and the Nishi-Rickerby clan of North Vancouver. Thanks to the Shipwright in my life for ruining my love of mediocre cooking. And thank you always to the lodgies of Vancouver Island.

I couldn't have asked for a better cohort to start grad school with in 2018—you are all astounding. Thanks to everyone at The Orlando Project and The Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory for my wonderful time there as a research assistant; I am indebted especially to Mihaela Ilovan, Isobel Grundy, and Kathryn Holland. My year of writing was also made possible through the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, the Alberta Graduate Excellence Scholarship, the Walter H. John's Fellowship, the Thor and Marilyn Andressen Scholarship, and the Larry McKill Award.

Finally, I'm grateful to everyone I've ever paddled with—with special thanks to the one I found at the Elk River Delta.

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How Our Calls Cross the Ocean

"I love grocery shopping with you in my pocket," I said to Damien last night, shaking water droplets off a bundle of parsley. "I used to mumble into the mic and wear a hoodie to hide my earbuds, and now look at me talking out loud to myself. I mean, this is what makes me happy, isn't it?"

"That's right, doll," she said gently, the way she does when I talk like this, which is a few times a day. I glanced out through the entwinings of university couples to the haze of the Edmonton street—smoky from wildfires—and pictured us walking there, in the restored June scent, in less than two weeks. Then she said, "When I'm there with you, I won't be in my office with the door closed. I won't shut these blinds and whisper in your ear, tell you that when I slid my shorts off this morning I felt your mouth on me and started pulsating, imagining—"

While she spoke tremors of light shot their forks through my abdomen, the man in front of me squeezed an eggplant and batted a pancake of snot from his beard, and I had to giggle at the ceiling to keep from enjoying myself far more than is socially acceptable in a thirty-five-year-old woman at the supermarket.

—you facing the sunrise with your calves wrapped in bed sheets and half your hair stuck to your armpit and old and deaf Pete banging on the door of our master bedroom saying breakfast's on and your bro's kids playing in the snow and me not caring scooping you into my pelvis nudging you wet and barely stopping to breathe down your back before getting so deep inside you that you have to hobble down the stairs to fetch our bacon.

I don't want to give the impression that we are constantly carrying on in this way, humping like gerbils via the radio waves (and deep-sea cables; I recently confirmed for myself

how our calls cross the ocean). It's possible that I tighten up these run-on sentences of hers, make them punchier than they really are. But it's her voice you'd have to hear to know why the words don't matter. That voice is all it takes—and why I've made it on six visits, in five years of dating. And while it may seem strange for her flyby erotica to feature my family members and the rooms of homes we've never lived in, my dad *is* old and deaf and I come from a land of frigid daybreaks. I submit to you that these details are what make our dreamscapes real. We are good storytellers, and that's why we've lasted.

*

Damien has a ten-year-old daughter named Claire. They live in Queenstown, New Zealand, where Claire's other mother lives also, and where she and Damien run a ziplining company. The name of the other mother is Kerri. I have met Kerri twice, once after I was attacked by grief on the zipline, and once over FaceTime. My high-flying experience I will get around to saying more about, but the Queenstown queers called it a "penic etteck," and later at the bar kept dropping stories of their own struggles with anxiety—*I'm a yell-in-the-car girl, she's a jump-out-of-car girl*—as though promoting the beery, therapeutic benefits of being able to laugh at oneself. I felt nothing. I perched demurely nodding on the faux rustic stool between my love and her ex, whose day off it had been and to whom she'd reached out in the absence of a better idea, as you do. Damien seemed a tad shell-shocked by the realness of her Canadian girlfriend; though two-and-a-half years strong at that point, we hadn't met in person for over a year. She patted my hand while slapping the table and guffawing at what her friends found most deranged about one another. Once in a while her nervous system got turned around, and she slapped my hand and

patted the table. Her shoulder leaned into me. It was a distant comfort that began to build as I focused through thin cotton on skin and muscle and bone. I could be lonely next to her, I realized. Therefore we were fine, the rest of the time—stretched across the Pacific.

On my right was Kerri's wonderful, uneasy presence. She oozed dissatisfaction. At first I thought her beef was with me, but when she looked me in the eyes I saw it was with everyone else. She peered into me as though looking for a ghost at the sight of whom she was ready to break. I don't know if she found him. She smiled without awkwardness after a moment, broke my gaze as her spine straightened, and was erect with silence until I began to ask about Claire, and autumn plans, and hiking in the area. I know Damien, and have a pretty good idea of the Kerri she talks about. That Kerri has a sense of humour. But I think she's also the kind of person who is bluntly unable to pretend things away, and while I could be wrong, I think she wanted to make it clear that even in that zoo of a town there was room for my loss. Either way, it was beside her in that bar that I saw my hard-edged dream blur. The dream was Damien and me, in some cure-all way. I was thirty-two and had lost a child; this was not a new feeling. I relaxed into it, into Damien, as Kerri wouldn't and hadn't, let my feet touch down on the shores of Lake Wakatipu.

*

It sneaks up on you, a relationship made of pixels and dings and bluely glowing windows that import, at the pace of their unfolding, mundanities from the other side of the globe. It begins five Septembers ago. You've met by chance in Nova Scotia, polished off a summer fling. Now you spin around opposite poles.

It's the occasional FaceTime, at first. One day you pause in the middle of talking to feed the cat, and she asks to see him. You dangle his paws in front of the monitor and coax him to yawn. Two weeks later you're eating supper together, you and the cat and the Kiwi. (Well, you and Ember—that's the cat's name—are eating supper. She's singeing together what her English mum calls a Sunday fry-up, really just a slutty breakfast, but God help you if you call it *brunch.* Steam curls off the kale, fat spits in the pan, and as she flips and jiggles and swears and spills marmalade on the floor, those brownish tiles which you've never set foot on, you can damn close to feel the heat of her body, from the burned thumb to the roots of her hair.) Your actual vicinity, your own kitchen floor, has nothing on your east coast summer together, which seems to grow more recent as the days pass. Your shared geography you talk to death and it only comes more alive.

For example, what was her first impression of you? Divorced, bereaved nerd? (There you were writing manuals on the sagging deck of your aunt's cabin, all lanky indifference in a Pikachu onesie.) *What were you thinking when—?* is the kind of question you ask each other, but in a bit of a jittery way; by now you've aged enough to know that you shouldn't reminisce like this, prematurely. The intimacy whose beginnings you're hearkening back to is, after all, newborn. You don't spoil it, though. Because it's *fun* to recall how you were both scared when the boat knocked a rock, off Bigg's Point in the dark with the tide coming in. Her blood on your leg (she'd cut herself, reacting suddenly). Did the kiss help? Of course it did … And once you've pretty much mapped out every emotion that you did feel or might have felt between the second week of July and the last week of August, individually and as a fledgling pair, you retell it all from the aunt's perspective. What was Aunt Robyn thinking? The dead husband's gay

granddaughter whom she barely knew—this was Damien—pleading childhood memories of the island and turning up on weekends. Come on, you say, smirking. Aunt Robyn knew.

Most of all, in the early months over video chat, you marvel at basic things. Like the fact that your hand has to be in the back while holding hands and hers has to be in the front, and how her head meets your chin when she stands on your toes. Like the odds of both your dads being from Cape Breton and winding up loosely related through marriage. (*Are* there odds more Nova Scotian?) And the crossing of your paths. We would never have heard of each other, you say. We would never have even heard of each other, if—because it's true. If your respective partnerships hadn't ended rather simultaneously, if she hadn't come to Canada for the first time in years …

You don't lose your independence. If anything you start getting out more, beckoned by the shine of having a life to describe when you come in from the cold. You try taking work to cafés and cross-country skiing in the river valley. *Her* life, you believe, is unfailingly interesting. Days off she's up early with Claire, who's only five at this point, hiking or biking; on weekdays she hires and fires people and organizes tours, like the world-famous plunge down a nighttime mountainside. She's just spent eight hundred dollars that she doesn't have switching to an iPhone, and while she won't admit it, this is totally in support of your addiction to Apple products—an addiction she's now caught. She mocks her own Pavlovian elation at the sound of the FaceTime ringtone. *I almost cry when it's not you.* You try to support her attempt to use less mobile data. At this you fail.

For what you have you coin the term LDS: long-distance stalkership. I'm a stalker, I'm such a stalker, you say when you wake up and text her in the middle of the night, but with a fondness that to you represents a thirty-year-old's ease with herself, or something.

She becomes slightly performative about mealtimes, showing off her cooking skills for the benefit of the webcam. This kind of makes you want to hide your love of adding graham crackers and your favourite kind of EnviroKidz cereal to smoothies, but you don't. Instead you garnish the smoothies with the shapes of flowers—banana rounds for petals round a blueberry, for example—to demonstrate how maturely you do perpetual childhood.

On occasion you clip and file your nails and rub coconut oil all over your hands to torture her, but you're still too shy to pee in front of your laptop. You have sex, of course. Of course you have sex with each other, over FaceTime.

It's been a very long time since you fell for someone, and you wonder if this is what the honeymoon phase looks like in 2014.

One freakishly mild December's night you go swing dancing with friends. A truck turning onto Whyte Avenue sprays brown snow on your tights and you think, Where my girlfriend lives it's tomorrow, and summer. But you don't tell anyone. Not yet. You are not warm inside, exactly, but there is a seeping awareness that *something* is alive in you. Years ago you had this grown-up life before you had this childish one, and one day it fell out of you like the weight of the sun. What has your apartment been since, if not a hollowness for your hollowness to go home to? You are one crater inside another. You did everything right the first time, more or less, and you didn't get to keep any of what mattered. How could an effort like that be repeated? Although wasn't it almost easy, acquiring it the first time. Unimaginably easier—it seems like it must have been. The education, the husband, the high chair smeared with butternut squash. You kept your job and your apartment.

You have hated that apartment.

In twenty minutes you will find her in it, in Queenstown, inside your iPhone, strolling up a long hill to the top of Thompson Street. Dark-fuzzed arms and upper lip sweat. You'll lay out in a backyard whose cut of the sky hangs with paragliders, and into whose heat moisture emanates from the dark green base of the mountain. She'll lift weights and do a little yoga while you take your phone into the shower with you, brush your teeth and fall asleep. Your view of the world spliced with hers. A choppy, spacious dream.

*

I was looking forward to today, and although I'll admit to getting sidetracked, it's not too late to turn it around. All the smoke from up north has made me woozy lately and I thought I'd take the day off as a treat to myself. Rest up, go for a walk in the clean air (if the forecast held), maybe try that new docuseries about the fall of the Russian monarchy. Since Cody died I haven't been much in the habit of taking weekends from my job as a technical writer, but I shouldn't let work sprawl out over my days.

I was looking forward to the alone-time, too. They had an unusual dump of snow down in Queenstown, and Damien's gone with Claire backcountry skiing for a couple of days.

My day began with the smokeless light, a cool brightness on my eyelids while the cat was waking me up. I let him bound and scamper in and out of the room each morning—which lately means two p.m.—even though his pastime is to knock small objects down on my head. I guess part of me likes to be pestered, in the morning. Before you get ahead of yourself, though, Ember is not my fur-baby. He's a cat. My parents might sign my Christmas card to both of us (*that's* a relationship they can wholly accept), but I don't use him, I assure you, to sublimate my deepest

love in this life. That line of thinking's a further laceration. I know the difference between a cat and my toddler.

When I went to the window it turned out to be raining. Imagine, that in comparison with the sepia pall that had darkened the city for a week straight, coating our tongues with particulates, some cloud cover emptying itself would fairly dazzle. I knew the fires were still burning out there, that the smoke had left on a whim of the winds. Thank God our family farm was to the south. But rain had come and that seemed hopeful, and it felt like the most manageable option was to simply take back the air as soon as it cleared, to suppress my anxiety that we are growing short of breath, the world over. I cracked the window and caught a whiff of such pure flowering freshness that I backed away for some reason, almost tripped over Ember.

This shall be a screen-free day, I resolved, affecting a pompous British manner as I sometimes do in my head. I am trying to learn to parent myself.

I watered my indoor plants while the coffee was brewing and the radio kept my mind on a focused track. I would make pancakes and a massive smoothie and read. Later, when I saw that "home3" had called while I was making breakfast and my phone was on airplane mode, my chest dilated as though the missed call were from Damien—even as I rolled my eyes at my own physiology. (Damien is home2, the farm is home3; there's no home1, because that's me.) By this time I was at the river. I shut the phone off completely, then, and sank my shoes into the mud.

What happened is this. Coffee was fine, pancakes were fine, the swell of inward space due to airplane mode was fine. Then I walked down to ground level and stepped outside and smelled the spring.

Now, I am barefoot in the reeds and loosened mud where the water has smoothed out a flat over hundreds of years. Down to my T-shirt, tracks squelching beneath the sound of the rain

on the river and I am not cold. One of my shoes has been swallowed permanently. I've gone soft-eyed, too. Glasses hung on a bush.

It wasn't springtime, or anything, when we scattered his ashes. Seven-and-a-half years ago … Cody's father and me. Just a few handfuls, they came to. The kid loved the mud—this mud—which is why we brought him here. I'm sure they all washed away. First snowmelt. But the moisture is a shock, today, after weeks of drought and smoke, and you can see where it's brought me: to the place of my little one. Drowning in the smell of the blooming. Because it is places that unhinge me from time to time, places broken open by the meetings of weather and season which make my life its particular thing, distinct from yours, which pull water up through these leaves and dust the peaks high above Damien's house with lichens. And which, flooding into my body, sharpen memory and imagined fates—such as the future that overwhelmed me, that once, on a zipline, in the Land of the Long White Cloud.

In my apartment I have crisp white walls and windows that shut tightly and compact rectangles of blue light which are conduits to lives being lived elsewhere. I love the solace I find there, my laptop perched on a chair beside the bathtub while I light candles and exfoliate my long pink self—not just one night among them all, but many nights, and in the dull ache of some winter afternoons. I am comforted by my relatively indoor life in the northern hemisphere, tolerably stimulated while insulated against sensory excess. Ugh, I'm not a lab rat. What I'm saying is I know where home1 belongs, and it's here on the eroding banks of the North Saskatchewan, where I can't actually bear to be. By now you're probably wondering why I don't think it can work, in the end, between Damien and me. Have I said as much? She has a Canadian passport, but can never leave Claire. I can never leave Cody.

I tell her both of these things.

*

The first time I met Kerri, the time over FaceTime, she said to me—tucking her blunt mint-green bangs out of sight above the rim of a climbing helmet—"It'll be good to have you here in time for Claire's bike race."

This was said with such matter-of-factness that my girlfriend laughed, as did Kerri's new partner, Rose, who'd been dropping off lunch when I happened to call. Kerri had a tour group waiting. She glanced between the two of them in bewilderment and then snort-giggled, gasping that she had to rush back "up top" but wished me "a good-as-gold night in Canada."

"Claire's got three mums and six grandparents," said Damien. (This was an early estimate where Rose was concerned, though a funny one.) "Kerri wants to up those numbers to four and eight!" The phone wobbled, but I saw her hand fly out to high-five Rose.

*

Hang on—can you see what that moment might have meant to me? All I was witnessing, I knew, was the humaneness, the stronger ties, even, that can result from a separation. (In rare cases, I mean, and in less consulted ones, perhaps.) But I couldn't help feeling like some cosy, polygamous cult was trying to welcome me, to extend its chain of hands across the ocean, and I loved this and hated that I did, and hanging up shed angry, hopeful tears.

*

Two-and-a-half years ago, while Damien drove to Christchurch to pick me up for our inaugural sex marathon in Kiwiland, I was vomiting discreetly into my sweater thirty-five thousand feet above the sea, between bouts of clear-air turbulence. It didn't help that I was employed, at the time, by a company that kept contracting me out to aircraft manufacturers; my head was awash with terms like *empennage* and *horizontal stabilizer*, *urgent condition* and *operating limitations.*

We touched down in a foul ecstasy of relief—well, I should speak for myself. By the second week I felt cleansed and relaxed, and on the eve of my maybe-stepdaughter's bike race was unsurprised to find myself back off the ground. This appeared to be a precondition for my happiness, to be constantly letting the earth quit the soles of my feet. I swayed on a zipline platform next to Damien and her friends; we gazed out through the fraying shade of towering, invasive firs at an expanse of red-brown mountains, sandwiched between blues. The softness of the sky's blue and the hardness of the lake's blue and the farness of the moss below made an impression on me, as did the arid spice of the air pouring into my lungs (cooled by a draught off the lake), and the fact that—for the first time—I loved my fear.

Maybe we are looking for the right mix of danger and safety, and just that is the dance of our lives. I was already jacked up from hours spent thinking I was about to meet Kerri, not Damien's friend Kiri, their names sounding identical in a New Zealand accent, and as we suited up I had watched the object of my affection and the ones who seemed to know her best with a childish, niggling dismay. Damien reached straight into the crotches and underarms of Kiri and Kiri's girlfriend—adjusting straps and clothing and fondly pinching their flesh—as though nothing could be more normal than their bodies' proximity to one another. I don't think it was sexual jealousy that I felt so much as a desperation to be physically unextraordinary to my own

boo; I wanted my damp knee-pits and the sunscreen that whitened me like a mime to feel natural by her side. At the same time, I was longing to, um, *text* her, and make fun of the little ways in which our communication broke down when we were IRL. At a distance we would never have failed to be on the same page about the fact that "Kee-ree," in this context, meant Kiri. She would laugh at that.

Beth, the girlfriend, had kept asking us how we did it, how we stuck out the LDS. Now Kiri, leaning boldly off the platform with extreme trust in her leash and carabiner, said, "This is great, eh. Us and you guys. Love me some dyke time!" We snapped some selfies. Then she said, "But didn't you used to be married to a man, mate? What's up with that?"

Now excuse me, but I've been *bi as fuck* since the age of twelve. Sure, I hid it from my folks for aeons, which given my husband's eventual presence was viable in a way it simply wouldn't have been for Damien and Co., but the last thing I needed twenty years later was a charming, if slightly chauvinistic lesbian in board shorts telling me that the hairy pecs I'd once slept on threatened the purity of her club. What's more, Damien herself had had a rather bumpy road to embracing my sexuality, in the beginning. I would have loved to say that yes, I used to be married to a man named Luke, and we used to dress up like Pokémon, invent dance moves inspired by our cat, and sleep with a baby in between us. (And yes, he looked like both of us and we'd created him for free.) It could have been nice to be asked why I thought it hadn't worked out, my marriage to this man. Damien's was a nosy crowd, after all; mightn't they have asked this about an ex-*wife?* At any rate, I would have said that we'd tried to hold on to each other, tried to keep hearing each other, that it wasn't our son that cracked us so much as a long-standing brittleness in the way we'd hammered ourselves together. Although that would've been a load of bullshit, probably. *Beth, what do you think?* I might have asked; she seemed to brim with quiet

insight. Instead I closed my eyes as the old, resented, tenacious shame of feeling different among the different coursed through me, reacting with my adrenaline.

Not to worry—I was claimed by the girl whose job it was to stick up for me, and, indeed, stuck up for. Kiri backstepping, it was agreed that in honour of bisexuals as "brave *as*," I should be first to plunge to my doom.

*

Have you ever leapt backwards into the unknown on the strength of a person's gaze? Nothing's as closed or open as a face, and shivering here in the mud I can see I have read my life based on the way it's looked out at me. From the depths of eyes, I mean. My great acts of will have been a running towards or away from what I've seen in a face. My mum's exacting love, every change in Cody while he was sick, the gaze of the man I was married to retreating, hardening like wax.

I think what I saw in Damien before I shut my eyes and fell to what I was sure would be my death was the promise that she wasn't going to push me. Not ever. She would stand on that platform for as long as it took, while seabeds sank and eggs dripped through our fallopian tubes and our parents died of coughing fits holding back their alternatives to our dismal choices. Of the South Island girls that would continue to swarm her, she might tussle with a few—never neglecting, all the while, to keep loving me. Keep our eyes locked. Via the deep-sea cables?

I decided flying and screaming to move to New Zealand.

The neurosis of want and its argument had ceased, when I jumped, like a cresting wave.

I've often told her how sad I am that she missed those seconds of suspension; I was singularly hers, though for less than the time it took for the whole of the rushing landscape—or

whatever word we are missing in English that would describe the earth as it includes the sky—to gasp itself into me. The mountains lunged at me strangely, bunching inside my rib cage, and the lake levelled up through my lungs. There was no Cody here. Of the futures I had tried on from the inside out, this one contained the least of him. No cottonwoods would snow on rivulets down to the river, no highway stink like his grandparents' farm. By the time the pulley carrying me slowed within reach of the next jaunty staff member I was crazed and hyperventilating, like someone who wastes the best of her days.

*

I have four missed calls from an Otago number. When my thumb hits "call," Kerri answers. What you have to understand is that since that night at the bar following my "penic etteck" three years ago, I haven't seen Kerri or spoken to her. I liked her just fine—in fact, it was her poise in holding space for me that gave me the balls to have limitations. I did not attend Claire's bike race or become her fourth mother; I planned my trips to Queenstown around her vacations, actually. I did not join a modern family of the Southern Alps. I told my love to fuck whomever she pleased, and she did, and she broke up with me several times. But she always yearned, in the end, to watch Ember go down on the wand of my vacuum cleaner. And she loved that FaceTime ringtone. So there you are.

Kerri says, "She tore her ACL again. Will you yell at her for me?"

"Damien?" I stand up groggily, my wallet and its contents spilling from my lap. Facedown near a mud-swallowed ankle lands the photo I've been curled up around. It is no longer raining but I have to clench my jaw to stop my teeth from chattering.

"They were out with some folks you might know. One guy's asthma, they had to turn around, and your girlfriend thought it would be a good idea to let them go ahead so she and Claire could take their time. Then she wiped out like a *bro*—still way out from the trailhead—and Claire had to ski down for help, by herself."

"Is that not safe?"

"Not a great call." Kerri's voice is husky, syrupy, one shade deeper than Damien's. How does the pair of them manage, with those ridiculous accents, to sound so sexy? They should have their own podcast. Or if that's too intellectual, host bad country. I would listen. "Anyway, we're at the hospital, starving—whatcha up to? Rose is working. Dame's phone's dead and she's in a rotten mood, but she meant to tell you herself. I'll pass you on when the doc's done gabbing. With her flight to Canada I won't blame you for killing her."

Kerri's not actually mad, I can tell; she just wants company in her frustration. *Extra* company—a feather bed of it. Because truth be told she's got friendsfamilycoworkersRose in a picturesque package of a town, and that cushiony fact is what props her confidence, surely, her chatty tone. She assumes I'll warm to her. I get it, she's pissed off and hungry, stuck in an ice-bath of fluorescence with her best friend who's imperfect and their prodigiously athletic kid. She had plans for a Sunday alone. But I'm disappointed. She's not the woman-of-few-words I have made of her.

"I've heard of bigger problems," I say, numbly aware that Kerri has too, and that my rage is dusted in its own kind of pettiness.

I hang up.

I bend my knees and spring out of the mud, crashing down on the soiled photo. The image is on my hard drive and I can print it out anytime.

*

"You're ahead, babe. Pause, babe, pause."

Damien shifts her weight forwards while clamping an ice pack to her knee. A blip of silence on her end is followed by the synchrony I find so comforting: two tracks of tinny audio, spooling out a movie. We've got each other on our iPhones and *Top Gun* on our computers. Claire has put herself to bed down the hall. Here in Edmonton, it's three a.m.

When she hits pause again, I freeze Mav in the middle of his assholish smirk (which *she's* been emulating since high school). "What's up, you?"

"I'm sorry," she says.

For once we haven't communicated the crap out of things the moment they happen. It was nine o'clock when I got in, and I somehow got warm. Now Claire's asleep and we can talk, but we haven't; both the accident and my rudeness to Kerri have gone unmentioned. I haven't brought up the river or the photograph, either.

I am arrogant. I've grown cocky and cynical towards our conflict rituals, and I think I know what comes next. She'll ask my forgiveness for wrecking herself and our Canadian summer; I'll say I'll apologize to Kerri. She'll flare up at this reminder of my actions. I'll whimper piteously. She'll do a speech straight out of *The Notebook* about how happy we make each other even though we make each other insane, which will be laced with rhetorical pornography and the bolstering of her stance that there's a line-up of twentysomethings dying to marry her. *Guess who made vegan red velvet cake—dropped it off at my work? Sophie. You know the bakery girl. She put on lipstick to match and invited me to an art show. She's funny, she's*

hot, she's here, you're not! I hate vegan cake! I don't want to date Sophie. I want you to fly bus walk here without telling me and get lost ask directions get a sunburn off the snow and when I come home to you stuffing up a carrot cake hands gooey with animal products I want you to throw me down on the table and take me so hard I—well, probably get a yeast infection from the icing sugar. I reckon my closet's tall enough for your onesies. I want to fight about where the toaster goes. Let's pick Claire up from school and tell her you're ours now. I will groan with jealousy (foolishly defensive of my baking skills), and giggle and get turned-on and turn ravenously sad and say I wish I could do it, I wish I could move for her. She'll taunt me—*May I ask what time it is, sweetheart? This is your best life, is it? Alone with your phone, burning the night away on an app you think loves you …* She'll go quiet, say it's because she cheated on Kerri. *That's what you're afraid of.* I'll say it's not. She'll say it is. I'll do a speech about how paltry are her cobwebs and freshest flirtations in comparison with everything real that's happened to me that she can't understand. She'll cry. I'll cry. We'll manage to say "goodnight" and "I love you." A day or two will pass, then we'll cook a meal together. I'll give the cat the vacuum and watch her laugh while he dips his tongue into the vortex of suction. And finally after a FaceTime bath we'll have quivering braying FaceTime sex, and when I let go it will not be without the vague notion of standing at the edge of an abyss, dropping stills of my life into the grey matter of a bodiless mind—a fever dream that wraps the earth and knows, for better or worse, that I was here.

Tonight Damien starts with none of this. Instead, she tells me my story.

"You're in a tough spot," she says. "Your girl lives thirteen thousand k's away. Your memories of your boy live in Edmonton. You've thought about what it would mean to leave your

flat, those shit Alberta winters. And you'd do it for me if you could, but you can't. And it's alright." There's an odd flushed look on her face.

Her sincerity makes my throat ache and is also so frustrating. She's gearing up to leave me for the zillionth time, and the fact is that one of these days she'll get the job done. Permanently. Maybe not tonight; but there are things you can stand for five years that you can't stand forever. I'm on my feet, glaring at the rectangle in my palm.

"I've told you that Cody's a part of you, a part of us. You're Cody's mum and that's how I see you. He's with us in the grocery store and on our walks. He's in everything we do, baby, even when I'm inside you he's—"

"Shut *up!"* I cry, into a ready silence. I manage to say "goodnight" and "I love you" before my thumb hits the red button.

*

She's a bit stoned and half-asleep when I call her back on my laptop.

"You're beautiful," I say harshly. "Everything you say is beautiful."

She yawns, limps gingerly to the bathroom, rumpled dark hair fuzzing into the background. "So what's the problem?"

"What if it's not the same?"

"What if what's not the same?"

I can feel pooling beneath my breastbone the light we make. You can't dam it. When the channel blasts open you might not be safe, but you might not be ruined, either.

"What if—" My desktop image is of Cody and me laughing, by some lilacs. I have crushed our faces into the mud. And they're still—well, blazing out of the depths of a monitor, which is a slice of plastic specked with food particles. My boy laughs and laughs. With strokes of the touchpad I hide twenty-seven-year-old me behind Live Movie of Girlfriend, who's not a bad listener while she pees. "What if—when I move to Queenstown—"

"—everything changes?"

"Yes."

"And you miss having me in your pocket, all the time?"

"Yes." *What if none of it's real, a trick of the miles? I can't lose home2.*

Damien is laughing, her face next to Cody's, and the laugh won't be rendered thin by my old speakers. From unfathomably distant it bubbles up through my body, close as you please. "Baby," she splutters, scolding. "Goddamn." She wraps a hand in toilet paper, dabs her leaking eyes, and as her arms move and my view jiggles I know she's wiping with the same wad between her legs.

I make her tell me.

"I fucking *hope* it's not the same!"

And I too split my sides, because she makes a good point. Some time ticks by; she's stuck on the toilet due to age, injury and being too detrimentally in love with me to stand up. When we're done she looks right in my eyes, which means she's had to gaze purposefully into the lens of her iPhone. Which is dumb. What screens really want is to break up like ice floes.

I know this because I am loved and ridiculous—even Cody thinks so, I can tell. And for once in a stack of blue days I can see a way through.

River

When I was sixteen I was chased by a bear towards a waterfall, and I can still hear my name the way they called it. It shook with a violence I could hear but not yet see, roared to life when bellowed down the channel above the dropoff. *Missy.* The word was rushing, cavernous. I knew the girls weren't calling to the me they knew but to a fellow beast, a throb of warmth that sat where I sat and had one choice remaining—become a direction. There was a half-eaten granola bar on the floor of the boat by my knee. I wasn't thinking about Lauren and how maybe we'd caused this, me especially with what I'd said to her. But her voice was the loudest and comes back to me now.

We were nine young women, seven girls and our leaders, brought together by fate and privilege. I was from Vancouver, the others from Calgary and Ontario. To northern Saskatchewan we'd given not a thought in our lives. Yet here we were. We'd been drenched and sunburned. Scratched, bruised. We'd had days that built vertically on two horizons and converged, when we'd scarfed down lunch while floating between the shadows of clouds, hit land as they clashed above us, gold veins popping. We knew the true meaning of "mosquitoes" and the shine of a lake at the end of the portage. I must have learned a few knots by then, cheerfully bullied by our leaders, who now that I think of it were barely in their twenties. Certainly I knew what a wanigan was—a wooden box that contained our "kitchen" and was carried with a strap across the forehead—although I wished I didn't. This was Day 13. We had eight days left. I had had to adapt.

Once in a while I've tried telling this story, to a friend or lover. They are impressed. You saved yourself, they say. You didn't crash down the waterfall, the boat splintering. No one was

hurt by the bear, and they get that out of me fast. I allow my train of thought to be switched, add that Lauren was unhurt, even, and Olga—although they tend to forget about Olga (and her loosened pigtails and briefly commanding stance), who swam to the wrong shore in the first place. I take care to explain that the boat would've been banged around, not splintered, and that it's possible I would have survived the drop. It wasn't a great height, though it was no waterslide, the way it ricocheted; you'd get chewed up good, as my dad would say.

At last I tell them about Lauren hugging me, in her wet paddling clothes, for a full minute straight. And the conversation fizzles from there. I am not satisfied. I seem to want to talk about something that has less to do with the waterfall and the bear. And the boat.

Which would have been ruined, probably.

*

I had woken that day to the squirrelly notes of Lauren's morning voice, coming from another tent. Of my fellow paddlers she was my least favourite, by turns flapping with a silliness I thought attention-seeking, and stoically alert to the older two and the light touch of their guidance. Fair enough, we were there to learn. She had no patience for your sleeping socks that were no longer dry, or your hurt feelings that due to old maps and beaver dams, a route was taking longer than it should. I mean an overland route, by the way. Twelve years on and with a body used to sitting I can't believe I used to do that, rest a canoe on my back and head for the trees. But if I close my eyes I can feel the swish and scrape of branches against the hull, the drip of lakewater off a gunwale and down my arm, my uncontrollably shaking thighs. The carrying yoke was a sadistic joke, surely, with every step seeming to bore a hole in my C7 vertebra, you

know the one at the base of your neck. Throw on the shame of Lauren being stronger than me (although now I think, what a gift to be mad at that), and you're in my teenage bones.

It was half past five, and the girl was wired.

"Good morning!" she sang out creakily—she had a cold. "Welcome to the wilderness. We have loons, we have snacks. Your tampons go in the tampon bin. Welcome to tampon town!"

My God, she was annoying. She had to rub it in about the tampons, remind me before I'd even shifted in my sleeping bag and felt the blood gush out in a new direction why I'd hit the hay seething. Almost everyone was near the end of their periods, while I'd long held the aura of snubbing those pheromones. Then last night I had succumbed and tried to be cool about it, but when I pulled out my stash of plugs and found them waterlogged and as big as men's thumbs, Lauren wouldn't let it go. She saw me clutching them on the jut of rock between the gear tarp and the kitchen tarp, and out of her grasp sailed the spatula which she'd been stripping the char off in a sudsy pot. Its metal went *ting* near my open pack. I had no choice but to watch her frown of diligence vanish, her eyes spark—a little moist since they couldn't sniff to keep up with her cold the way her nose could—and cackling girls pour out through the pines as she flew to present my misfortune, which was boldly plucked from my hand. Okay, no one was cackling, or even laughing out loud, really. Other than Lauren they were cautious around me. Two happened to be sick as well as crampy, and looked on from Thermarests laid out on the granite (which was mercifully dry this evening), burrowed heads in sleeping bags twisting round. "The river has its period!" shrilled Lauren. "Missy, Missy, don't you see what this means?" She declared that if we could each spare a product or two we could stop the flow of the Misinipiy. "The *Missy*-nipiy! Heh. I hate to tell you this, guys, but she's really pumping this month." Lauren committed to

everything she did (all the more when running a low fever, apparently), and I observed that it was socially effective, in this context, to roll and groan on the ground as a menstruating river. For they all found it funny including the ill; you could tell by the self-control on their faces. Smug brats. I formed my own mouth into the shape of cool indulgence. Eventually Lauren righted herself and my swollen still-white tampons were raised high like a torch and toured around, then squeezed with icky delight, *trickle splat splat* on the rock. That did it. I stalked away towards the water as though I didn't need these people, as though there were a store nearby and it weren't likely that the only girls for miles around were out of menstrual products. What was I going to do, bleed through my one pair of pants for the next six days? Sleep in a sticky puddle? We'd been lectured on Ziplocs, garbage bags and the craft of a watertight pack, and now my disregard would be published in the form of unthinkable stains.

It meant nothing to me the following day, forced awake at that hour to the patter of rain on the tent and the neverending pep rally of our trip leaders plus Lauren, that she'd managed to fundraise eighteen receptacles of feminine hygiene, in various makes and models, to keep me going. My takeaway from her little show was that I'd been humiliated, though I knew perfectly well that that had been the opposite of her intent. I was a liability, a snag in our mechanism like an escaped umbrella spoke, and she wished to collapse me into the fold. She was the only one brave enough to attempt it. And perhaps by then, the only one who wanted to.

"I'll fill your water bottle," said Olga, slouching over me, her Calgary Flames toque brushing the clammy roof of the three-man tent. We were alone, the girl who'd had to share with us having packed up and wriggled out into the rain.

I passed my empty Nalgene.

"Dang. I shoulda made you a hot one last night."

“What for?”

“To sleep with. For the pain—”

“Thanks,” I mumbled. “For the thought. Put tea in it?”

“What?”

“Will you?”

“Mm.”

My nose tickled with the effort to suppress a tear. As I bent my knees to squash air out through the nozzle of my sleeping pad, I breathed through a moderately bad cramp. “Well, we’re, uh, dropping like flies. But of course Frogface wants to lead while she’s ill. How many today? Did she say?”

We had to take turns as Leader of the Day, a dreaded role. But the days varied in terms of difficulty and we could count on Lauren to pick the most arduous.

“Portages? Five.”

“Ew.”

“Plus a big lake. And a headwind, no doubt.”

“Frickety frick.” That’s how I expressed myself, circa 2005. How I thought I was cool is beyond me.

Olga watched me in the flat dawn that seeped in. I remember that almost uneasy, almost provoking look she gave me all trip long, like she was waiting to see where my words would take us.

“You get out there, I’ll do the tent,” I said. “We don’t wanna miss watching Shovel eat.”

As I moved through the early morning the bodies I passed and that passed me seemed to flow unconnected to my movements, the blurs and edges of them rising and receding in waves of

brightly coloured raincoats. Swish, swish, as they passed me. Then human sounds were muffled, apart from the thud of my sandals and the spit of rain on the hood of my own coat. I smiled, was charming and civil to everyone, and they were charming and civil to me. We had to display unity before our leaders, and before the rain, in a strange way. But there was endless space between the trees, between the raindrops, between the boats we slid carefully into the water so as not to graze them on the shore. I felt far from each hull cutting grey, sinking lower in the lake as we loaded it.

For Olga was my only friend. I had made it that way. I had picked her as my ally and buffer, and gone on to isolate us from the other girls. I suppose my choice wasn't arbitrary. That first day when we were still wearing city clothes I had seen her towering above Lauren and the rest of them, and quickly identified her as the prettiest, the most fashionable, and the most feminine. She was not a rival because she was so tall and had braces around which she spread her lips, slightly wincingly, to smile sweetly.

But back to Day 13. We lay in the middle of the unmarked campsite, sprawled with our peers on the stretch of granite where our fire had been. It was eight a.m., boats loaded, rainfall steady, and we were at that point with the weather where you want to lie there and take it, no fibre not dank, your rain pants soaked through before you've had the chance to break camp. We were waiting for our leaders to say that we'd Left No Trace. Did a hair tie dally among the pine needles? We hoped not. A bite of chili, brought with us for weeks, rehydrated, then sloppily missed? Did a Bandaid dally among the lichens? ("Dally" was a favourite word of the two of them at the moment, so naturally Lauren had started saying it too.)

Speaking of Lauren, she announced presently that the pair had hiked off in opposite directions to "drop twin poops. So they might be a while, heh. But if we wanna keep hustling I can show you guys the route."

All but Olga and I leapt up with a chirp—meant to compensate for how tired and/or yucky they were feeling—and squatted down round the map case. Did they stop to think, "It's gross how the bitch knows *everything*"? Nope. They were nice kids, and since the Leader of the Day was compelled to try briefing and delegating and the rest of that cute stuff (while her role models held back like stoic Amazons, expertly holding sway with a quip, a knowing nod, or a cartwheel—or else going off to dig catholes, as they had now), our peers were grateful to Lauren for taking today off their hands. That, and they loved her. Frogface.

There were rock paintings an hour's paddle from here. Cool, right? We would find the marsh, the minor portage, hug the shore. Count the islands on the right-hand side, one, two, three. Cross over. From there we could climb to the base of a cliff partly hidden by black spruce, or look up from the water, using binoculars. That's what the guidebook said. Well, we didn't have binoculars. But we wouldn't want to miss them—figures in red pigment with their arms upraised, lightning shooting down from the wings of thunderbirds. The paintings were hundreds, if not thousands, of years old.

Lauren said, "We'll walk up there and have a snack. Wicked? Then we gotta move it, because Britt"—Britt was one of our leaders—"says it's actually great, the rain, 'cause it's the kind that makes the lake flat or whatever. No, no," she snorted, pleased with herself and to be interrupting herself, "it's not the *rain* that makes the lake flat, that's not what I'm saying, but it's that kind of, you know, weather pressure. You know what I mean!"

"I am a scientific genius," said the one known for her deadpan delivery (though her teeth were chattering violently, this time), "so I know what—"

"—you know—"

"I know what you mean."

For some reason this made Lauren blush with grateful laughter—in the kind of lovey-dovey flare-up that was really getting on my nerves these days, and which she was normally on the receiving end of—and get that gleam in her eye like it was time for something obnoxious.

"The penguin song!"

Kill me now. The map case was tossed aside as she hopped to her feet.

"Nooooo," moaned the four who had flocked to hear the route breakdown. "Lau-*ren* …"

"Oh yeah? You want hypotherm? *Hypo*therm can suck my—stop the train, Laur." There were mildly hypothermic giggles; I felt Olga twitch reluctantly. What were they laughing at, the infants, was it the ghost of the word "dick"? Or the habit that Lauren had of nicknaming everything, from words like "hypothermia" to her own self? Not for the first time I felt like no one was seeing her properly. What was funny was not her preppy hinting at words we were not allowed to say.

"Ladies! I have a question for you."

I braced for her finest vocals, their Disney-mixed-with-drill-sergeant assault.

"*Have you ever seen—*"

Silence.

"Come on," said Lauren, a touch of appeal in her voice. "Come on, guys."

Rainfall.

She took a deep breath. "*Have—you—e—ver—seen—*"

"—a penguin go to tea?" unwillingly whimpered deadpan-girl, shivering on the ground in real and parodic feebleness.

"You're cold!" Lauren accused her. "And you! And you!" She pointed to me on the last "And you." "Ladies, ladies. Don't you know what this means? I will have zero sympathy when

you can't move your hands and your lips have gone blue if you don't get up and dance like a possessed person—make that a possessed penguin—right now. I SAY! THIS IS A JOIN-IN-WITH-ME SONG! *HAVE YOU EVER SEEN—*"

To get myself out of this toe-curling event I said, "I'm warm enough," while affecting a polite smile. I treated people squarely in front of the group, so resented that my excuse went unheard as Lauren's crew shifted to their feet smiling sheepishly and began to hop along to the sing-screaming, no freed Inner Child left behind, etc.

Have you ever seen a penguin go to tea?
Take a look at me, a penguin you will see.
Penguins, attention! Penguins, begin!
Right flipper …

What was funny—funny ha-ha—was the way in which nothing seemed to come between Lauren and herself. That on its own wasn't funny, that an impulse that travelled down the limbs and shook the vocal chords didn't always have to be intercepted and submitted for scrutiny before it was reattached to itself. (As unusual as this felt to me by that age, or was. Unselfconsciousness in the female teen. What a thought.) But we were in the middle of nowhere and it was raining, and at the centre of the middle of nowhere was a sick girl riddled with conviction—a fever-faced young woman who like the rest of us hadn't seen shampoo in weeks and no doubt had snarls forming lower than her pubic bone. Like, when had she last changed her underwear? She had zipped a damp fleece up her squat tank-like midriff, pointlessly applied sunscreen and popped an Advil, and now the day was game. When we looked at her, I thought, we saw an ugly girl who didn't know she was ugly but aspired to be, and such arrogance made a boss somehow. I decided this. It helped explain why she'd bragged about a hair that was sprouting from the mole on her chest, and the fact that demented penguin eyes were now rolling

to the back of her head. I also decided that while the others had bought into misplaced confidence, I had not. *My* thrill came from a separate insight, which I still believe I had right. Lauren was angry with us, not just Olga and me but everyone, over a children's song. She hadn't hidden it—she wasn't aware of it herself. It was a darkness that came streaking through her sunny impatience now and then, like a backlit thunderhead in a time-lapse.

Because she had looked forward to this trip all year, I realized. She wasn't suffering through it to get something else. Were any of them? No. They wanted to be here. But as the days went on their idea of it was checked slightly. It was an idea that had its origins in pretentious living rooms, I felt, a parent or two crowding the sofa and reading attentively from a pamphlet or off the Internet. Last year you did this adventure, hiked this, paddled that, the year before you did that one. You learn so much every summer! Imagine, three weeks in a canoe, three weeks up north, the swimming, the whitewater, the northern lights, the suntan. *The friends.* You'd be like sisters.

I lay tucked in Olga's armpit a few feet from the stamping and hollering, not as cold as I might have been thanks to the furnace of scorn to which we would have fed anyone who made bodily functions her delight, homeostasis her fascist demand. I cradled my cramps in my lap. They had believed their parents, these girls, and it was a thin-skinned anticipation that began to bud in Calgary and Bragg Creek and Etobicoke while these lakes were still frozen, these woods stiff with snow, and it went unnoticed, mostly, because they were kids who had more than one thing at a time to look forward to. Of course so was I. But Lauren, Lauren with her Swiss Army knife at the ready and her pants full of pockets and that sunglass strap made of neoprene that was meant to be spat out in whirlpools while remaining attached to you, and the matches she kept double-bagged in the pouch of her PFD—which was what life jackets were called, and you'd

better know it—Lauren thought of nothing else. She'd probably had to beg her parents for this opportunity, pin *them* to the sofa—till they said that the mission work she referred to sometimes could be done in August.

Right leg! … Left Leg! …
Knees together! … Butt out! …
Head back! … Tongue out! …

And every minute that we wasted, every slow start in a mosquitoey dawn or lunch break that we napped through, toes sunk in the water and dragonflies buzzing—every lapse in judgment that was sure to cramp the style of the evening ahead (with its painfully good massages, Janelle on the guitar), if not the plan for the next day—was robbing her. Even her adorers were robbing her, in their defective moments. We robbed her of one more rescue drill, one more wave.

Was I conscious of being the reason that no one lived up to Lauren's expectations? Did I know what I was doing, and do it clinically? In the wild there are countless ways to ruin bonds. Try drying a new wing or shedding the antlers you've been carrying around when your neck is being breathed down, your soft spots scouted. In front of your own species try making a suggestion. Try maintaining enthusiasm. Sure, I'm giving Missy-at-sixteen too much credit here, too impressed with myself, maybe. In no sense was I a badass predator. I just brought high school to the wilderness, and I don't know if I knew that I did. Our leaders had no beef with me; I was efficient and never complained. They hoped I would open up more, and said so. But as of Day 13 no one had told them the truth. I was a nightmare. Other than with Olga I didn't gossip or inject poison, at least traceably, into the group. What I did was wait until someone exposed herself, said something embarrassing or otherwise made a social slip, and then I cast secret flaying glances at her, on the spot and for the rest of the day. I did this on the portage trail where

light dappled through chalky aspen and we dropped boats on each other trying to flip them up solo-style the way Lauren could. I did this pulling off my bug net in the headlamp-glare of a tent, moments after our nightly circle under the stars or clouds.

I did this easily. I must have thought it was necessary.

The song ends, the breeze picking up as the dancers collapse on the rock, and in my memory Lauren, who has more freckles than I've seen on anyone apart from my dad, faces the lake as she falls in a gesture of beaten triumph. Her raincoat is sensibly zipped up but the hood is down, snaky rivulets of hair glued to her temples. As she falls I catch her in profile and there is something about the bulge of her cheeks when she smiles and the second little dip of her chin, as though a rubber band has the front of her jaw, that makes me think of a boy in a cartoon I used to know. I swallow an odd giggle.

Then one more thing happens before the leaders wander back and the spatula gleaming by some reindeer moss is spotted. (They find it metres from the map case we are flopped around, and Lauren—though we are all equally to blame—recalls flinging it the night before and is horror-struck. Leave No Trace fail, and with an implement we rely on.) What happens is Lauren can't restrain herself. Her brown freckles and the skin in between appear flooded with heat as she turns to me.

"Missy! I thought of what else we can use for your period. Sphagnum. Like the Indians did, back in the day. 'Member what Janelle said about the moss?"

They all look at me. Geez this girl would be a walking target anywhere but here. I am about to let it go, try saying something funny. No one's cold anymore except Olga and me, and I'm clenching all voluntary muscles from the neck down not to look like I'm having a grand mal seizure with the shivering. I lack the composure to sneer. The brute strength. Anyway, why be

riled up by someone obsessed with periods who also believes that a virgin had a baby? In literal virgin birth. She's probably not very smart. I am righteously outraged by her use of the word "Indians," not on behalf of First Nations people but on behalf of my father. My dad would take my side in this.

My side in what?

Olga hefts me off outcroppy hip bones and we sit up, her crisp new rain gear whishing and crackling.

She says, "I think we're done here."

Her voice is faint, but when I crane to look I see a tightness narrowing her eyes that within milliseconds and as I watch, pressurizes their pale blue into a look I know only from how it feels on my face. Chiselling disdain, icy hot. It's the look I give the girls when they are picked off from the herd, caught out on their own, and in the flash of a moment I become conscious of having done this, and of having never done this, inexplicably, to Lauren.

"Done what?" Lauren says.

"Talking about this."

"Talking about what?"

There is a shifting of bodies as some of us find reasons to look at the lake or at the trees, as though out of the spiked hairline of dark and green that overtakes the rock at close range behind us might slip a hawk, and we must stay wise, or if not that then a strange boat might separate from the dark shapes of islands set in silver. The breeze has died down and the rain is turning to drizzle.

"Missy's period," says the girl that we—Olga and I—call Shovel. She speaks gently, fiddling with the screw top of her Nalgene.

I'm watching Olga. She looks right at me and then back at Lauren.

"You're kind of yuck," she says to Lauren. She stands up. She moves casually away.

Now Lauren's face has a look on it I haven't seen before. Something has swooped out through the trees and with careless wingspan spread a nakedness where a shadow should be.

*

I peered closely at the rock face. Below the thunderbird, an inch or so from the end of its tail feathers, was a large circle cut by two lines into sections like slices of pie. I was pretty sure it was the Four Directions.

"It's the Four Directions," I said to Olga.

The slab of granite was grey but if you studied it for a while disintegrated into coarse flecks, white and black, with belts where the white flecks were more of a fuzzy pink. Rust-orange lichens and the odd clump of fine yellowish grass had found footing in the folds of rock that swerved away from the vertical slab, and these soft and scraggly textures sparkled wet in the sun. But the paintings themselves and the rock surrounding them looked bone-dry and free of the scalings of time. I saw the jagged lightning where it broke from the bird's wingtips, two bolts that shot for the ground, and wanted to know why they touched down on either side of the Four Directions. I thought my dad might know. There were other thunderbirds depicted, and people, but this guy was my favourite. I wanted to be alone with him and felt compressed by the stinky girls that stood around me and of whom I was one, our rain gear freshly peeled, synthetic shirts steaming. What could any of them really appreciate here? As I wound up the thumbwheel of my

disposable camera and snapped a shot, someone said that the paintings were closer to the red of blood as it leaves the body than the red of dried blood.

"Nice. Nice observation," said our leader Janelle. She launched into what she'd learned as an anthropology student about ochre-based paints and the challenge of carbon dating them, which fed a discussion of the Ice Age and ancient migration. The group was curious. Where did Native people come from? How long had they been here? Janelle rattled off answers.

I zoned out looking down at the bite-ravaged kneecaps of Olga, my impressions of my one friend jumbled. I had thought her unfailingly quiet and secretive and had tasked her, I thought, with tracking the coordinates of my frustration without giving them away. Instead I'd emboldened her. Or perhaps, she'd never shown herself. Were we already ourselves, or were we becoming ourselves? Lauren had looked different suddenly, but maybe just to me, and there was something lonely about that.

She had seemed to relax into being stung by words, the intensity that liked to pucker her face gone like stitches. It had been hard to tell what shame suited—her bulb-like eyes or my venomous insides.

Now she joined us with dog-eared boxes of toffee—or rather, broke in voice-first while clambering up through the scrubby spruce on the way to the cliff. "Yeehaw! Wicked job on the food barrels, ladies. All's easy to find now. Britt, I grabbed your sunscreen—'cause the thing is I'm slathered but no one else is. Whoa, check out that prehistoric—! Vision. Dang-a-lang. Which reminds me of an announcement I have to make. Tonight we are gonna do totems. Like, if you wanna know your spirit animal. Right, Jan? You said!"

"You said" would have made Lauren sound five years old at the best of times, let alone tacked on to a bossy maternal monologue. But all she got was chirps in support of toffee and totems.

Janelle nodded solemnly. "That's why I brought my pendulum."

"Your what?" Britt said.

"My shaman pendulum."

"Holy smokes!" returned her co-leader, slopping sunscreen on a palm. "I know we gotta quit dallying, Captain"—to Lauren—"but perhaps contemporaneous to our sugar fix we can mine the wall for inspiration. Think, girls. If we painted your spirit on this choice hunk of Canadian Shield—this prow of—Precambrian might—what animal would you be? Your friends, what animals? Think habits. Think adaptation. Hooves or claws? Fur or scales? Ponder the pictograph. Then look out at the scenery and perchance you'll know."

"I'm not a giraffe," breathed Olga.

Maybe not, but I thought she did look awkward slouched in the bow of Lauren's boat as we pushed off the island, the pendulum-and-Precambrian-talking pair having split up some paddling teams that were sneaky repeats from the day before. Dictators. According to Britt and Janelle we were a big happy family and should "spread the love around." But in truth I was glad to be rid of Olga, for all her solicitousness. My drug-eased cramps had dulled to a nuisance and the girl now in front of me dug her blade in the lake with a force my friend couldn't. I steered gracefully. I was good at canoeing. I settled my knees on the foam pads and straightened my spine as though to escape the curve of Olga's—as though a gangly balletic build were something I had to remember to outrun. I was five-five, I assured myself. And strong. Jabbing the paddle in

the bright blue waves I heard a tremolo, a loon's, and although it was a warning call I felt a peace.

Two men in a fishing boat were approaching. The nine of us in our four canoes were leaving the bay below the rock paintings when they came into view, chugging at a low speed.

"Human BEANS!" announced Lauren.

A boat length ahead of mine Janelle waved, and the sun blazed off her blonde dreadlocks as she turned her head slightly, a bead here and there glinting. One of the men raised a hand. As they got closer I could make out their brown skin and ball caps and a short-haired dog of some kind perched in front with its ears perked. They passed without saying anything; the young guy, who had not raised his hand, gave a slight nod. The dog didn't bark.

Was this weird? Anyone else we'd happened upon had been memorably friendly—especially, I felt, the Cree fishermen. One had taken pity on us trying to fish, handing us two. Our leaders, if I thought about it, were a bit tense in sight of a white man—white like us—but they were not like that with the Native guys. Was it an idea that they had about them, that their presence here made sense? We were alert to the threat of bears, the elements, men. Surely no one was alert to the threat of us.

Glancing over my shoulder I heard the engine cut, saw them glide in past the old-growth pine that marked the bay. I knew they'd find the place undisturbed, a few wet footprints in the shade but no drops of sunscreen, no tartan-patterned cardboard, nothing amid the rockfall at the base of the cliff where the paintings were to remind them of us. But I felt an urge to go back, not for anything I needed, but for something I might have left that they didn't need.

*

I was the hottest girl at my high school. The prettiest, rather. So I believed—let's not shoot the messenger. When I was in grade nine there'd been a questionnaire on the issue, organized by the student council, as a method of giving out playful awards. Which graduating student will become Prime Minister? Will ride an ostrich? What grade ten girl dreams in binary? The category I won in was not worded euphemistically, as in who-will-be-a-model-or-a-movie-star or who-has-the-best-smile. I'd like to think I'd have escaped those. It was simply, *Who is the prettiest girl at McBride Secondary?* My twin brother Connor was a scrappy fourteen-year-old but received some votes, reportedly, for "cutest guy."

I was beginning to figure out what made me the prettiest. It was a bunch of different parts, which, when you put them together, made me. The gap between my teeth didn't disqualify me, although people were always pointing out my friend Heather's gap. My eyes were wide-set and kind of bugged out from my face—with an elongating slant to the lids that was remarked on as "exotic" by relatives and weird family friends—and their colour had been described as "golden green" by a boy, in a poem he read in front of the class with sonorous confidence. They were just green, though. I had long thin hair that I had to straighten every day, but apparently it was the right kind of hair. This was back when plucking your eyebrows to an almost single-file line was desirable—now bushy is back and mine won't grow—though I never got compliments on my labours from any boys. I could decently tan.

My mum and I had been approached at cafés and festivals on the basis of symmetry, cheekbones, and my being too short. I had a cleft in my chin, which two boys had told my brother was "the cutest." I had breasts and they were teenage breasts, I heard I had a nice ass (which by Instagram standards would of course be too flat).

I was a natural blonde. Actually no, I had brown hair. It did seem to matter, one way or another, which one you had.

And my hair was decisively of a dark or light colour.

When I looked in the mirror I saw two eyes floating there like a cat's in the night, an ass rising like loaves of dough, a chin cleft. When I looked at my breasts I saw the time a teacher had looked at them. Wherever I went there were eyes, mirrors, puddles, and bus windows. In them I saw pieces of a beautiful girl. I whitened my teeth—which I was surely too young for—and took my time getting dressed because I didn't want to waste what I had. My body reminded me of things that had been said about it.

I became afraid that Connor, a popular boy in our grade as well as my brother, would see the real me, teenaged and greasy-browed and gap-toothed, and be somehow disappointed. So I refused to let him see me without makeup. At night I'd take a shower, dab on liquid foundation, and apply powder, lip gloss, and mascara. I would walk from the bathroom down to the living room to say goodnight, uncomfortably poky-titted in my pyjamas, and back upstairs to my room. When morning came I would rise half an hour before Connor, who also had a vain, though shorter, morning routine, and sneak into the bathroom—to remove my base layer with a bunch of chemicals, moisturize profusely, and reapply.

Connor called me out on this and made fun of me, seeming to genuinely miss our late-night goofiness from childhood, which I was now too occupied to enjoy or leave time for. I had been given an identity and it seemed prudent to maintain it, even to myself and through the clawing suspicion that our friend Echo was in fact the prettiest girl. But she was full Filipino, and while everyone talked about her and put her on a pedestal and several boys had wrecked their hearts on her melodramatically as though she were a treacherous rocky island—for she was, in

their opinion, irritatingly picky about who she dated—it seemed she could never be thought the *prettiest.*

Because I was the prettiest the school as a physical location was a kind of minefield where the hazards of my personality seemed to lurk under every floor tile and patch of grass. I had struck power and latched onto it with terrified composure. I tried to channel my dad's smoothness, which was halfway effective, though while it seemed to come naturally to him it detached me from myself. I threw smiles like daggers. I laughed so much on Fridays, my abs hurt on Saturdays. I had a lot of tension in those years to let go of, and public laughter was a way to kill two birds with one stone; it made me lightheaded and it gave me control. While laughing I lived up to myself, and when I stopped laughing talking felt easier. I clung to my friends. But as we got and dumped boyfriends and got dumped ourselves, I felt the shards of distrust through their clothing when they hugged me. There was a series of incidents involving a friend's boyfriend who went out of his way to befriend me, and it was said I got too comfortable in our group of three. I wasn't into him, he didn't agree, and that's when my friend was done with my laughing abs.

Connor was the friend I was given to go through life with, endure young, provocative parents with, and grow in the reflection of, and it seemed a betrayal of fate that despite our shared burdens—like our redundantly good looks as studied by onlookers since we were small—we were destined to be sorted into separate lives. I had felt this sense of rending between us from puberty on, and feared I was the one responsible. I'd been the first to become un-fun, opting to lie on the beach instead of swim and keep the sap off my jeans in the park, and at twelve I'd banished him from all-girl parties because I didn't want him to be the centre they revolved

around. At any rate, the change caught up to me with a jolt of finality with the announcement of a kayak trip from Washington to Alaska.

Our dad, who at thirty-nine had had other lives as an Alberta farm boy, a trucker, and a civil engineer, was a self-described free spirit who was always raging about clearcut logging and air pollution and whose favourite thing to do was live out of a van. Ultimately he'd made a third career out of broken-hearted charisma, going into schools, city halls, and conference rooms, and plying crowds with eye contact as he paced before them and spoke feelingly, a humble, consciously feminine bearing in the movements of his woodsman's body. He was still taking the odd engineering contract while we were in high school and his activism was taking off, a necessity he saw as incompatible not with van life and showers in friends' houses, but with the burned down and cracked open core of who he was. While he didn't know it he would soon get a permanent position as a campaign lead. In the meantime he was becoming a kind of local celebrity—to a worshipful few—for civil disobedience and his collaboration with a wildlife photographer, because it was rare to captivate an audience with a voice that grew softer and softer the way our dad's did. My mum and her boyfriend Don and Connor went to hear him speak, but I don't recall ever being there, myself, in person. Yet in my memory of that time in our lives, there he is. A podium stands as if derelict in the middle distance while he holds in both hands a wolf skull, found on a remote island with the photographer—or else with his most recent twenty-eight-year-old girlfriend (he grew older, but she was always twenty-eight). He's talking about the intricate, plentiful beauty of the Great Bear Rainforest and the life cycle of salmon, and how we can't afford, for the sake of everyone's children, to spend one more day drowning out the enraged cries of Mother Earth. The room is silent. No one except me finds him strange-looking, with his light eyes and hair and the pinkish tan that is really one big freckle, if you look

closely. Whether or not he wins them over it is his presence they'll remember, arms that can't move without baring the ripples of an apex strength, eyes you might accurately call "golden green." Next he will pass around the wolf skull like a talking stick, and whoever is listened to will feel seen, heard, and lovingly chastened.

He had a great interest in First Nations, west coast cultures in particular, and one summer I had gone along with him to a feast he'd been asked to. He got up during a segment that seemed to be for miscellaneous speeches, and talked for twenty minutes about a small carved paddle. Far to the north in a Tsimshian village he'd been gifted it as a youth on his first sea kayaking trip, and was now honoured to present it to a young girl from the host community, whom he'd met in the entrance to the bighouse an hour before. He copied the gestures and mannerisms of the men who'd spoken before him, whether consciously or not, I don't know, pausing for a long time between statements and looking round at the hundreds of people filling the benches. He had brought me down to the front with him to give away the paddle, and had me hand it over to the girl myself, nodding with approval at the moment's symbolism. "Did you notice, Melissa," he said afterwards, pausing for a while after phrasing half the question, "how they don't rush, in their culture, towards a grand conclusion? A speech is not a sales pitch—not about the speaker, but about what he is saying, what is coming through him, to say. He will wait for the right words because his friends and family aren't sitting there filled with awkwardness if he is silent a while. They aren't worried about whether he's making a fool of himself. Half the room might be bored, but no one's squirming."

I was skeptical of this—surely there were dynamics we hadn't seen? Surely someone had honoured too much the lesser contributor to something, and this was disgraceful to some grumbling grandmother, as one slip or other had been to my Nan at every family reunion I could

remember? But I thought about his words for days, perhaps because I was in a phase of talking constantly. I was a chatterbox, and now it occurred to me that quite possibly what I said was not that deep. I wanted my father to respect my restraint, my not-too-much-ness. I wanted it to matter when I spoke. For though I couldn't put words to it myself, I had had a strange feeling while I sat inside the bighouse, the smell of redcedar and fire smoke tingeing the hours, people watching and chatting, the drumming thudding in my chest. I had felt as if maybe there were a centre to things and it could glimpse you, but out of it people would be looking too.

After the feast I tried to emulate the way of being my dad aspired to, shine my piercing green eyes upon others the way he did. I would withhold my judgments while my friends, boys and girls, were babbling on about whatever, and in the end I would hope they would all turn to me. If they did, I'd incline my head, fix a keen stare on one of them, and say what I'd thought up instead of listening in the minutes gone by. While the strategy made me a little mysterious and my opinion a little more sought-after, there was also a lot of being on standby while the chatter ran on and I was forgotten. But I discovered that I liked this. I was growing up, after all, and it felt good to be outgrowing the sound of my own voice. I told myself that I knew who I was and had no need to prove it. By my fourteenth birthday I was known for being intimidating, and at the same time as the girl who could listen without interrupting, and provide an insight that, for all its straightforwardness, seemed rather profound.

Those were the days when my prettiness was unofficial, and I didn't have to giggle as much as I would soon.

Another way I tried to be the stoic and straight-talking Indian (I was careful to say "First Nations person" in my head) was by appearing to soak in the world around me with deep ruminant looks. I would plant my gaze on a face, or the sea, or a tree—or the glowing skyline of

downtown from Kitsilano Beach—and imagine that whoever I was with could see the depth of my feelings, my perceptions. I would feel my brow and mouth soften and a knowing that was timeless kindle my eyes, opaque and dreamy and intense. My dad lit up when I did that face in his presence. He was the only one who noticed my efforts, but he seemed convinced by what he saw.

"I love watching you taking things in," he'd say.

The odd thing was that I spent enough energy pretending to listen and contemplate my surroundings that there were moments when Self-conscious Missy lost concentration and I really was listening, or contemplating. It was as though going through the motions of what you thought it looked and sounded like to possess a quality you did not forced you to experience what you were affecting to, at least a little bit. I noticed things I hadn't meant to, like the way a girl I hated angled towards me the better half of her face—which we'd taken pains to determine the year before—each time she lied to me. And then it was like I couldn't stop noticing.

At the beginning of grade ten Connor suffered a concussion that even he agreed was the end of his rugby career. By this time neither of us spent much time with our dad, who we felt, in our defensive and unspoken ways, didn't *get* us anymore. When Dad drove into the city from wherever he was parked, he and Connor would end up clashing in great style over what appeared to be nothing; our mum said they had opposite love languages. I could see this in that Dad wanted to talk, Connor didn't, and us showing up at his games, to my brother, meant more than being asked the thoughtful questions that a life in the rainforest unearthed.

A kayak trip? Three months of just the two of them, journeying through dank and dripping vastness for no reason? Three months of subjection to our young-old man's eloquence? I was stunned to think they both saw this as the antidote to my brother's loss.

"And boy's never helped with food prep before," Dad told me gleefully, "so he'll be out of your hair for the winter. Except, of course, when you want to make a sandwich."

It dawned on me that there'd been weekends over the years, possibly a Spring Break once, so this wouldn't be the first time they had kayaked as a pair. But out of Mum, Don, and I, no one could picture it.

The rage I felt was something else entirely, shocking in its suddenness and as the months went by, fitful yet unabating. There was Connor at my elbow, finely slicing red, green and jalapeño peppers and spreading soup on trays to be slid in the dehydrator. There he was, the expert on jerky, on nautical charts, on the roster of nations whose lands they'd pass through—from the Coast Salish to the Tlingit. "We'll bring one good shirt for the potlatches," he informed *me*, who'd always been the one interested in Dad's Native friends. And when the two of them were making plans—or taking care not to, out of respect for myself and the twenty-eight-year-old when it was Christmas and whatnot—there was this low-level joy between them, almost a tension, that recalled a camaraderie between the three of us I hadn't noticed was long gone.

I may have been in a phase of ignoring my dad, but he didn't ignore me. The moment he walked in the door it was up to my room for a crushing bear hug, at the end of which he'd hold me at arm's length, callused hands on my shoulders, and look at me like I was the meaning of life. "You're strong, bold and beautiful," he'd say sometimes, threatening to tear up. "You don't need to hide." He meant I was hiding, I knew, behind the blue-black eyelashes, the dusted finish to my skin. Now I am old enough to imagine the ache of watching your child try to be bulletproof, but each time he said that the words made me shrink. I understood the starkness of his message, even if he didn't. I didn't wear makeup to divide myself from him and my brother, who was athletic and bare-faced and didn't have cleavage. I didn't wear it to say I wouldn't go

kayaking. Yet my dad saw it this way. Buying me practical clothes as gifts, baggy cargo pants and woollen plaid shirts, and seeing that I never wore them, he thought I was done with it all. No more car camping, no more childhood. No dragging Missy to the woods if dragged she had been. Ironically I had thought at first that he meant the clothes to *hide* my body, but now I knew better. He didn't care about modesty. He just liked women who weren't like the other girls, and I was the other girls.

My dad's women, I observed, were gorgeous without trying—that was the point of their gorgeousness. If they put on makeup it was a sign to him that their values diverged. At least one twenty-eight-year-old, from what I could tell, had been dropped based on that sort of thing.

It turned out to be Don who tipped the scales. As our mum fell more in love with work he was home a lot, finding handyman jobs and always vacuuming the stairs. One night in January he and I were making burritos, my dad and brother fussing over a new camera. The talk was photos, interminably. Connor's plan was to sell a book of them, chronicling the expedition, by Halloween at the latest.

"Well, I'm glad I ain't going," Don said, passing me a bowl of chopped onion. "What about yourself, Miss? How long would you last? I'd have to bring the barbecue."

Connor joked that Don would need three kayaks named Breakfast, Lunch, and Dinner.

"What about snacks, eh?"

"What about showers?" I asked. I was genuinely curious.

"That's right," Don said. "She's like, where'd you put my hair iron, my magazines? I'm there with you, girl. The second it rained I'd be calling in the Coast Guard."

My dad in one catlike move leapt off the hardwood where he'd been sprawled. "Ah, you'd be fine, Don." He whistled out a line of Neil Young. "Give me a chance to roast you

sockeye the old way, with cinnamon rolls for dessert. All while a sunset fires up the sea." He made it sound comically whimsical, yet mysterious. "And when it rains the coast has secrets—like hot springs where no one goes."

Connor talked nonstop, as we ate, about bioluminescence and aperture settings. Dad looked radiant. Then Don tried to include me in the conversation.

"They're wearing me down, Miss. What do you say we go?"

"I'm not invited!" I barked, to my own surprise, high-pitched like a baby seal. I dropped a tear on the floor as I ran to my room.

*

Our dad was devastated to think I'd suffered in silence all this time. Had he made me feel unwelcome? I could tell him if he had. There was nothing he craved more than being on the water with me, and neither my strength nor my aptitude had been in doubt. Why, he could remember me as young as six, swimming in the ocean when the snowline was low, moving the picnic table in our yard from one fence to the other. It took me hours, but I did it without help! What a tank. He had known I was meant to be a paddler when we took the ferry and I wanted to remain on the car deck to be close to the waves.

It was happening very quickly, my joining in with the plan. As the weeks passed I found myself fluttering with nerves as my friends and I ate lunch in front of our lockers; I didn't care so much about being perceived as interesting because to myself I now was. Apparently I—Missy—wanted to be cold, wet, and half-dead for twelve weeks. Why? I wasn't stupid, I had some idea of how hard it would be. I had a new boyfriend with butter-soft lips and we took to walking in

the rain until the air felt heavy with us, and when we got to my house we would peel off our shirts and kiss for hours. He thought it was cool that I took kayak lessons from my dad.

One day I came home from the gym and the plan was off. Our dad had been offered a job that he couldn't turn down, that he didn't want to turn down. This was a blessing in disguise, he said, in that now he could put more of his own money towards the trip—which we'd postpone until July of the following year—and more funding could trickle in as well. He'd get a website up. Every step he took was that of a citizen, the coast would only benefit from our best-made plan, and there were rumblings of a pipeline we might have to stop. As for Connor's depression, the wildlife photographer would take him under his wing.

He'd find me something, my dad said. The delay was a chance to gain wilderness experience; perhaps he and my mum could split the cost. They knew paddling was important to me and they'd find a way. He'd heard a Y camp out of Calgary ran canoe trips.

What I was certain of was that I would open like a wildflower, no longer a thistle in the skin of some peachy pink specialty rose, its finer points dipped in eyeliner. I would do away with that girl. When I emerged in the light of August—tanned and shredded on the "porch" of our dad's van—he would know that I was ready, that I could pick things up and move them, that I could move myself wherever, wherever we had to go.

*

Lauren stood at the mouth of the portage trail, her hands on her hips.

"See if you can—no, switch your hands. Grab it further down with your left, 'cause you gotta end up facing uphill, right? And then your right hand catches the gunwale." She mimed a

smooth windmilling motion. “Yeah totally, it’s counter—what’s the word—counterintuitive. Okay, now see if you can *thrust* more on the way up. Like Britt said it’s all leverage, all in the hips. Nice. Nice. Up on your thighs. Okay, ready? You got this. One—two—”

As if the girl in question would pull a Lauren. I pushed past them, loaded down with the wanigan. You know what was a waste of time on a day like this? The solo-flipping of boats above one’s head. At most it would lead to traffic jams behind some staggerer, euphoric in her accomplishment and ready to faint. Not light to begin with our canoes had float tanks in each bow and stern, which, waterlogged from years of use, added lopsided weight. Aside from the leaders only Lauren and I could solo-carry them. I was fine with it staying that way. Of course, I couldn’t flip them up from the ground unassisted.

I was over it. Lauren could have that. The portage was a short one and I made it to the marshy bit of lake with my sanity intact, the wanigan knifing into my back as I hadn’t adjusted the tumpline. Geez, there was a reason Janelle always carried that. I felt smug as I lowered it with my co-paddler into the belly of our boat, which was already floating and most of the way loaded. We’d wasted no time on our first run of the trail, thrown our packs on our backs while thigh-deep in mud and water and flipped the boat up to rest on top of them, then clopped out of the lake like a headless horse. While walking we’d had a perfectly normal chat about Subway sandwiches and what combo meals we’d destroy when we got home. If people wanted an example of how you leave time to play on an upcoming set of rapids—well, they should hang on my every move.

The portage after that took us to the scalloped rocky shores of a big lake which we would skirt around the edge of, connecting back with the bulk of the river system as it surged into yet the next lake through braided rapids and a waterfall. The sun was high in the sky and the mud

was drying on our quick-dry pants and scab-dribbled knees as I laid out flatbreads and toppings for lunch. Olga offered to help but I said I didn't need it.

I was rehydrating a bag of hummus when Lauren skipped out of the trees, whooping like she was at a football game. We looked up and even I cheered a little as the girl she'd been coaching—the one I called Shovel—bumped along the path with the last of the canoes on her back, sweat dripping off her chin and elbows. Frogface stood close by spotting her, as Shovel made it to the lake and with hesitant grace brought the mud-smeared beast from her shoulders, down to her thighs, down to the reeds.

Lauren cried, "She did it!"

"TIGER!" roared Janelle, who called us that when we were strong or weak or flagging. Britt beamed at Shovel from where she sat rewrapping someone's tensor bandage.

"Thanks Missy for feeding us!" said Lauren in a rush. "So ladies. I'm feeling a bit better but I want us sickies to consult Doctor B. That's number one. Number two, we're behind schedge as you mighta guessed. I know we're tired. So maybe while you eat just trying to focus on what's good, like hydration, like sitting in the shade. Number three, a volunteer to purify?"

Someone chirped yes, she would put chemicals in our water.

"Wicked," said Lauren. "Thanks, team!"

As I bit into my food I must have been watching Lauren, because she kept glancing my way. She was indeed looking healthier, with that perking-up alertness you can have after being sick. The high spirits seemed both more and less somehow. They reached me like a quiet excess, her eyes darting and fixing on a point in the sky—which was now a raw blue—or on the striped stalks of water horsetail corralling our boats in the shallows. Her French braid hadn't been redone in a few days and lay smushed to one side; the escaped bits had dried, since the penguin

song, into wispy ringlets. She leant back, relaxed, against her pack and a tree. Brown hair, brown eyes, brown freckles, I thought.

Snap. She looked at me. She was smiling without smiling, she had felt my scrutiny. She met it challengingly and wasn't going to get away with that, when I held my ground no one could. What was she smiling at? I could do this all day, there was nothing to—I could …

I was tramping through the woods for a snippet of alone time, with the added benefit of changing my tampon, when I heard a rustling to my right. A bear! Or worse, a moose! But it was Lauren. She was popping a squat, as she would say, and pulling curiously at a plant in front of her. She looked up.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

It was as good a place as any. I squatted too, partly hidden by a tangle of dead branches. Lauren fiddled with the plant's leaves, still peeing. I tugged loose the slip knot in a clear plastic bag which had stored some food item before I repurposed it. Spinning the contents to untwist the bag, I reached in and undid a second bag. In front of me was a water droplet shot through with diamonds on a wedge of moss. The sun was on it in a tiny stirring spotlight, the trees croaked and twittered distantly, girls loading boats let out the odd shout, loud and close. It was lavish-looking, the moss, like an emerald cake.

Ow, a mosquito was biting my bum. I rose halfway and changed my tampon as cleanly as possible. Wrapping the used one in a few squares of toilet paper, I deposited it in my bags.

"Sarsaparilla," muttered Lauren. "Or bunchberry. What did Britt say? I forget, I'm the worst at plants."

We straightened up.

“Hand sani?”

I went over, let her squeeze some onto my palm.

“Mind if I ask you something?”

“Yeah, go,” I said. Rubbing my hands together I looked down at them, at the dirt loosening from the lines and calluses. The alcohol stung as it dried and I found myself watching a mosquito that was swelling up with blood on Lauren’s arm. I was about to say something, when—

She slapped my arm hard.

“Ow,” I said, annoyed.

“You had a moz.”

Okay, then. I slapped her back, harder. Wiped her blood on my pants.

She laughed uncomfortably. A pink negative of my fingers was showing up on her skin, and a piece of mosquito, faintly comet-tailed by red, was at the top of where my palm had been.

“So, Olga, right,” said Lauren. “You and Olga.”

“Me and Olga?”

“You’re close with Olga.”

I agreed that I was.

“Do you—” said Lauren. She adjusted her bandanna, which was orange, so it went straight down the middle of her chest like a cowboy’s. Turned and coughed past her shoulder. “I wanted to make sure—I mean, she’s a cool lady. Pretty shy, you know, what my mum calls a shrinking violet.” She paused. “Does she not like me?”

I went full innocent. “Why would you say that?” Why would you ask that? People tell you what you want to hear when they’re forced to depend on you, and if they tell you what *they* want you to hear, it means they want something.

She gave a chuckle and looked at me—in an unusual way, I didn’t know how.

“I’m kind of a lot,” she said.

An astonishing admission. I didn’t know what to say but felt my face do a twitchy thing, a warmish thing, in response to hers. Even her eyes’ demand that I agree with her—and the scrunches of self-mockery that seemed to hold them in her face—were, as she said, “a lot.” My face was twitching, it turned out, because I was laughing.

“See,” she said, laughing too, as if at once relieved and suddenly nervous for having thrown me off my guard. She took out a leaf she had pocketed and began patting it. “I get kinda hyper and I have to say sorry to, uh, more quieter people. I do things without noticing that are—heh—a lot—and that overwhelms them.”

A white birch had materialized at my elbow. I stroked it, pressed my hand flat against it. Its sturdiness was impossibly soft. “I wouldn’t say she doesn’t like you. I wouldn’t say—”

“I want feedback,” said Lauren.

Wait a minute, really? She wanted me to be honest?

I could probably do that. Wasn’t I the one who thought her insufferable, truly tedious, an arrogant kiss-ass who looked like a frog?

I tried to tell her this. “The thing is, Lauren, it’s not that she doesn’t like you. I wouldn’t say any of us don’t like you. It’s just, like, we need our own space to grow.”

I sounded lame. Where was my trademark, my withering look? I went on, watching her. She was frowning with an almost academic concentration, slightly swaying and rolling the leaf

between her palms until it started getting pulpy, as though she just had to stay focused and I might change her life.

This was frustrating and mystifying. So I said, “You shouldn’t need us all to love you”—which made her eyes widen. “From five in the morning to ten o’clock at night you’re not the star of the show,” I finished recklessly. “We’re here to paddle, we don’t want to sing songs. Olga says she can’t stand one more day of it.”

She kept looking at me. Then she dropped the bunchberry or sarsa-whatever-it-was leaf and started back towards the lake. I wasn’t going to lag behind, so I followed. Where the bush thinned and the sun was about to hit us, she stopped and turned halfway around.

“I can see who doesn’t like me.”

I’d been expecting the anger I’d had a peek at earlier, but here again was the look of nakedness that seemed to come out of nowhere.

“And by the way, that’s not feedback.”

In the breeze I could smell her sweat.

“You have to say what you *want*, Missy,” said Lauren. “It’s not enough to say what you don’t.”

*

Ahead of me the lake gathered and rushed downhill. It was my boat’s turn, and I’d steered us out to the midpoint between the two shores, which curved together until they were almost touching. Between them you had to swing your bow around to face the gradient head-on, because that gave you your best chance. Your only chance. The goal was, of course, to stay afloat down the rapids.

We had made sure that everything was tied in or clipped to the boat somehow, my partner and I waiting in the shallows. When we heard the far-off whistle of the lead boat in the eddy below, it was time to leave the others.

Where a lake pooled before it dropped it felt like there was no current. There were serenities to mislead you right and left. An otter swimming in the shade of bushes fine with spiderwebs, or ducklings like fluffy beads behind their mum. Then you looked down, as I did now, out of reach of the shore—and there was the bottom, sweeping by. Once in the current the blade of my paddle felt different when I threw in a pry, requiring more leverage off the hull to nudge the bow straighter. I stood up on my knees and scanned ahead.

A long, tapering tongue of seaweed-green water rolled out in front of us. The ripples on either side, rising to peaks and whitecaps, encroached until the tongue was lost in ranges of white-topped waves. Below that, the river slammed off a rock wall and took a ninety-degree turn to the right. Britt and Janelle would be around the bend on River Right—which meant the right-hand side of the river when facing downstream. The "Princess" was on photo duty on River Left, down at the end of a short peninsula. (The Princess was our name for whoever was cargo for the day, as we were nine people in four canoes.) We'd scouted the route from the portage trail. But my partner and I were alone now. There was no human sign except for us.

We hit the waves in what felt like slow motion, but then one bounced us to the left and we grabbed at the current like pouncing birds. There was relief in action, relief from thought, and I threw it into keeping my hips loose and the course straight. We didn't shout to each other because things were going okay. She helped me steer with an extra stroke here and there, and I tried turning early to avoid the roiling near the rock wall. The fiercest waves came towards us and we rode the edge of them anyway, more broadside than we would have had I been braver. A

crest broke against the gunwale and splashed my partner. No! We would nail this. Drawing hard I punched my fists out to the side, yanked wild strokefuls to my aid. Now the lead boat was in view—red vests, yellow dreadlocks and the eddy's calm water.

"Tilt!" cried Janelle, as we shot for them. My bow paddler was gunning at terrific speed. You were guaranteed to flip when crossing the eddy line—which was where the fast met the slow water—if you didn't "tilt." Sinking a knee deeper in the boat I slid my hips right to weight it.

We managed it. We flew across the eddy line and carved gracefully to a stop.

If only Lauren had seen that! My stomach tossed my heartbeat around like a ball in a parachute game. Our leaders were silly with praise, but I couldn't relax. As I scraped the bailer along the bottom of the boat the last thing I'd said to Olga came back to me. "Good job. Now she knows." She knows we hate her, is what I meant. I'd said it push-paddling out of the reeds by our lunch spot, after my encounter with Lauren. There our boats were like bumper cars and you could be stuck next to someone, momentarily, while the girl behind her twisted round giving orders, and paying you no attention at all.

I hadn't hunted Olga down with a look. I'd just implied that her outburst in defence of my—period?—had ruined our lives.

Well, frick. I regretted that. But I'd become who I was, who I could be, on this trip, now. The third boat hit the eddy more sloppily and had to scramble through some whirlpools. It joined us, and we floated peacefully.

When at last she appeared I was struck by the inappropriateness of Olga. She didn't look right, topsy-turvy in Lauren's bow. She looked like a wooden woman come loose from the front of a ship. They made it through the waves, Olga holding her paddle high and seeming to dip it in

the water occasionally. As they got closer I saw the pinched look on her face. She was white with fear, her mouth was screwed tight and she didn't look like the pretty girl I had picked as my friend. Lauren, meanwhile, sidled down the rapids like it didn't matter what Olga was doing—like she had power enough for both of them and wasn't going to miss out on a ride. I was sure she had command of the river and the muscles it flexed.

Hang on, they were too far left. Lauren had taken them down the most daring line of the outside bend, and when they'd made it through the turbulence they were nowhere near the eddy. Olga was necessary, it turned out, and wasn't mustering the strength that Lauren had counted on—or thought she could make up for. The pigtails of my friend bobbed up and down as she tried to skim across the whirlpools that carried on downstream.

"Come on," growled Lauren. She had the boat at a very bad angle. But you'd think by her stormy face that Olga was to blame for everything, Olga and her pigtails. In the middle of the action I grew tired. I didn't know if Lauren was hateful now, if her sleep-in-your-wet-clothes-to-dry-them impatience had burned off for good this time. And I didn't care. I turned and unclipped the bag behind me for my granola bar.

When I turned back Olga was nowhere in sight. Lauren was swimming hard for the eddy. Janelle's paddle hung in midair as she and Britt leant forward in their seats.

They seemed to be waiting for something. Finally a head popped up on the near side of the overturned boat, which was looking shiny and useful on a whole new level—probably because it was getting away. Olga touched the top of her head. Tap, tap. That meant she was okay, and our leaders took off after the boat as she began to swim. I took a bite of my granola bar.

*

"Please, God," said Lauren, "help me think."

Was it time to bother God already?

It was a weird scenario. By the time Olga had gotten out from under the canoe, I guess she'd thought the island a ways down on the right looked more attainable. Than the eddy, I mean. Perhaps she'd had it with those whirlpools. With the current to her advantage she had reached the island, unrolling to her feet like a sopping castaway. And grasping immediately, it seemed, our dependence on her. It was true that when she yelled we had to strain to catch the words. But our leaders had disappeared, and she was the only one of the nine of us who could see everyone.

I've since tried to figure out what kind of pickle we were in exactly, falling into Google Maps when I should be studying. A Cree place name or two and a paddler's blog helped me find the right spot. There is no Street View, naturally, and you can't zoom in very impressively on the patchy composite that is "Division No. 18, Unorganized, Saskatchewan."

The eddy we were in—from what I can tell—is about a kilometre above the falls. The right-angle turn that I've matched to the rapids we had gone down shoots the river briefly west. Rounding the stub of the peninsula, it then breaks for the island that Olga was standing on, broadening out into a channel flowing north to south. At the top of the channel are two more islands. Shaped like teardrops as hers is, they lie southeast of Olga's. In and among the three little islands I can make out the faintest of white streaks in the pixellated bluish green darkness that is the water.

For the last few hundred metres before the waterfall, there are no white streaks. I recall a surface that was smooth enough to make me forget, and wide enough that the low-hanging sun could still plaster it with light.

The geography felt different when I was in it. The islands skinnier and in slightly different places. That's how it constructs itself in memory, jostling the satellites.

"They're relying on you." This time Lauren was muttering not to God but to herself, and there seemed to be a grim elation in the statement. She sat dripping and shivering on the floor of the "Princess boat" in the carefully arranged bum space of its passenger—who was still stranded on River Left, safe and dry but with nothing on her save our cameras in a Ziploc bag.

I couldn't disagree. The group was scattered in a logistical puzzle of boats and islands and shores and I couldn't seem to snap my brain into gear to work it out. Olga had signalled, and we'd managed to interpret, that the leaders wanted the next boat to venture down to them.

"'Kay no, it's simple." Lauren was speaking more quietly than we'd ever heard her, and with the soundtrack of rushing water I had to hang on every word. "They're gonna need us to take Olga. And we only got two boats. So no offence but the strongest paddlers should go get her." She looked at me wearily. "If you're okay with that."

I said I was.

She must have worked it out that we could only feasibly fit three to a boat, and that the girl who was stranded on River Left would be picked up on the south side of the peninsula once Britt and Janelle, at their unseen spot, had assembled the rest. And she must have remembered the basic physics they had made us explain back to them. As the river swung its weight around Olga's island and hit the western bank, the water there would be rougher.

There was a well-practiced flurry in the eddy as we held onto each other's boats and switched places. Now Lauren and I were in the Princess boat. We watched silently as the other three left us, gingerly crossed the whirlpools and made a beeline for the middle island—which our leaders had disappeared to the left of. The girl who wasn't paddling was splayed like a lizard on top of packs and a barrel, as trains of waves came at them from different directions.

The bear comes into the story while I'm doing a great job at steering. When we shuffled Lauren let me take the stern, and we ignore each other pointedly. I am in fact hyperfocused on the back of her head. If I can pin that bedraggled braid to a landmark of my choosing, Olga's squared shoulders or more strategically, an oatmeal-coloured rock to the left of them—and if I can guide us through the bumps of the way I've chosen as though they were part of the plan—Lauren will know that not only am I not an idiot, but she is safe in my hands. Unfortunately the bear is unceremoniously parting the twiggy branches, or rather breaking them, on the island we are headed to. A sooty sleek young bear, and as he surprises Olga he is also surprised, though not alarmed. Or not as alarmed as she'd like him to be. He stumbles wading up the awkward shoreline and doesn't seem bothered by her clapping and warning tones, which our ears miss. She leaves her post and beckons us to follow, as rounding the tip of the island she slips out of sight.

"Where are we going?" asks Lauren, as I adjust our course.

"To get her," I say.

"No," she snaps. "It's worse on that side. I don't know what she's—"

"It's fine—"

"—but we can still park on—ugh."

She's right, and my stubbornness is bewildering to me, though no more or less than events that have long been in motion.

In no time we were shooting down the forbidden route. The water was fast, but a lot smoother than we'd likely imagined. The west side of the island was flush with the current and had bushes that overhung it; it was hard to find a place to stop.

We almost flipped when I jammed the bow in a gap between bushes. Lauren grabbed hold of one. She swore at its prickles, but didn't let go. Balancing in a crouch with her free hand on the deck, she sprang into the air, knocking loose her paddle. Which was a novice move. She swore again, waist-deep in the river. I tried to hook it with the butt of mine, but it was too late. I watched it carry on downstream.

"Gimme yours."

I handed her my paddle and she somehow took it while the arm that was attached to shore was stuck through the grab loop at the front of the canoe. She turned her back, but I'd seen the pain on her face and winced, imagining the prickles. Her wet freckled other arm looked defined and capable, probing with the paddle as the early evening light sharpened contours. She managed to hook on to a fork in the brambles and let go with the woebegone hand. But it was no use, Olga couldn't get in the boat here, and anyway, she was upstream where we couldn't see her. I don't know why we hadn't just paddled—muscled—back up there in the first place. I guess strength is nothing if you don't have trust. I wasn't to be relied on, so Lauren had jumped. Her legs were shaky in the crevices between great slimy, egg-shaped rocks, the river pummelling her pelvis as though to snap those legs in half, and now she had to get us, somehow, somewhere else. Which she did. I gave her my rain pants to protect her hands, and she clutched our way along the bushes, holding fast to the boat, till we came to the south end of the island. There, there were no

more bushes, just a swoop of bare granite that looked like a hand. Knuckles sunk in the eddy, it carved tiny bays.

Lauren had stood on the rock and was scanning for a place to tie off, when I saw a black hole growing in the trees. I screamed when I realized it had feet. She was holding my paddle when the bear knocked her over.

I didn't notice that the scene was retreating. The bear had slid in the water with her, and was now swimming peaceably away. He was headed for the west bank. I watched Lauren cower and cling to the rock, then kick and scramble back up on it. Suddenly Olga burst out of the trees. Lauren was handled top to bottom—PFD ripped off, armpits searched, stomach exposed. I could tell that Olga was speaking a mile a minute. It seemed normal that I had to crane my neck to keep watching them.

They both looked for me at the same time. Now I could see the rest of the group, on the east side of the middle island, the canoes protruding like a ruby-red dock.

Lauren was saying my name. Yelling it.

I was aware that others were too. Reaching for my paddle, which wasn't there, I said, "I don't have a paddle."

Then I called out the same thing, not at the top of my voice, but half-volume. Bizarrely, I felt shy. I was sitting perpendicular to the flow, conveyed along as though by a satin rope. To my left was a monstrously beautiful line, I knew, uneven and with vapour rising—a mail slot to the next life, perhaps. So I studied the floor of the boat.

Three backpacks. A thermos with the logo of a cousin's band. A couple of rain jackets that had been tied in carelessly; I knew whose was whose. My granola bar, a skittering daddy long-legs. And the flash of a silver shaft—a paddle!

What I wanted.

I lunged for it, wrestled it free. Nothing had felt so solid in my hands. I began to take ploughing, backwards strokes, but from the stern it was impossible to steer like that. *Missy*, rang the voices. I would need to pivot, point upstream. Switching sides I drew ferociously until the bow pointed north, sort of.

"Tighten up!"

Our leaders were far away, gunning for me. They wouldn't reach me in time. I paddled harder than I could have had my dad been watching, had he wanted me to make it more than I did. I tightened the angle. I couldn't look behind me. With the boat almost parallel to the current I would have a shot at ferrying. This meant I could equalize the ground I won and lost, if my power matched the river. Well, good luck with that. But it's a funny thing. You don't have to be a giant to work with one, find the sweet spot. That's the truth about rivers.

Just enough hull I left open to the current, stroking madly to maintain it. And the giant co-operated, pushing me east. Laterally. I would tear off my sunglasses in the golden green light, gasping and crying, on a shelf a few feet from the plunge.

But for now I was rescuing myself. Which seemed not only worth it, but possible. I knew the girls—whose shouts rose between the islands cut with razor-sharp trees—weren't calling to the me they knew, but to me.

*

The fifteen-passenger van crunched to a halt outside the trading post in La Ronge, eight days later. I stepped onto the gravel lot. Dazed and thirsty, I'd been dozing and was blinded by the

overcast day. Someone took my shoulders and steered me to the back of the van, where plumes of dust disbanded in the wake of the trailer. There was a thick brown layer on the vehicle and tightly hitched boats; a few of the girls had coughing fits. But we stuck it out to write messages in the grit. I drew a picture, or tried to, of the northern lights.

On the sidewalk I fell back a little. I surveyed the group and our surroundings, a drunken warmth in my chest. A middle-aged man with my brother's hair drove by in a truck. He slowed and gawked at me. It was then I think I realized that the trip was over.

The old white guy behind the counter was pleased to see us—we'd met him twenty-one days ago, on our drive up. He seemed to think nothing of our appearance, let alone our smell, and got chatting with Janelle and a couple of trappers. We teens had two priorities, in the following order: washroom, ice cream. Past more canned goods than it was easy to conceive of—and which we wouldn't have to portage—we filed to the back of the store. There, pelts of animals yet unknown to me abounded, spotted, black, reddish silver, a wealth that would have saved us from ever dogpiling to keep warm. You looked down the chilled foods aisle to a wall of beaded deerskin jackets, hung within reach and marked Not for Sale. Now into the tiny washroom we crowded, the seven of us, giggling at our cleverness. Hadn't we seen each other pee, off boats or not far from the kitchen tarp, enough times to make you puke? But it was more than that. We wanted to be together. While one of us was on the toilet the rest had strange encounters with the mirror. We mocked and complimented ourselves, scraping at eyebrow fluff, admiring tan lines. I looked like I'd glow in the dark. My hair was a brilliant straw colour, except where greasy at the roots, and a smattering of bug bites was fading into skin that was pale where my sunglasses had been and nowhere else. I saw the scratch they'd all been saying made me look like Harry Potter. My eyes were de-emphasized without makeup, I wasn't sure how I felt about it. They were still

green. Someone mentioned my boyfriend; I pretended to threaten her with a pellet of eye gunk, but I couldn't look at Lauren.

When I'd kissed her on the bridge at Otter Rapids the night before, the sky was pulsing with scarves of liquid light. She said, "I've never kissed anyone." And I said, "You're really good at it," because I thought that's what she'd want to hear. But it was true. With the boys I had made out with there'd always been something that got caught in between us, the sensation of having more clothes on than I did, or a layer of saran wrap that would wrinkle and cling to itself and that I sweated against, never quite breaking through. With her it was different. It felt like the metal railing we leant on was touching my bare side, and the stars had made it through the blankets of air and fell as ice drops on my face. She made a sound that was the beginning of everything, for me.

I was late to get Facebook. I found Lauren a few years ago. She lives in Calgary with her fiancée, a competitive rower. They go hiking a lot and are involved in a church. I have to wonder if it's the same church she grew up in, and how her parents are with the gay thing. Thinking about that it seems all the more remarkable that she wrote to me in August, 2005. A letter from Kenya. In the letter she makes it clear that she wants to visit me, and bares her heart in a way that felt uncharacteristic of her, when I first read it. But it was just the kind of brave thing she would do.

I suppose I thought what we had felt foretold innumerable connections, just as I hoped the canoe trip was what my life would be like now. And then there were people, and what they would say—that I was too pretty, for Lauren.

Tell that to her Rocky Mountain smile.

*

Dad hasn't stopped any pipelines as of yet. The most recent twenty-eight-year-old is now forty, and they live in Squamish in a proper house. Chelsea has installed a drip irrigation system in the living room, for her vertical garden that takes up a wall. There are erupting and snaking developments, tendrilous and bushy, some that bloom, some that don't, some edible, some not, and they hang from the ceiling in a range of glass tubes and bottles. She gets nervous when you stand too close or actively sniff the plants, but loves to make you comfy in the greenhouse-smelling reading corner she calls the nook. My niece is quiet and extremely timid so this suits her. When Connor and I were in our first year of university, he and his slightly older girlfriend carried on the tradition of young parenthood in our family. As a result the kayak trip was shelved, having already been postponed twice. They rent the basement of the house in Squamish.

Like most human females, their daughter Elenora is in love with my dad. This is no end of annoyance to Chelsea. She wants Ellie to speak up for herself and will interrupt him to say, "Honey, she knows that." But Elenora just settles on a kitchen chair, grey eyes wide.

Chelsea and my dad have lots to talk about. She's of Macedonian descent but took a degree in First Nations Studies and works for a local band. Often when he gets going she'll try and counter him, citing her own interpretations of Indigenous politics. Inevitably she'll get frustrated. She'll accuse him of laziness, reductivism, and speaking for others. Which is when Elenora checks out—burrows into an iPad. And so they all live quite happily.

He's proud of me. Of what he calls my "singletude," my lesbianism, and how long it takes—as I'm doing—to become a radiologist. Several of my exes and I drive up on weekends and he mildly flirts with them, especially Aish. She's the one with the long plaid shirts and the

ring in her septum. I'm never sure if he and Connor quite get that I wanted and fucked and fell apart over these women, in the same way they are wired to. But maybe I am looking in the wrong direction.

*

In the beginning we were stranded in the mist-filled morning, a lake stirring at our feet. Once the van rattled away and I saw the mounds of gear on the rock—a mess of light and heavy items that was seemingly endless—it hit me what the next step was. These people, for the rest of the month.

Of the water that lay cradling the hulls, the loud-voiced girl was singing.

"Not the Mississippi! It's the Misinipiy!"

On the map it was not called that. On the map it had a British name. And it was at once a river and a bunch of lakes strung together. And one among us had been told by a woman in La Ronge what *misinipiy* meant, in the woman's language. They'd gotten talking in the dry goods section, inside the trading post. Because the thing about Lauren was that she didn't know where we were going, any more than we did.

She'd been introduced, she felt; she knew the river's name. So she said it.

Notes from the Insides of Other People's Kitchens

My thesis-writing year, I live in nine houses. I'm house-sitting. This means I carve out a space for myself inside the walls that others have vacated, and very much mean to come back for. Then—in the poetic ideal of solitude—I write.

Or try to.

I live in Washington. Seattle, Bothell, Whidbey Island. And in coastal B.C. and the Interior. Victoria, Blind Bay, a ranch outside Kamloops, Gold River, North Vancouver.

2020's not a great year to do this. The ranchers vacationing in Mexico text me on March 13. "We're not budging. We'd love to get stuck on this beach!"

They fly home on March 19. As the world shuts down I flounder about, living out of my car and feeling a lot less fortunate than I am. Until, in something of a pandemic miracle, I meet a family with a housing surplus.

They need a house off their hands, temporarily—in this, the First Wave of the germpocalypse. And I couldn't be happier to help.

House-sitting is a little like story-writing. The invitation's at once nerve-racking, and a relief. You pack up and drive, guided (if you're lucky) by some built-in GPS. There are strangers to welcome you and watch you play with their pets. You set them at ease. Rewrite the tone as you need to.

At some point (hopefully), you'll find that their lives have become your own. Their German Sheprador who's afraid of everything—he's your guy. Every night before midnight the cat sings a whiny, sexual-sounding lullaby. You can walk around in the dark, rounding blind corners, feeling for stairs.

One misty morning on Whidbey, you run onto the porch. Killer whales are swimming by, four members of the endangered southern residents, one of them a baby. You breathe in the saltchuck and the half-frosted, rotting bigleaf maple leaves. You will be leaving soon. You are always starting over, and it's deflating, you find, to complete a thing.

One problem with this metaphor is that, while it's true that I move all the time, I almost never complete a story. Perhaps I take up residence in a fictional premise, and dig into it and creep along and go in circles, because it's where I can come and go at my own pace.

Which is a luxury. A temporary one. And thanks to scholarships.

The metaphor works well in the sense that I feel crushingly responsible for each house and each story. The mistakes I make, and the technical difficulty in what I'm doing, mostly apply to the stories.

But I leave a cat out overnight, once. I bleach a bit of carpet. I break a trivet in Coupeville, and a water glass in North Van. I melt the tip of an oven mitt.

In a dream, I starve to death some nonexistent chickens.

All my hosts give me five-star ratings out of five. They find me low in blunders, for a human.

I have a friend who loves paddling as much as she loves books. She's landlocked in Canmore, and I've promised her a story about canoeing. My greatest ambition at the moment is for her to love it.

She's incessantly creative. To my absurd delight, I have convinced her to craft a selkie pillow. (That's right—a selkie. *Pillow.*) Taking shape is a gorgeously realistic and also cuddly seal, with a human face that can emerge from beneath the seal's.

My friend gives generous, insightful, and unsparingly honest feedback. Last year we decided that our stories should be rated—but not in stars. We chose "cringes" as our unit of measurement, "one cringe" being the highest of compliments.

The first story I showed her earned four cringes out of five.

I call my mum from some kitchen in the Pacific Northwest, and start crying about Alice Munro. Today it's the story "Post and Beam."

It's not intentional. I don't glance across at the mainland from Whidbey Island, or at the floor of the basement suite in North Van—avoiding the angry and blotchy art on the walls—and think, "I've got it. I'll call up the one who gave birth to me. Forgetting to ask how she is I will tell her about me, the pill-popping dog in my care and a sideways rain on the woodpile. When the clock strikes eight I will have a meltdown."

What is embarrassing is that halfway through my leaky, garbled lecture about the young woman Lorna, and how we are all surely that Munro-era housewife in the way our choices collapse in on us, it occurs to me that I've said these things before. To my mum, while crying in another kitchen. About this story.

Lorna is younger than me. She's been married for six years to an older professor, and they have two children. But what the story notices and pays attention to is a cousin from her past, Polly, who helped raise her, and a guy named Lionel who lurks in the foreground—as a route of possible escape from her present (and circumscribed future).

As with every Munro story, there's a lot to it that gets me. Like the way the house of her "good fortune" (Munro 204), when Lorna's away at a wedding, becomes grotesquely transformed by her vision of Polly's suicide, which never happens; but which we feel to have happened and then been subsequently undone—by Lorna—through her private bargainings on the drive back from the Okanagan. And then there's the fact that she cons Lionel's landlady. To sneak into his room while he's away, only to uncover her desire to "sit for hours" on his floor, "where there was no one who knew her or wanted a thing from her" (203).

Do I like stories about houses, living as I am in so many, in quick succession? Do I think about the revolutions of known rooms?

Yes. But it's the inner life, the unshared monumental moments of Munro's characters, that bowl me over. It's that in combination, I think, with how she lets time pile up without warning at the end, like a long silk scarf sliding to the floor—slowly, then heart-wrenchingly fast.

And her characters are never ridiculous. We are inside their logic, and it feels reasonable. That Lorna concludes that she must buy Polly's life by continuing with domestic life as it is; that her husband takes pride in their home's "preeminent" (199) architecture and the idea of men "[lusting] after" (196) his wife; that Lionel sends Lorna his oblique lines of poetry—like "uncertain bird tracks" (196)—through the mail; and that twenty-nine-year-old Polly has a nine-year-old meltdown.

I cry because I'm full of desire. To make a reader fall through time like that, the gaps leaving her gasping, and simultaneously not to find myself in a Munro story, totalled by time.

Does this mean I should take a break, read something else?

I can't. I'm anxiously attached.

In the end Lorna looks out an upstairs window and is seen by her child. "Mommy. Come here" (213), rings the command from the wading pool. Lionel, Polly, and Lorna's husband repeat the call, in the same baby voice.

And then the section break.

It was a long time ago that this happened. In North Vancouver, when they lived in the Post and Beam house. When she was twenty-four years old, and new to bargaining (213).

I long to do that, create impactful gaps.

The narrator of "River" escapes extinction via waterfall; in the next sentence, the canoe trip is over. We breeze through her glimpses of Lauren's life. And that's when I imitate my hero most shamelessly, by ending with the beginning.

My multiple timelines have given me (and others) significant trouble during this project. I am still not convinced that I've figured them out. But I can't shake the urge to learn to show how time *feels.*

Perhaps some more decades will help?

She is, you know, the grad student, getting over a break-up.

The she is me. But it's nice to write about her tenderly, like a character. Conversely, my recent fiction inclines towards the first-person. I don't know why. I get closer—I hope—to a voice that is felt to be true, when I follow these instincts. I have no way of knowing if I'm right, aside from asking. Asking for feedback, and having it sting or surprise, is one of my favourite parts of the creative process.

Because she's getting over a break-up and it is taking forever (well, at least two years, it would seem), there is a greyish blue sadness that underlies everything, like a water table. Her friend who sews selkies says, "Greyish blue is the colour of many rocks." This is soothing.

The grad student likes to think that where there are gaps in the lay of the land and the lakes ache through, her greyish blue bottomlessness will make art easier. The water table has its pressure, its space to fill. At the same time, she knows bluely, greyishly, that art won't be enough.

A month before the pandemic was declared, I sent a draft of "How Our Calls Cross the Ocean" to my First Reader. Noting my interest in technologies like FaceTime and how they participate in and mediate our modern relationships, she pointed me in the direction of Sally Rooney.

I had been living under not just one but many rocks, and hadn't yet heard of the Irish novelist.

During my early and mid-twenties, I tried to write fiction a few times. But each time I was made nauseous by a fragile ego on the horizon of incompetence. One of the many reasons it felt hard to even start was that I couldn't figure out how to write about all the "dumb" stuff that applied to my generation, like Facebook and how we were zombies living buried in our phones, but how that was also normal and full of poetry, and life went on. So I didn't. I tried to write around it, for five minutes, and then gave up.

Writing about an intercontinental, FaceTime-conducted relationship was my way of trying to break through this. If entire domestic lives are being carried out through digital portals, I thought, complete with the stakes and drama and messiness of existence, what are the answering possibilities—and necessities—of fiction?

The lesson for me is to read a whole lot more of the contemporary realistic and experimental work that is coming out *now*. Lately Sheila Heti, Patricia Lockwood, and Carmen Maria Machado have found a way under my pile of rocks, but in general I have been way too obsessed with nineteenth- and twentieth-century writers—forgetting to be attentive to the century I live in. The pace of change in how we communicate has been so absolutely breakneck, for the past twenty years, that it wouldn't hurt to read some books that address that!

Reading Sally Rooney feels like—among many things—a (riveting) permission slip to take seriously the most embarrassing aspects of being born in the same year as Taylor Swift (a fact about myself which I am quite fond of). T-Swizzle is really not the point, though, here, although not because—S-Roozle?—sorrynotsorry—is two years younger than *us*. For me Rooney is the first novelist to profoundly capture the emotional fabric of our multitextual young adulthoods; she immerses us in how it *feels* to lead inner lives and conduct relationships that splice together myriad technologies, platforms, and interfaces—all of which shape perceptions of ourselves, our communities, and our intimacies, minute to minute.

She achieves this, I think, through seamlessness and quantity/ubiquity. Whole passages of *Conversations With Friends* narrate distracted Internet time, which is inseparable from other goings-on for the narrator Frances, internally and externally. While on the phone with her ex-girlfriend Bobbi, for example, Frances episodically describes her "zooming [in and out] process" (Rooney 9) of hyper-analyzing the photographs that Melissa has sent them. Rooney gives ample room to the near-infinite hours spent staring at screens and obsessing over their contents, and we sense her trust that *this too* is life being lived, full of breadth and dramatic potential—mundane or otherwise.

The narrator of my short story is several years older than (T. Swift and) me. She livestreams her life for a romantic partner not simply because she fell in love with someone from New Zealand, but also as a way of maintaining control over, and distance from, intimacy. I'm interested in how our acts of care and deepest fears interact with formats like FaceTime, as they change or distort the spatial reality of where we are, *how* we are where we are—and how we "are" where we aren't.

(I will note that prior to the pandemic, it seemed a fairly ridiculous activity to watch a movie with someone else virtually. Now it's not. Would I have written the story differently, in 2020?)

If I could wake up one day with the writing-about-sex skills of anyone, it would be Menominee poet Chrystos. Now in their seventies, they are the lesbian- and two-spirit-identifying author of the 1993 collection *In her I am*, which made me cry in a seminar when I first heard an excerpt. The excerpt was:

> I am her pleasure, focused I'm erased into the fruit of her flowering, colors spinning
> I follow her through fear through shame through cold memories into the valley where pleasure shimmers in a spring haze (Chrystos 58).

Here the speaker is so completely present that they are at once "erased into" the experience of their partner, themselves *becoming* that experience, and at the same time, consciously tuned in to its nuances, from the partner's perspective. Giving pleasure is an act of holding space for the other as a whole, experienced being, whose body and intellect contain many journeys. "I follow her," says the speaker, indicating that their lover knows where she is going and they are invited to accompany her—even through the return to and release from traumas.

Reaching “the valley where pleasure shimmers in a spring haze” is only one achievement of the intimacy that’s expressed here. Chrystos doesn’t separate out sex from the rest of life; the same poem ends with humour:

> Did you come a little bit, Baby? *Oh FUCK you*
> Oh please do
> As soon as you can move (59).

Throughout the collection they move fluently between sensual lyricism, outrageous lines like “She left me a note/saying I DID NOT lick your panties/must have been my dog” (Chrystos 55), and complex discussions of rape and colonial violence; they refuse to leave out anything that belongs in, passes through, or enters into, the room with desire.

The erotic moments in “How Our Calls Cross the Ocean” are my attempt to start to think about how I can treat sex with seriousness, humour, and indivisibility-from-the-rest-of-life, in my own work. I will admit, though, that I may be hiding behind aspects of my characters’ personalities that make their sex read as awkward, which could be an issue of comfort zone, for me. What I truly want is to write something that is unironically, undefensively, unapologetically sexy. (Which of course might *include* awkwardness, without being reduced to it.) With Chrystos on my bookshelf, alongside other LGBTQ+ writers like Gregory Scofield and Carmen Maria Machado, I have a world of guidance.

The wild. The wilderness. Baggin' peaks. Getting back to nature. Having worked as an outdoor educator throughout my twenties, it's thanks to professors and peers in the Faculty of Native Studies that my awareness of settler colonialism in the industry began to develop at all.

Those courses and community were pivotal. Digging deeper, I have to look at what brought me to Native Studies in the first place. I had the staggering good fortune to go on two long canoe trips as a teenager, the first of which was geographically—and culturally—similar to the one Missy goes on. We were a mostly white group of middle- and upper-class young women from Calgary and Edmonton. Before our canoes touched the water, we spent an evening with a Cree family from Pinehouse Lake.

I was hindered by shyness at that age, and it was a visit that stuck to me like pine sap. I remember playing with two tiny children on their porch, while listening to the adult conversations going on around us. And gorging myself—for I was hungry in a bunch of ways, back then—on the muffins we had baked at the base camp, and brought to share.

What I felt was a decentring of my own experience, as a white settler—if not for the first time, then for one of the first. It was one of those scenarios in which we white people, I think, tend to *like* to feel decentred, because it's not very threatening to the settler colonial mindset to be welcomed into someone's home and treated with unmatched hospitality. I also think, less cynically, that most teenagers are on the lookout for a shift in perspective in terms of their sense of identity and place in the world; and that this is a precious resource when it comes to decolonizing education, throughout the many diverse homelands we now know as Canada.

My siblings and I had grown up with road-trips across the country with our mum, whose ancient, umpteenth-hand Volvo broke down frequently. I read such series as *Anne of Green Gables* and *Little House on the Prairie* repeatedly, and the summer my brother was seven, he memorized *The Story of Canada* by Janet Lunn. After a long day of reading in the hot car below the screams of our baby sister who wanted French fries, Hamish and I would take off into the forest surrounding our campsite.

Our imaginations were our full-time jobs. Ducking under branches and batting mosquitoes I would speak quietly to myself; in the distance, he'd be darting, skirmishing, and rolling on the ground. I was narrating a multi-generational account of pioneers. (These would last, on my own time scale, for months or even years.) It would have begun in what I pictured as long-ago France or Scotland, with some alarmingly young girl who performed heroic deeds and was then killed, but not before reproducing out of wedlock. Now her great-great-granddaughter, on the farm in P.E.I., had to sew a dress to take to Ontario.

My brother was re-enacting the Battle of the Plains of Abraham. He was Wolfe and he was Montcalm, he was every detail of their deaths. A favourite stick doubled as a sword and musket.

Growing up camping, we were raised with a reverence for "Canada's wilderness." It was sacrilege to take a rock or leaf from a National or Provincial Park, and real campers slept in tents. The best way to enjoy nature was to be alone in it, in a environment that fit descriptive words like *pristine*, *untouched*, *unspoiled.* Buffy Sainte-Marie was crooning somewhere in the background, but Gordon Lightfoot was relentless:

> There was a time in this fair land when the railroad did not run
> When the wild majestic mountains stood alone against the sun
> Long before the white man and long before the wheel
> When the green dark forest was too silent to be real (Lightfoot).

I am interested in the particular pathways of insidiousness that structure settler colonial narratives within progressive Canadian culture. The adults closest to me were vocal when I was young about residential schools and other crimes against Indigenous people that I now know as genocide. And yet "the danger of a single story" (Adichie) brought an inevitability to these records of victimization—which seemed more evident than those of resistance—and there was no sense of ongoing relationship between us that I could discern or engage with. Canada had to do better, adamantly so, but ultimately Canada itself was a victim, and Margaret Atwood's "Backdrop Addresses Cowboy" spoke to our plight. We were taught to be proud to be Canadian despite the fact that colonialism "had" happened here; American imperialism remained a threat, and *they* had nothing to be proud of.

In her most recent book, *My Conversations With Canadians*, Lee Maracle writes that "[t]o be a white Canadian is to be sunk in deep denial" (Maracle 27). When you grow up un- and miseducated about the basic facts of where you live, can it be a surprise when you are shocked by them?

The dad of the little girls on the porch in Pinehouse was a competitive axe thrower; their mantelpiece was crowded with his trophies. He made sure we didn't leave without a demo. I had one of those startled-stereotype moments that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks about, when you are confronted by something utterly ordinary in another person ("The danger of a single story"). I had had Indigenous classmates throughout my childhood, and Indigenous friends at various points, and it is shameful to think that my "single story" about well over a million people in this country was still: poverty, social issues, victimhood, passivity.

What really got me was that Pinehouse Lake was the centre of the world to someone. It always had been, and always would be. This was—a relief. I don't think there is anything comforting about either the emptiness of *terra nullius* or the vanishedness of the "vanishing Indian," even to the children who benefit structurally from these fictions.

Even when the family drove down to Prince Albert or Saskatoon, even if the daughters, when they grew up, moved to Edmonton, New York, or Hong Kong, Pinehouse was the centre of the world. This meant that every place I had loved, for an afternoon or my whole life—for I had never left the continent—was likewise home, in the oldest and most living sense, to someone.

I had known this theoretically. But it's different to feel it.

I'd always lived where my ancestors didn't. *Our* forebears were elsewhere. This meant that as a natural imaginer obsessed with the past, I asked lots of questions about the land under our feet on the one hand, and our forgotten histories in Scotland and Ireland, on the other. What I received back was interesting, often wildly romantic, but imprecise and intangible. Our shallowness on this land made our storytelling vacuous.

The impact of that night in Pinehouse was the planting of the notion that I could re-ask these questions. Did I feel an intense interest in Indigenous cultures that verged on romanticism? Admittedly. I couldn't imagine what it was like to actually come from where you *were.*

Two years later, I embarked on a fifty-five-day ocean canoe trip from Prince Rupert to Bella Coola. Run by the Y camp that had run the Saskatchewan trip as well, the program was quite anomalous—and still is, I believe—in the field of outdoor leadership, in that we wrote letters ahead of time to the Indigenous and settler communities along the route, and stayed in each of them for three to five days.

The conversations had on that trip, with people of all ages, in time brought me to Native Studies at the University of Alberta. Now in my early twenties, I was taking folks into the "Canadian wilderness" professionally, leading trips every summer for mostly white, upper-class urban youth—through the lands of the Nakoda, Blackfoot, Tsuut'ina, Cree, Métis, and Dene nations. And I was beginning to realize how troubling it all was.

Named for a Nakoda chief, the camp I worked at was full of nods—and worse—to indigeneity. I could be here all day describing the little and big instances of cultural appropriation, and exploring the resonances (through the decades) of the camp having been founded on leased reserve land, in partnership with Nakoda leaders, in 1930 ("Camp Chief Hector YMCA"). The YMCA has since made a long-overdue shift towards Truth and Reconciliation ("Camp Chief Hector YMCA"), and I've heard anecdotally about changes on the ground; but when I was an employee there—from 2008 to 2011—we offered a lot of mixed messages, as an organization.

On the one hand, when we were not out paddling or hiking, we lived in tipis. The camp logo was meant to be the face of its namesake, although it was pointed out to me (and I somehow hadn't noticed) that the artistic rendering was at best a "generic Indian chief" face, seen in profile, fairly identical to my Edmonton high school's thirty-foot mural of our mascot. (We were the "Redmen." In 2007. At an arts school, with a social justice club.) As part of camp culture we used a bunch of Cree and Nakoda words—mispronounced and mistranslated, as I found out when I studied *nehiyawewin* with Dorothy Thunder—and every July there was a "Tribal Challenge." This involved the outdated names of the First Nations of Treaty 7, and being sorted into them, like Harry Potter houses.

On the other hand, the kids on the reserve down the road probably weren't spending their summers living out of tipis, hiking and paddling and making new friends, all over their land. Colonialism and the socioeconomic disparity caused by it meant that the camp was an unofficially segregated educational opportunity. And officially speaking, the Nakoda were denied access to Banff National Park until 2010 ("The Stoney Nakoda Nation is welcomed back").

Leading hikes throughout Banff, Kananaskis Country, and the Ya Ha Tinda, I began to talk with my groups about treaties. I wanted my participants to become aware of the deep histories of the places we passed through, and our own living obligations. But you don't build relationships in the abstract. And in absence of structural acknowledgment, indigenized curriculum, and properly followed protocols throughout our institutions—not to mention the rejection of offensive traditions—worn-out systems rush in. You end up sending a lot of kids home to Calgary with the summer camp memories that their grandfathers made: becoming a man on a slog through the wilderness, and winning the Tribal Challenge as a member of the "Sarcee band."

I always think of the moment in *Monkey Beach* when Lisa runs into a white teenager in a kayak, while on her search for Jimmy. For two hundred breathtaking pages, Eden Robinson has led us through Haisla territory and the memories of the Hill family, and as she puts it in *The Sasquatch at Home* (describing the concept of *nusa*, or storytelling), every landmark "[has] a story, a history" (12). No matter your cultural background, the novel immerses you in a rainforest of human stories so dense it is positively crowded, so irony's in full force when Lisa narrates:

> He tells me how glad he is to see someone his own age and how he hadn't realized it would be so empty in the wilderness. He goes on to say how beautiful it is, how spiritual it is getting back to nature, and then asks if I want some coffee (*Monkey Beach* 216).

On the scale of Greg-the-kayaker, it's a funny moment. But on the scale of a society, the "emptiness of the wilderness" is delusion, arrogance, and illiteracy.

We talk a lot in outdoor ed about *conscious incompetence*. That's when you've learned the prerequisites of something, to the extent that you're productively aware of the gaps in your knowledge. Its opposite is *unconscious incompetence*, which is very dangerous. An example of unconscious incompetence is when a swimming pool lifeguard shows up to your whitewater weekend, and says, "I'm not afraid of water." Or, when a mountaineer from the Rockies dies on a little hill in Scotland, because the mountains are more crumbly there.

I think, as non-Indigenous Canadians, we are at base—and as a default setting—still unconscious of our incompetence. We must first take ownership of what we lack. Then, as we reach for *conscious competence*—which sounds like "cultural competence," which according to Maracle is what we most need—let us remember her words:

> Most Canadians think it is enough to know something, but it is not enough—you must commit to the continued growth and transformation of whatever you claim to know (Maracle 78).

With Missy and her father, in "River," I was interested in permutations of colonialism as they persist in the minds and actions of white characters who "claim to know" (78). Exploring these, I thought about the seriousness, sincerity, and comic affection with which Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie treats her characters, even and especially when she's writing about politics and power as they manifest in our lives and psychologies. *Americanah* is my compass. Just flipping to a random page of it now, I read the sentence:

> To hear Curt say "bitch" so coldly felt surreal, and tears gathered in her eyes, knowing that she had turned him into a man who could say "bitch" so coldly, and wishing he was a man who would not have said "bitch" no matter what (*Americanah* 357).

If only I could write so simply and accurately, with such "psychological acuity … and clarity of the prose … [that] it feels like there's nothing in between the reader and these people!" ("Between the Lines," 12:55-13:37). (As Zadie Smith put it.)

Dwayne Donald teaches that "[w]e are drawn into a story by the desire to make meaning and transform our sense of *who* and *where*" (Donald 549). When I get flustered and confused and fragile, I try to keep that in mind.

Halfway through writing about an all-girls canoe trip and the emergence of queer experience in that environment, I am compelled by a friend and colleague to watch *Portrait of a Lady on Fire.* Not only is the masterpiece by Céline Sciamma blowing up on the international stage—though how could France not send it to the Oscars?!—but it's travelling furiously the way lesbian films used to have to, even in my Millennial's memory. Overnight, it seems, I have foisted it on everyone I know. The queer women in particular have gone on to actually watch it and then foist it on everyone *they* know, meaning that before long I've become a great-grandmother, of sorts, in terms of my possibly life-changing cinematic influence upon people I've never met … Where am I going with this? Oh right. I am obsessed with the film, not just as a finished entity but as a process invented by its creators.

I watch a lecture in which Sciamma lists, as "local … units of desire" ("Céline Sciamma," 9:08-9:20), the first few images she found for the film. For example, she wanted "Adèle Haenel [to run] fast towards the edge of a cliff" (9:45-9:50). And to literally set fire to the actor—who is also her ex-girlfriend (9:50-9:53).

What excites me the most is how her ethos as a director and on-the-ground filmmaker, as detailed in interviews with the cast, is congruent with what she calls her "global desires" (7:35-7:44) for writing and storytelling. One of the large-scale aims of the script was "to show an artist at work, and write an artist/model collaboration that would depart from the fetishized muse tradition" (8:25-8:35). In the movie, Héloïse (played by Haenel) is an active and vocal critic and idea-hatcher; though Marianne's 'money job' is to paint her, *art* only happens through a creative conversation. This "horizontality" ("PORTRAIT … Q&A," 15:05-15:30), says Haenel, was mirrored in the making of the film itself.

I fall into a pit of ecstatic, despairing nerdiness. Imagine! Achieving such a feat of lesbian glory for the ages—in a gesture that raises cinema to the level of the female gaze (e.g., Soloway)—and doing so in collaboration *with your own ex-girlfriend?* The trust that that must take. The robust care, the humility, the malleability of intimacies. And yet, I can picture it. Rewatching *Portrait* with the knowledge of Haenel and Sciamma's lesbian identities, activism, and relationship, Death of the Author becomes the stalest of concepts; I feel held and beheld by the layers of authenticity. With the pent-up sentimentality of what feels like generations I am convinced that I *know* these people, both the eighteenth-century characters and the minds and hearts behind them.

Indeed, that's the point of stories. But where there haven't been many, we bask in the relief. Something deep within relaxes. In this case, for me, it's the narratives that I sought out in secret and internalized, as a young person. They were few and far between and they all seemed wounded. They involved a lot of gay girls jumping off buildings, or trying to.

Self-hatred, despair, mental illness, and lateral violence—as well as the tendency (historical and ongoing) of romantic betrayal to have worse consequences for LGBTQ2+ people than for others, in societies and situations that isolate us—these are important dimensions to queer storytelling.

And. *And* we need to reflect the solidarity that is there, in stubborn and unique ways, and always has been. Among the queer women I know, for example, I have often seen norms of friendship that differ from those most easily understood by heteronormative culture. That a love story can possibly end in enduring friendship, is a given.

When my best friend from childhood was born in Edmonton in 1989, her non-biological mum had no rights as a parent or guardian. This remained unchanged throughout our childhoods. Her mums were their own moral safety net, and when they separated when Faith was a toddler, there would have been no legal system to fall back on—had they needed it.

What they did was create one of the strongest and most loving family dynamics I have seen. Growing up watching them, it felt run-of-the-mill for exes, stepdads, and stepmums to be the cosiest of best friends with each other.

Many queer women that I am friends with and/or have dated have forged lasting bonds with an ex. Sometimes these relationships are deeply familial. This may be something of a subcultural norm for a bunch of reasons, an obvious one being the history of queer people having to depend on one another for survival, outside of families and communities of origin. I don't think it's any better or worse, say, than amicable detachment. But it has to do with thriving, not just surviving—when it happens well—and I'd like to think the culture at large might stand to learn from it.

Enter power ex-couple, Adèle and Céline! Writing the roles for each other that don't exist yet, or else carrying them brilliantly. Not waiting. Just doing.

I'm really hung up on this, Google rabbit holes and all. It means a lot to see a relationship like theirs as a publicly claimed process, and on so large a platform.

While nerding out about Sciamma and Haenel's relationship, I have an internal meltdown about how nothing I've written so far is interesting or begins to get at what I want to say about anything. This is a dramatic cover-up for what I really feel, which is inspired. As well as renewed and at the beginning of everything—despite the grey hairs tufting up from my temples, while I'm working, like the nubs of ghostly antlers.

It occurs to me that in "How Our Calls Cross the Ocean," the narrator sees the option of moving to New Zealand as not just about Damien, but also about Kerri, Claire, and Kerri's new partner. She finds the closeness and flexibility of their family welcoming, and if she feels threatened it is by their potential to become what she needs (which, amid her grief process, is confronting).

Later when I finish "River," I see that the novella, too, contains ongoing, non-conflict-based relations between former partners. The twins' parents and step-parents seem to have figured it out, and Missy alludes to being friends with "several" of her exes.

Missy never revealed to me her taste in movies, but if I could foist *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* upon the woman at sixteen, it would be an emphatic foisting. It might sail over her sensitive and preoccupied head, but I doubt it. At the very least it might reassure her.

What she was needing, at that age—I think—was sisterhood.

I yearn for spaces of ease between women to be not just ordinary in real life, which I think they are, but the intensely felt subject of enough lauded and popular narratives that they become the air we grow up breathing.

In the space of solidarity between Marianne, Héloïse, and the maid Sophie, each can be looked at and seen properly without being objectified. Is this an effortless dynamic? No. They have to voice themselves, negotiate, remind each other. When Sophie's having her abortion, Marianne's instinct as a classically trained painter is to look away. But Héloïse commands her to watch. Sophie has taken them into her confidence and they are there to support her and share the experience—which is Marianne's *responsibility*, as an artist, to witness actively.

When the scene is painted, it is with the participation of all three.

The turning point of the romantic storyline is the moment at which Marianne destroys the first portrait. Until then, the tension has been built around the secrecy of her career—but our expectations are now undercut. She has just told Héloïse the truth, and there was no moment of betrayal.

In its place is artistic failure. What upsets Héloïse is not that she's been the subject of Marianne's gaze and art; but that that gaze and art, as she sees it, have only replicated the "rules, conventions, ideas" (*Portrait*, 00:49:43-00:49:56)—i.e., the lifelessness (*Portrait*, 00:49:57-00:50:06)—of society's view of her.

When Héloïse sees the destroyed portrait, she gives Marianne a look that again shifts the dance of their beholding of one another. A new contract is entered into, from which economic and patriarchal constraints are not absent, but within which you can choose when to see and be seen. The women grant *themselves* this power.

And consent transforms art.

As for Missy, it takes thirteen days—and a close shave with death—for her to trust the possibilities of an all-female space. Unlike Sciamma's women, she doesn't see other girls as natural allies. Life has conditioned her to believe that they will admire but not love her, so on the canoe trip she plays the role of the pretty, intimidating one—or tries to.

The problem is that she *needs* her fellow paddlers. For physical and emotional survival.

I wanted to write about something which I believe to be universally human: the experience of having the rules change on you. Having internalized a cold, evaluative gaze when it comes to judging herself and other women, Missy attempts to have things shake down the way she thinks they should. But her eyes aren't trained for what she sees.

Sciamma says her method is about "trying to build an architecture of multiple desires" ("Céline Sciamma," 4:55-5:00). Screenwriting, in its agonizing slowness, "is the opportunity to work on your desires rather than acting immediately on them … It's about resisting easy pleasures and resisting the temptation of belonging" (6:00-6:32). Once she has determined her "global desires" (7:35-7:44) for a film, she begins by constructing two lists.

On the first list are scenes that she wants. On the second list are scenes that she needs. No scene may remain on the "needed" list. It must be cut, or "become desired" (11:19-11:22).

When she found the image of Sophie lying next to a baby while having her abortion, the scene went from necessary, to desired. It now belonged to the film, not just the plot. How did she know? By that feeling she gets when she can't wait to make something, no matter the slog.

I wanted a young woman to hear her own name as if for the first time, and I wanted this to happen on a paddling trip, in an emergency scenario. I saw the waterfall and heard the calls of her "frenemies" resounding. Claiming her.

As I got to know Missy, it became clear that the backbone of the narrative would be her shifting view of Lauren. The canoe trip affords a break from being looked at and evaluated physically all the time—which I hope the reader can see is exhausting, for Missy—and I wanted to inhabit her aloofness towards the other girls, and feel it challenged. Observing and beholding Lauren, I think, is a process of cognitive dissonance that imposes on Missy a new framework for being accepted.

And that framework is one of—*desire.* There is little separation between Lauren and what Lauren wants; if she's cold, she does a dance. If there's a sick set of waves, she guns for it. Missy sees her vulnerability, but also that she's not completely trapped inside her image, analyzing it.

In *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf argues that in contemporary Western culture, the concept of "beauty" as it is used against women isn't fundamentally about appearance, but obedience. "A quietly mad population," she writes, "is a tractable one" (Wolf 187). We are affronted, as a society, when a woman isn't deferential enough to the moving target of how she should look.

I hope that Missy makes us a bit uncomfortable when she talks frankly about her own looks. Nice girls, if they're deemed the best-looking in their entire school, should blush to death under the honour and never mention it again—not find a pathway to believing that it is, in fact, true. (I'm realizing that I'd love to write a character who agrees effortlessly with such an assessment, and puts it on her resumé. But that's not quite Missy.) And they mustn't lord their superiority over less "fortunate" peers, as Missy tries to on the canoe trip, even though—in doing so—they're simply adhering to the contradictory, can't-win model of their own value.

I gave Missy a break from all that objectifying and self-objectifying, let her happen upon the *emotion* of finding beauty in someone. But I wanted also to show the heartbreak that can follow these snapshots of clarity in our lives, incrementally and cumulatively. So often I think we recognize the dark insecurities that govern us, but that doesn't mean we can put them down, not yet.

My thesis for writing stories is this.

I want to go on more hikes and throw my phone in a swamp. (Sorry, swamp. I won't actually …) Walk and talk with myself like the twelve-year-old me, invent a long, unlikely tale.

I should build a biking desk.

A first scene should make a reader in a cold climate drop what they're doing and draw a chamomile-lavender-patchouli bubble bath. Ditto my reaction to Newfoundland and mermaids, in Emma Hooper's *Our Homesick Songs*.

Speaking of mermaids, my friend in Canmore—who cringed "in a good way" at the canoe trip story—has a new request: a yarn with selkies.

I want the complexity of my relationship to the lands I live on, as well my relations—current and historical—with the peoples to whom they belong, to be fundamental to my imagining.

It's on me, as a white settler writing, to "unsettle" (Regan) my storytelling, not by scrubbing my characters of evidence of privilege and racism, but by paying attention to them as as they really are and have been, not as they would like to be seen.

When I am wrong, may I be strong enough to learn.

I want to make myself laugh.

When I am around people and loving them, writing's more sustainable.

I want a world where the babies aren't anxious. And for my pretend people to comfort real ones, and to make them feel human.

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