Apparitions: essay-stories

by

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Abstract

This collection of essays explores my experience of girlhood in rural Alberta and beyond, especially the ways in which my relationships with other women and girls have impacted my sense of myself and the world. This project takes a particular interest in platonic love, and the kinds of heartbreak and longing that emerge out of female friendships. By consistently evoking ghosts and haunting, I attempt to make physical the underlying precarity of relationships, as well as the ways in which our past relationships continue to influence and interrupt the present. Two central questions here are: How do we manage and interact with our personal histories? And is it possible to truly leave behind the relationships we develop in our formative years? These essays often resist closure, asking readers to sit inside the uncertain aftermath of grief and embody a meaningful sense of *not knowing*. The beckoning call of our places of origin is also central, and parts of this collection aim to explore as well as trouble what it might mean for a settler person to be "at home" on stolen lands; in this case, on Treaty 8 and Treaty 6 territory. As the narrator grapples with the ghosts of her past, she must also engage with the complicated nature of longing for a home that might not "belong" to her in the way she once imagined. Importantly, this project took shape alongside an ongoing reading practice and was inspired by a number of exceptional writers and thinkers, including Sara Ahmed, Jo Ann Beard, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Sheri and Heather Benning, Sheila Heti, Maggie Nelson, Erin Wunker and others.

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The Ghosts of Girlhood: An Introduction

Every so often, in my undergraduate fiction and poetry workshops, my professors would come to me with the same question: "Are you sure this isn't non-fiction?" No matter how much I tried to shoehorn my stories into another genre, I always got busted. Why did it matter, anyway? As Jo Ann Beard says in an interview with *Slice*, the boundary between fiction and non-fiction tends to be permeable; "I do care quite a lot about the truth-factor in my own work," says Beard, "if not the fact-factor" (Sistare). I was also writing toward the "truth-factor," but as time wore on, the relevance of the "fact-factor" began to nag at me. When writing fiction starts to feel like hiding, it might be time to consider a change in genre. And there is something empowering about taking ownership of your own story, your failures and joy and mess. It is both vulnerable and cathartic. To quote Beard again: "I always felt the weight of the future, even as a baby . . . My past is light, though; I've written it into submission" (Berman).

My past was heavy, and I wanted to make it lighter. Much of that weight came from my adolescence in rural northern Alberta. During that time, I often felt like a ghost observing my own life. I was neither inside nor entirely outside my own body, inside nor entirely outside the world of my peers, inside nor entirely outside the world beyond small-town Alberta. Thus, the autobiographical essays in this collection consider various kinds of liminality, in-betweenness, and the experience of occupying both a voluntary and involuntary position on the periphery of things. They also consider what it might mean to experience young womanhood in contemporary rural Alberta, especially the ways in which women and girls tend to make, transform, and even erase each other over time. In other words, this project is a celebration of female friendships,

maternal relationships, and sisterhood as much as it is a meditation on turmoil, unrequited love, and the ghosts that emerge from the wreckage of our most meaningful relationships.

Last fall, I read Sheri Benning's essay, "Watching Woman: The Marysburg Project." The essay opens with Sheri and her sister, Heather Benning, camping in rural Saskatchewan. Heather is about to begin construction on a twenty-four-foot sculpture, to be assembled inside an abandoned farmhouse nearby. The "Watching Woman" was completed in 2004, her legs breaking through the ceiling of the house's old kitchen, her breasts erupting into the once-nursery, and her giant, plaster head bursting from the roof. As Heather Benning notes, the sculpture "gestures toward the multitudinous stories of prairie farm wives whose harsh realities were never discussed" (qtd in Benning 47). It also serves as a literal example of the ways in which women make one another, and further how a great deal of that making takes place within, as well as expands beyond, traditionally domestic spaces. It is my hope that the subjects and settings of the essays in this collection may echo Heather Benning's work as ruminations on feminine desire, as well as the comforts and constraints of the domestic sphere.

Just like she peers across the Saskatchewan prairie, Heather Benning's sculpture watches over her sister's accompanying essay, where she recounts a breast cancer scare, one friend's traumatic experience of being restrained during a c-section, and another's refreshingly positive memory of her abortion, through which she was supported by her mother. In sharing these stories, Sheri Benning brings the silenced suffering of prairie farm wives highlighted by her sister's sculpture into conversation with the largely still-unspoken narratives of contemporary women in Western Canada. As she supports her friend post-partum and ruminates on the compassion of her friend's mother and abortion nurse, Benning also underscores the ways in which women tend to forge our own safe spaces together. But these spaces, as well as the bonds

that are strengthened there, are always uncertain; indeed, Sheri Benning's concern for what will happen to the Watching Woman when the crowds of art critics, academics, and prairie grandmothers have stopped coming to see her seems anchored in an underlying anxiety that the sculpture and the women it represents may eventually be forgotten again (51). Half-asleep in a field in Saskatchewan, on the camping trip that begins Sheri Benning's essay, Heather imagines a counter-possibility to the Watching Woman's gradual decay and disappearance from the public imagination: setting her on fire (51).

According to Heather Benning's website, the Watching Woman was destroyed by vandals in 2011. Nonetheless, her previous inclination to set her work aflame speaks to the tenuousness of the worlds women and girls make in and with one another. So too does a scene in Sheri Benning's essay, where the plaster mould her sister attempts to make of her torso hardens into a suffocating shell that knocks Sheri unconscious, and must be torn from her body in pieces (45-46). It is imperative to note that these constructions and potential demolitions, by fire, neglect, silence, time, or our own hands, always occur inside the pressure cooker of patriarchal, colonial-capitalism. As Erin Wunker writes in *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy*, "There are points in female friendship *where the intimacy and witnessing become too much both for the world in which it exists and for the language of the world as it is*" (136). This tipping point is not necessarily immediate nor easy to identify; Wunker reflects:

> What I had were too many experiences of ferociously close friendships with women that, for one reason or another, fell apart. It was as though we would get too close, too dependent on one another, and one day, suddenly, the barometric pressure of the relationship would shift, and just like that, drift would happen (134).

Like *Notes from a Feminist Killjoy*, this project calls on personal experience in order to explore some of the points before and after this so-called "drift" takes place. In particular, I am interested in the ways in which the space "after" may lack the concreteness of closure, producing a sense that one is haunted. That is to say that this project, with its specific focus on longing and liminality, features its fair share of ghosts. I want to acknowledge, in the interest of transparency, that the ghosts in the coming pages are not the work of my imagination. I cannot take credit for their antics. They appeared and became stories, so that they could reappear again and again. This project, as Avery F. Gordon puts it in the opening chapter of her book, *Ghostly Matters*, "looks for a language for identifying hauntings and for writing with the ghosts" (7). For me, these are the literal spectres that haunt the houses I grew up in, as well as the shadows of lost—or almost lost—loves. These essays explore the ghost-like precarity of female friendships, maternal relationships, and other platonic bonds forged between women. I also attempt to think through the ways in which women and girls participate in a process of raising each other, in adolescence and beyond, as well as how the loss or potential loss of these relationships manifests a particular kind of heartbreak.

When I originally proposed this project, I imagined it strictly as meditation on rural girlhood. Through the process of writing, the stories have expanded outward, to Edmonton and even California, but the question of place remains essential. I am especially concerned with the disorienting experience of becoming estranged from a place that, for me, once represented the epitome of home: northern Alberta. On the one hand, this estrangement stems from the simple fact of my displacement from the place where I grew up. But as my understanding of Canada's violent and ongoing colonial legacy becomes more nuanced, I have also come to know a broader

feeling of disconnect from this place. My personal definition of "home" is not clear or definite, and reflects a specific kind of dissonance, where my position as a white settler living on stolen lands is critically unstable. This perspective is informed by Indigenous histories, which counter and expand reductive textbook narratives that perpetuate the fallacy that Indigenous peoples ever freely ceded their traditional lands and territories to colonial power. Not only is this a fundamental untruth, it is also the kind of oversimplification that allows white settlers to continue to accept, benefit from, and comfortably inhabit a colonial-capitalist system that actively erases and does harm to Indigenous communities. In his essay, "Fatal Naming Rituals," Billy-Ray Belcourt writes that, "Simplicity is a mode of being in the world available to those enmeshed in white structures of feeling. Simplicity is an affect that motors the cultural imaginary of whiteness; it is an interpretive strategy." Taking Belcourt's critique of simplicity to heart, this project resists the commemoration of "quaint" rural settler life and acknowledges the ways in which colonial history itself is a ghost that haunts and harms us all in different ways.

My hometown, High Prairie, is located only thirty kilometres from Joussard and Grouard, Alberta, where residential schools were operational until the mid-twentieth century. Yet that history felt distant when I was growing up, in part because of the misleading past-ness of the history presented in my classrooms, and in part because of my position of privilege as a white settler in a predominantly white community. I was educated in a provincial school system that watered down the horrific realities of colonial violence for Indigenous peoples in Canada, and received what Dwayne Donald calls "the tipis, food, legends and costumes version of Aboriginal reality, which gives the unfortunate impression that Aboriginal people have not done much since the buffalo disappeared" (25). These narratives undermine the real and ongoing violence of colonialism and serve the interests of a nation state that benefits from the continuation of that

violence. While I by no means felt entirely comfortable in High Prairie, especially as a young woman living in a town rampant with toxic masculinity, my experience living on Treaty 8 and Treaty 6 lands is specific to my position of privilege within those spaces, and I will always be engaged in a process of re-learning history, resisting simplicity, and trying to fill in the blanks.

Through the process of writing, I have further come to read my places of origin through the lens of Freud's uncanny, also known as the *unheimlich*, or the "unhomelike" (Freud 84). The opening essay in this collection, "Roads Toward Home" recounts my first journey home in several years and is rooted in the uncanny effect of experiencing "something long known to us" as simultaneously familiar and strange (Freud 85). This includes the disorienting sensation of returning to Treaty 8 territory with a new understanding of the system of violence that brought it into being. "Roads Toward Home" is an establishing essay, which informs the pieces to come; indeed, many of the stories throughout this collection feature their own "roads" toward home, as the narrator finds herself unable to escape the literal and figurative ghosts of her upbringing, her relationships, and her environment.

"Apparitions," for instance, zooms in on Township Road 744, which leads to the narrator's childhood home, and becomes a site of gendered violence. In "A Voice Calling from the Bottom of a Long Flight of Stairs," the narrator confronts her uncanny "double" in both the ghost of a woman who once occupied her apartment, and in the spectral vision of herself in dreams. This essay challenges the notion that one can truly "belong" to a place that inevitably carries its own history, while also acknowledging the ways we are always implicated in those histories. In a slightly different turn, "Season Finale" reflects upon what it might mean to have an "ending" in a contemporary media landscape that is obsessed with resuscitating "dead" content in order to profit on nostalgia. It also examines how social media produces its own hauntings,

and draws us home in unexpected, and perhaps unwanted, ways. Finally, "Sisters" explores the complicated nature of friendships forged during childhood, which may persist despite our having outgrown them, and may reproduce a vision home that can no longer exist. These spectral visions of home are both welcome and disorienting, creating a sense of unease in the familiar that is characteristically uncanny.

In a broader but not unrelated sense, the essays in this collection seek to convey an ongoing feeling of uncertainty in the narrator. This uncertainty applies to her understanding of place, the status of her friendships, and her conception of herself as a young woman navigating the world. In these ways, this project takes after Jo Ann Beard's memoir *The Boys of My Youth,* which often conveys a sense of precarity about the status of Beard's relationships, as well as the fragility and ambiguity of one's position in one's own life. In her essay "Out There," Beard recounts a trip from Iowa to Florida and back, in the immediate aftermath of her husband's confession that he does not love her. As she drives through Alabama, Beard is targeted by an enraged stranger, who drives alongside her on the highway and screams through his window that he wants to kill her. In this moment of terror, Beard loses all sense of herself; she writes, "There is no husband, there is no Volkswagen, there is nothing. There isn't even Jo Ann right now" (148). This last line takes on layered meaning in the looming shadow of Beard's divorce, so the essay becomes not only about the very real threat of male violence, but also what it means to be a woman in the world *alone*, and how Beard might confront the momentous task of forging a sense of safety inside and outside of herself as a single woman.

"The Yoga Retreat" occupies a similar wavelength and explores the narrator's confrontation with an older, predatory male, while embarking on a (rapidly failing) experiment in self-discovery. Keeping in mind the nuance of meaning in Beard's essay, "The Yoga Retreat"

examines the complex, non-linear terrain of female self-discovery, where spaces that might seem conventional and safe can quickly become perilous. At the core of the essay is also the question of *who we choose as our teachers,* which sends the narrator on yet another road toward home, as she gains new appreciation for her mother's guidance. This mother-daughter relationship is further explored in "Spring Migration," where her mother's cancer diagnosis, treatment, and recovery force the narrator to confront her parent's mortality and reimagine her most enduring female bond. The remaining two essays, "Flowering" and "A Heart Premonition," also engage with the question of what it might mean to lose someone dear to us, though under vastly different circumstances. Both essays explore the difference between *letting go* and *being let go*, as well as the limits and possibilities of self-care, and human resilience in the face of incredible change.

The process of completing this work has likewise been a test of the limits and possibilities of self-care, as well as an experiment in "running away from running away from home" (Beard 144). It has been emotionally taxing to sit with my ghosts, day in and day out. I have, however, been in great company among Sheri and Heather Benning, Erin Wunker, Jo Ann Beard, and others who are interested in the ways in which our relationships with other women and girls can shape our worlds. Wunker writes, "I've had friends walk away . . . I've been the friend who walks away. Sometimes, friendship falters and disappoints. Sometimes I falter and disappoint. That hurts. It still hurts" (143). My work aims to sit inside the *still hurting,* and for that reason, many of the essays in this collection intentionally resist closure and seek to inhabit the middle ground that tends to underscore the dissolution of deeply meaningful relationships. Such middle ground is defined by the persistence of potentially breakable silences that stretch across time, making ghosts out of those who once were fixtures in our lives.

In this spirit, each essay in this collection is also accompanied by a short piece of erasure poetry, taken from an anonymous note that was given to me as a teen. The note is quoted in its entirety in the collection's prologue and continues to "haunt" the text in fragments. These poetic fragments, which are in conversation with their original source text, are themselves apparitions that mirror the narrator's search for connection and contact with the spectres of her past. The anonymity of the note also speaks to the troubled kinds of love covered throughout the project; the note itself is an unanswerable call, and another echo from a home that can never be located, identified, answered. The bolded sections of each poem further gesture toward the themes and curiosities of this project, hovering on questions like "Where do you live?" or creating new ones from the source material; for example, "what do you think about me?" becomes simply, "do you think about me?" These notes within notes inspire and inform the essays they accompany, not unlike the figure of the Watching Woman, which both inhabits and observes Sheri Benning's essay on young womanhood. Indeed, with her white plaster body and stoic, anonymous facial features, the Watching Woman might be mistaken for a ghost.

I make this comparison optimistically, and with the hopeful conviction that haunting tends to open more doors than it closes. As Gordon writes, "Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (8). What is needed in the face of incredible heartbreak and despair, whether that be personally, socially, or, as is often the case, both together, is something that opens us up to the transformative. Many of the essays in this collection wonder after what could have been—and in many cases, what still could be—different. When, in "Apparitions," the narrator looks for evidence of ghosts as a means to cope with the murder of a woman in her community, she sees the spectral as symbolic

of an alternate future, where ghosts become a way to "imagine living elsewhere before we can live there" (Gordon 5). Similarly, the child ghosts that haunt "Sisters" speak to the narrator's anxiety about whether or not she desires to have children. These child ghosts represent a number of different (or transformative) personal futures. In "Spring Migration," the narrator confronts the possibility of her mother's ghost, and must navigate a new, precarious future where the longevity of their relationship is under threat. Other phantoms in these pages exist in memory have been lost only to the world of the narrator; these "living ghosts" are casualties of Wunker's "drift" and incite a sense of unfinished emotional business. In the simplest terms, this series of essay-stories seeks to continually ask, "What if?" inviting the reader to sit inside the uneasy reverberations of a variety of potentially avoidable losses, the interruption of which might manifest new or altered futures.

If Julian Wolfreys is right when he claims that "all stories are, more or less, ghost stories" and moreover that "all forms of narrative are, in one way or another, haunted," then these essays are my attempt to invite my ghosts into being and share my haunted experience of girlhood and young womanhood. Like ghosts, stories are visitations from another realm—this is the realm of memory, of imagination, what Patricia Hampl calls the "unmapped geography" of writing (222). That is, while this project explores many in-betweens—of place, bonds, identity—there is also the "in-between position of the writer" to reckon with (Hampl 222). Perhaps especially when it comes to memoir, the experience of writing is defined by a sense of being both here and there, lost yet grounded; for instance, I have been continually amazed at how infrequently I can recognize the ending of a story that has already happened. But I feel certain that the way toward the "truth-factor" is not the manufacturing of a resolution where there has been none. For that reason, these essay-stories may make their home in yet another in-between, which is the space

between beginnings and endings. This liminal position might be fitting for a project that is more "Shards glinting in the dust" than a comprehensive archive (Hampl 222). Regardless, what follows are a selection of my stories so far, my uncertain roads toward home, my "inkling[s] . . . toward meaning," (Hampl 224). These are my small worlds revived and reimagined, always changing, and, I can only hope, "ghostly real" (Hampl 222).

"It is other women, not men . . . who most impact the evolution of girls into women. Other women, not men, who provide the opportunities for self-expression and self-discovery. Other women, not men, who bear witness to the triumphs and tragedies of young womanhood. Other women, not men, in whom we both find and lose ourselves."

- Anna Holmes, "The Age of Girlfriends"

"Do I have an electron microscope or am I blinded? Do I see more clearly now or is this a distortion? I could ask that about the whole wide world."

- Elizabeth Wurtzel, "I Believe in Love"

Prologue

Whoever left the note probably didn't expect that I would keep it all this time. The anonymous sender dropped it into my seventh-grade locker like someone releasing a bottle into the sea. The message read as follows:

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

I didn't show the note to anyone. I read it quickly, then folded the torn piece of notebook paper into a rectangle and took it home. Sometimes I'd unearth it from my desk drawer, study its plainly printed letters, it's unusual immediacy and precision. By opening with an apology, the sender warns that what follows might be awkward, messy, too much. We get it anyway.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

Roads Toward Home

I grew up in rural northern Alberta, in a town called High Prairie. Though often confused with High River, Grande Prairie, or High Level, it is none of those places. My hometown is about a four-hour journey from Edmonton, cutting northwest on Highway 2 through Westlock, Slave Lake, Driftpile First Nation, and Sucker Creek First Nation. A number of smaller communities also branch out from either side of the highway: Kinuso, Joussard, Grouard, East Prairie Métis Settlement. Travelling north, one leaves Treaty 6 and enters Treaty 8 territory, 840,000 square kilometres of land mass that has existed under treaty for more than a century.

In the summer of 2019, I went back to High Prairie for the first time in three years. My parents relocated to Edmonton in 2016, following my mother's cancer diagnosis. Although I'd lived in Edmonton for a while, and had gone home many times, I'd never been back in this way, with the sole intention of *seeing* it.

By then, I'd been uprooted from my small town and felt dubious about whether I should still consider High Prairie home or simply a place of origin. I was hungover from an adolescence spent grappling with an overwhelming sense of not belonging, and most of the friendship bonds that might have brought me back to that place were frail or broken. My experience at university had also expanded my understanding of Canada's colonial legacy and complicated my sense of what it means to claim something as your own. Sharon Venne: "Sharing our resources, a treaty right of non-indigenous peoples, has led to the colonizing government assuming control over all the resources above and below the surface. This is a treaty violation."[1] How could I call a place

[1] *Treaties Made in Good Faith*, 7.

home when the very conditions necessary for my being there were not being met? Further, what might it mean to be *at home* on stolen lands?

I have been in the grips of this line of questioning for as long as I have been trying to write about my life in rural Alberta. Even when I'm not trying to write about it, that place barges in, along with all the questions it stirs up. Those moments aren't so much like being pulled back home, but rather are a confrontation with a persistent desire to move *toward* a shifting idea of home. This sense of *toward-ness* is truer to what High Prairie means to me now—and what living on Treaty 6 and Treaty 8 lands as a settler means to me now—because there can be no set coordinates for an understanding of home that is constantly in flux.

To write toward home is to sit inside my own uncertainty. It is to underscore my inability to know the whole story. It is to imagine a potential route to a still-unclear destination. It is also to acknowledge the ways in which my small prairie town remains in my bones, though never quite in the same way again.

The places where we grow up are often difficult to shake because they are our first sites of incredible joy and pain. Northern Alberta is that centre point for me. It is an axis. It is also a place deeply affected by the enduring violence of colonialism, which is actively perpetuated by a flawed provincial school curriculum that falsely confines that history to the past. This is one example of how language features centrally in colonialism's toolkit, as well as one reason why my time at university has included a comprehensive "critical re-reading"[2] of history that remains ongoing. But the beauty of language is that it is also a medium with which we can trouble the way of things, change our own thinking, and, as Sara Ahmed puts it, "keep going despite or even because of what we come up against."[3]

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[2] Dwayne Donald, *Edmonton Pentimento*, 25.
[3] *Living a Feminist Life*, 6.

It might be uncomfortable for settler people to alter our conceptions of the places that, in many ways, formed our senses of ourselves. Necessary to this shift is a direct confrontation with the violence that made and makes our being here a reality, and that confrontation brings with it the inevitable realization that what has previously always felt like home does not belong to us at all. But this is a truth worth steeping in.

I suspect that shifting one's idea of home becomes easier when one is not troubled by any strong or enduring affection for the place where one grew up. I think I fall into that category, or at least, into the category of people whose affection for their hometown is very fraught. I wasn't even supposed to be born in High Prairie. My mother went into labour in McLennan, Alberta, which was the town where she spent much of her childhood. This was supposed to be a strategic plan, because my mother felt that the hospital there had access to slightly more advanced medical equipment. That theory was challenged when, halfway through delivery, we were ambulanced thirty minutes back to High Prairie.

There was a lot of blood. We survived.

I don't know much about astrology, but I was born two weeks late and in a different place than expected, under a slightly shifted sky. I missed the Pisces window by ten days and instead came out a ram. The place I was supposed to arrive in wouldn't have me, and I would later try to reject the one that wanted me instead.

In an essay titled "Where the World Began," Margaret Laurence describes her birthplace of Neepawa, Manitoba as "a place of incredible happenings, splendours and revelations, despairs like multitudinous pits of isolated hells . . . a place of jubilation and of mourning, horrible and beautiful." This is her vision of the small prairie town, the setting where, Laurence writes, her

eyes were formed. Although she longed to escape Neepawa as a teenager, she would go on to identify that place as “the mainspring and source” of her creative work.

I also dreamed of leaving my small town behind, which was delusional. It will never let me forget, and I see now that it’s better that way. Remembering holds us accountable.

The house I lived in for most of my childhood and adolescence was on an acreage, and my bedroom window looked out on fields and bush and distant highway. I was accosted by my own isolation and hated it as much as its familiarity was a comfort.

My adolescence was cavernous with longing. But my inability to leave the place I felt most stifled and invisible also fostered a desire, and indeed a skill, for disappearing. I wanted so badly to fit in that I counted myself out before anyone had the chance to reject me. This was my lonesome armor, and a self-fulfilling prophecy that pushed me further away from the very thing I wanted most: genuine connections with other girls. I found myself occupying a liminal position among my peers, neither fully accepted by those around me, nor definitively excluded.

My environment had also made me familiar with middle grounds. High Prairie is an in-between place, changing as much as it stays the same. It struggles to be anywhere because it is always the point between one town and the next, never the destination. It is a community split between industries: oil and gas, lumber, agriculture. The time I spent there was defined by in-betweenness; it was the space between childhood and young adulthood. More specifically, it was the space between childhood joy and adolescent depression.

I remember hugging a lot of people on my graduation day. Several of my friends were crying, maybe because high school was over, and they were anticipating their own imminent nostalgia for the days of our youth. I was anxious for a conclusion, but there has never been

one—Margaret Laurence could have predicted that. I'm constantly returning to that something-like-home, awake and sleeping and when I write.

I took things a step further last summer, when I really went back. I drove nearly four hundred kilometres to stand in the place I imagined so often, which was real and yet distant. I wanted to compare memory and reality. I wanted to take pictures.

When I got there, I couldn't bring myself to stop the car. It felt too eerie, like stepping into an old painting. I drove slowly and gawked though the window, resigning myself to the hope that some images might sink into my brain as mental snapshots. I passed the abandoned Esso station, a barren plot of concrete and contaminated soil in the heart of town; the company has neglected to clean up the site for more than a decade. There was the rounded blue building that functioned as the library, with its bug-eyed windows, like a submarine. The vacant storefront of what was once a local video rental place, where my brother and I got games for our PlayStation. There were three liquor stores serving a community of a few thousand—when I left, there had been two. Places to buy alcohol now outnumbered places to buy food. One of the grocery stores was notorious for stinking like sewer, though the produce was cheaper.

A right turn took me past the hockey arena, domed and painted barn red at the base. Seeing it inspired the visceral memory of its odor, a repulsive yet comforting mix of sweat and gravy. I drove past my high school, which was brown and flat and looked shrunken like a raisin. There was a sign outside with black square letters that read: *C U IN THE FALL!*

I considered pulling into the high school parking lot but didn't. I took a left and headed for the movie theatre instead, where I had happier memories. It was a hammer-shaped building at the edge of town, nothing behind it but a long stretch of prairie and highway. It had a single screen, which showed one or two films per week. Each one was a gift.

I spotted a rippled crack in the window as I pulled up, which mirrored the condition of several other windows down the street. Some were patched with plywood. Most of the parking lots around town were empty. One heavily pot-holed parking area in front of a convenience store had even been closed off; a rough pentagram of yellow tape bordered it, wilting in the breeze. I don't know if, at any point, I saw another person. Instead, naked before me, was another kind of in-betweenness: my hometown was half-dead.

That was what made the idea of stopping seem so impossible. I would have been alone on the street, an exposed nerve. The only antidote was to keep going. I reverted back to my old habit and disappeared.

In September, a few months after my visit, two teenagers broke into the condemned High Prairie hospital and set it on fire. The blaze grew quickly and caused significant damage to the structure, though the building remained standing. It now exists in a state of purgatory, the squat white exterior bordered by a sagging chain-link fence.

I saw photos of the exterior damage online. They had been taken during the day, when the sky was blue and cloudless. One streak of black rose into the air, a smear of night that cut through the pale morning. A memory portal. I stepped through and re-entered the place where the world began for me.

Like smoke, the spectre of High Prairie seeps in through the cracks and gets into everything. It's somehow also the crack through which everything seeps. That place is always lingering around me, like the traces of campfire in my hair. It is a scorched building that sizzles long into the morning. It is a lingering question that I'll always live inside.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

Apparitions

When I was very young, I was hit by a bicycle. The culprit was another kid on my grandmother's street who liked to ride past the house while I played with my cousins in the driveway. He was older, maybe around twelve, and big for his age. I'd been suspicious of his desire to squash me for some time. His head would turn as he passed, gaze fixing on his target.

That day, he connected with me as easily as if he were pedalling over a speed bump. It seemed to happen from nowhere, and the kid took off immediately after, probably aware that he was in for some kind of punishment, but, I imagine, also high off the rush of having crushed the breath from my body. The air was hot, and the sidewalk was gritty. Rocks dug into my arms. Every moment felt oppressive and upside down.

My two older cousins ran over to tend to me. They were concerned about my wellbeing, and also eager to get the bicycle kid in trouble. My lungs refilled with oxygen and they ushered me inside, battling each other in a race to spill the details to the adults. My grandmother's house had two big picture windows that faced the street. The table was cluttered with vodka-waters and sweating glasses of beer. There were no witnesses.

At first, we struggled to convince anyone that the encounter had actually happened. I was crying and my lungs were sore. I can see now that the physics of the whole thing were slightly questionable, but we insisted it was true. My grandmother took me into the master bedroom and removed my shirt. To our mutual astonishment, the bicycle tire had indented my skin. I saw it in her hanging mirror: a red zipper across my back.

The evidence was presented to the others. My grandmother's friend, Marcel, became instantly outraged. He was one of the only openly gay men in town, so the injustice of the

incident might have been felt more acutely by him, as yet another example of toxic masculinity steamrolling everything its path. Everything happened very quickly from that point on. Marcel leapt into his shoes and darted down the driveway, his short legs pumping madly. He vanished from view while the rest of us crowded the window.

Outside, Marcel found that the kid hadn't gone very far since running me over. He was hovering down the street, still on his bicycle, monitoring the scene. Marcel launched after him, beginning a pursuit that would lead all the way to the kid's house several blocks away. There, the kid ditched his bike, ran inside, and subsequently suffered a violent asthma attack in his foyer.

The boy's mother called my grandmother the next day to enlighten her to the fact that her son almost suffocated to death on account of to her friend's stupid behaviour. Marcel was forced to return to the kid's house and apologize, though the justice of it all was not lost on me.

Stolen breath was taken back.

*

I learned to listen for the dead from daytime television and my grandmother. She always had the T.V. on, even when no one was home, in order to deter burglars. Her grandchildren were allowed to consume whatever she did, which was, to name a few titles: *The Jerry Springer Show*, *Maury*, *Ricki Lake*, and *The Montel Williams Show*.

There was a mirror on the wall between the kitchen and the living room. It reflected the television screen, so my grandmother could watch while she cooked. Every scene came to her backwards: a college girl lifts her shirt in exchange for a purple beaded necklace; a single mother

demands paternity test results; a woman with enormous breasts steps onstage and is asked how she copes with the burden of her enormous breasts—and without the right bra!

The famous psychic Sylvia Browne was a regular guest on *Montel*. She would swish her straw-blonde bob and speak to the audience about their dead relatives. Those watching at home were told to keep an eye out for coins; finding three or more together was a sign that your deceased loved ones were with you. My grandmother adored Sylvia Browne and clung to her every word. When we walked to the playground, she told me to watch the sidewalk for signs from our guardian angels.

They reached out to us only once, in the form of three pennies, clustered together in a triangle. My grandmother spotted them on the sidewalk and stopped abruptly, one hand reaching for her open mouth. She bent down to gather the coins, then poked at them in her palm, as if to confirm their materiality. “Can you believe it?” she said. “No one is going to believe it!” She took them home and sealed them, in their original triangle formation, inside a plastic sleeve in her photo album.

*

Walking became a more solitary activity as I got older. The summer I turned thirteen, I walked the length of our driveway almost every evening. The journey was a little more than a kilometre, toward Range Road 162, where a stop sign bisected a four-way intersection. As young adulthood loomed on the horizon, I found it satisfying to stand at a literal crossroads. Behind me was a dead end, canola fields and bush. Ahead was a distant opening of highway, where cars and semitrucks occasionally appeared.

To my left was another dead end, the last stop on Township Road 744. Alternatively, a right turn took you toward town. About a kilometre from the point at which gravel meets pavement, the road curves into a bend and is temporarily obscured by the cover of trees. It was there, inside that strange, near-invisible blip, that Riana Otto died in the spring of 1998.

She was killed, while on her morning jog, by my neighbour. It was May, so there might have been a quiet chill in the air, and the days were getting longer. Our neighbour at the end of Township Road 744 drove past her twice that morning. The second time, his truck blew a cloud of dust and rocks in Otto's direction, and she may have responded with an angry gesture. My mother always said that Otto motioned with her hand to tell the driver to slow down, but it doesn't matter anyway; the detail about the hand gesture was designed to blame Otto for the indefensible actions of a violent man.

In the minutes that followed, the driver confronted Otto, tried to rape her, then knocked her unconscious and strangled her with the lace from her running shoe. Otto's body was found, loosely concealed by brush, a few hours later. Her killer was arrested that evening with a face lined in scratch marks. I've imagined her bruises, an uneven, blotted purple line around her throat, blood pooling as air was blocked from her lungs.

I don't really recall a time before Riana Otto's death, nor do I remember the moment when I first understood the horrific details of its happening. I was three at the time, and incapable of understanding what was going on. I learned everything later, mostly from the women in my family, who refused to forget.

Otto's killer was released only a few days after his initial arrest and allowed to go home while law enforcement awaited more concrete evidence in the form of DNA results. My mother took me to my grandmother's house—always a safe haven—and two months later, the original

suspect was arrested and charged with homicide. For the rest of my childhood, Township Road 744 carried Riana Otto's memory toward me like a vein.

I had my matted collie to keep me company on my walks to the intersection. She came to anticipate our route and would sit by the stop sign and wait. I paused, listening to the insects and birds, the long grass rustling in the ditch. I would stand there until it felt ridiculous to look at the scene any longer; I'd wait for the horizon to seem almost foreign, like when you repeat a word over and over and it becomes unrecognizable. I wanted the road to shift slightly out of focus and become less fixed in its meaning. Only then did it feel right to turn back.

*

Once you start looking for ghosts, it's a difficult habit to break. I don't easily trust silences or empty rooms. Like my grandmother, I leave the television on, for the background noise and the company. Sometimes shapes appear in my vision, brief shadows pressing against an invisible barrier. I blink and they vanish, though I'm not sure that means they're gone.

In her 2019 Netflix special, *Stage Freight*, Jenny Slate reflects on the experience of being "raised in a haunted house," as well as by parents who openly discussed the presence of ghosts in their living spaces. In one scene, filmed in her childhood home, she sits across from her father as he describes an apparition that he once saw ascending their staircase. Slate cites this story as the source of her lifelong fear of the house; turning to her father, she asks, "What would I be like if I was one of those people who grew up in a house without ghosts?"

I've wondered the same thing, and at times have wanted to be that version of myself. Maybe I wouldn't be so anxious, or preoccupied by what might happen, what has happened. But

ghost stories broaden our understanding of what's possible. They ask us to practice believing in what we haven't seen and open ourselves up to the radical possibility of something not here, not this. To encounter an apparition is to witness a break in the status quo, a hopeful tear in the world as we think we know it. Now I refuse to close my ears to ghost stories or shut my eyes to those little, frightening shadows, because the spectral serves as evidence of something else beyond the "rules" of this place, beyond violence, beyond the so-called impossibility of transcendence.

And there are many kinds of apparitions. My grandmother, for instance, likes to recall one she saw on the morning of her mother's funeral. She was in her bedroom, when suddenly the air filled with the overwhelming scent of flowers. "Mom, where are you?" she asked aloud. From the lampshade descended a spider, life held by a line.

My grandmother planted a huge flower garden behind her house. Every summer, she would set up an aluminum tanning enclosure back there, three makeshift walls that beamed sunlight onto her skin. She'd lay in the garden for hours, surrounded by the thing that once had rescued her from despair, and soaking in the warm light.

She knew that the edges of the world could soften and asked me to believe the same. When they did, it was a tiny glimmer.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

A Voice Calling from the Bottom of a Long Flight of Stairs

My first apartment was in Edmonton, a one-bedroom suite a few blocks from the University of Alberta, where I was an undergrad. The building was old with a slow, heavy elevator and green carpeting. All the walls in the building were also green. The door to my suite was green.

When the leasing agent showed my mother and me the apartment, I was reminded of my grandmother's house. It had the same dark wood cabinets with vertical brass handles, and the same shallow pink bathtub.

"It won't be like this," the leasing agent said. She was severe looking, with a sharp nose and a slick ponytail. "Everything will be refreshed. The previous tenant lived here since the place was built, fifty years ago."

Refreshed or not, I thought the apartment was perfect. It had a big window in the living room with a view of the river valley. The air was so terribly hot that I could hardly breathe, but something about that comforted me. A hot room feels more like an embrace than a cold one.

After a sweaty weekend spent moving in, I found myself on my own for the first time. Shortly after that, I began to receive the previous tenant's mail. Letters from pet shelters, mostly, asking for further donations. Also, flyers with her name stickered to them, the odd envelope from an Internet service provider. Her name was Frances.

When I brought the mail down to the leasing agent's office to get a forwarding address, she told me that Frances was dead.

"She fell in her suite and couldn't get up. Paramedics had to break down the door—you might have noticed the marks. She died shortly after. Just write 'RTS' on the envelopes."

"Oh," I said. "Okay."

"Anything else? Everything good in your suite?"

"Everything's fine."

"Great."

Upstairs, I set the unopened mail on the kitchen counter, as though Frances might come back to collect it. I shuffled the papers around for a few days, moving them from countertop to table and back to countertop. Then I threw them away.

I didn't enjoy discarding Frances' mail. Once I knew about the circumstances of her death, I felt less like the resident of my first apartment, and more like an intruder in someone else's life. We forged a supernatural connection in my imagination, as the only two people to have inhabited our suite. My body became a shadow of hers, fifty years earlier, sitting on the couch, eating a frozen dinner, and looking out at the same river view.

At night, an unusual sort of electricity sometimes filled the room. Without having to think about it, I knew it was Frances, politely suggesting that I go to bed so she could have some time to herself. I listened to her urgings, and closed my bedroom door behind me, not because I was afraid, but because it seemed like the least I could do.

*

My parents sold their house two years after I moved out. It was purchased by a local family of three. Their son was my brother's best friend, a short, hyperactive sixteen-year-old with a taste for boredom-induced destruction. One week after moving in, he bought a pair of combat boots and set them on fire in the driveway, just to watch the rubber melt.

The new owners kept most of our furniture and seemed to step into our lives. A boy my brother's age slept in his bed and sat at the desk where they once played videogames together during sleepovers. A new couple shared the master bedroom. Or maybe they also slept apart, the new dad dozing off while watching History on the tiny, ancient television in the spare room.

My bedroom remained uninhabited, because the family didn't have a daughter to claim it. That's what I assume, anyway. When we were packing up, I tried to refinish my old desk to take with me to Edmonton. I ruined it stripping the paint and had to leave it behind, upside down, on the floor of the garage.

*

At the same time every evening, the door to my apartment unleashed a loud *pop*. The sound was not caused by anything on the other side of the door. I knew this because the door didn't move, and also because I'd checked, throwing it open seconds after a pop occurred. I found nothing but the dull green carpet on the other side. It was more unusual than the kind of pop that might be brought on by a change in air pressure, or the building settling on its foundation. It was an otherworldly burst from within, a release of energy.

I'd welcome Frances back.

*

After my parents sold the house, I travelled there in dreams. In the first one, I walked through every room, my panic growing as each one became more and more unrecognizable. Walls were

torn down and re-erected around me. Staircases led to nowhere. The kitchen was impossibly huge, and the cupboards were such a deep shade of black that I thought I might fall into them.

In another dream, it was winter, and I was in the middle of a field. I could see my house glowing in the distance and tried to go toward it, but my body was heavy, and I couldn't stand up in the snow. I pulled myself forward on my stomach but never got any closer.

In the final dream, I was house-sitting for the new family. It was nighttime, and no one was there, and it was incredibly quiet. I lay awake in my childhood bed, staring at the ceiling. There was a ghost in the room. I could feel it, like when Frances came to visit my apartment, only this time I was paralyzed with fear. I kept my body perfectly still for what felt like days, until I finally sat up to face it. I saw myself in the doorway, translucent and in my pajamas.

*

While getting ready in the morning, I sometimes heard a woman inside my blow dryer. It sounded like a voice calling from the bottom of a long flight of stairs, and I could never quite make out what she was saying. Maybe she was calling my name, or telling a story, but the words got knotted up inside the fan. As soon as I started to hear her, I'd turn off the blow dryer, but the room would be silent, and I was left wondering why the voice would only speak to me when my head was caught in a storm of electric wind.

*

I lived in that apartment for five years. Then, on a roasting day in July, I began to pack my things. I had a garbage bag on the floor, collecting junk that couldn't come with me to the new place. A heap of old Christmas cards, some cheap tarnished jewelry, a travel sewing kit missing its needles, a dried-up bottle of sunscreen. The bag also contained a white cotton shower curtain, which had a sizeable urine stain across the bottom. This came courtesy of my boyfriend, who had terrible vision and even worse aim when he shuffled to the toilet in the morning without putting on his glasses. We were moving in together, to a place downtown, with two bathrooms.

I tossed a few old photographs of him and me into the garbage bag. I'd found them at the bottom of a drawer, the products of a failed experiment with the Polaroid camera he'd bought me for my birthday. In the photos, we appeared tired and a bit forlorn and in need of showers. I had plenty of other, more appealing photos of us together, ones that only took up space on my computer hard drive. The stress of packing had highlighted the appeal of digital storage.

When the bag was full, I tied it up and took it out to the dumpster behind my building. I also grabbed my half-bald broom from the kitchen on my way out the door, to save myself the extra trip. I approached the bin, broom in hand. Just as I was about to toss it, a man emerged from his car and rushed toward me.

"Mind if I take that?" he asked.

I launched the garbage bag into the dumpster and shrugged.

"Sure. It's all yours."

He took the broom by the handle, eyeing the splayed, filthy bristles.

"This will come in handy," he said.

*

My lease officially ended a few days later. I did one last tour of my suite, said goodbye to the walls. I kept thinking about how they were once Frances' walls, before they were painted over, and my arrival. Her shag carpeting had been torn up, and all the cells and particles that may have been left of her went along with it. Her pale pink bathroom fixtures were replaced by shiny white ones. Like in my nightmare, the space had been rearranged without her permission.

The tiny, windowless kitchen was dark. I'd pulled the fridge and the stove away from the wall for the inspection. I imagined Frances crouched down behind the refrigerator, waiting for me to leave so she could have the place temporarily to herself again.

I wished Frances a silent farewell and locked the door behind me. Then I hit the button for the elevator and waited in the hall. Everything was blue now, instead of green.

I returned to the alley one final time, to discard a small bag of dust bunnies I'd gathered that morning. On my way to the dumpster, I noticed a small trail of litter spread out across the pavement. It looked familiar. The rusted clips from my shower curtain, my Christmas cards, a small spool of thread. The Polaroid photos.

Me sitting on the couch, greasy hair pulled back, clutching a pop can. My boyfriend, speckled cheeks pressed upward slightly into a nervous smile. We both looked uncomfortable, or maybe just unsure about being captured like this, our images birthed into our hands.

Before tossing the Polaroids, I'd tried to tear them in half, but the photo paper had been too tough, and I didn't have the energy to search for a pair of scissors. When I saw the pictures strewn across the road, I felt the terrible exposure I'd feared was possible. It was like strangers had seen me naked, instead of just braless and in a dirty T-shirt.

On the bright side, whoever had torn into my trash hadn't felt compelled to pocket our self-portraits. They did, however, take the piss-stained shower curtain. I suspected Broom Guy, who was probably curious what other treasures might be discarded by a woman willing to throw away a broom so willy-nilly.

I knelt beside the dumpster, breathing the smell of hot garbage. I quickly collected the photos, cards, and other items, adding them to the dust bunny bag. There were probably a few more photographs trapped beneath the dumpster. The thought of one of them blowing into the street later, to be found by a passer-by, made me cringe. I could hardly stand it, the thought of being seen like that: my body frozen in place, eyes unable to look away. Another ghost, trapped inside a room that's no longer mine.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

Season Finale

I became friends with J in the seventh grade. Her mother was a math teacher at our school, which made Friday night sleepovers at their house convenient. When classes ended, we'd hang around the empty halls and wait for her mom to finish grading quizzes or preparing for the next week's lessons. The school was roughly diamond-shaped, the ends of each hallway vanishing sharply into one another.

J's father was a cattle farmer, and their house was far from town. It was small and creaky. I loved the kitchen, which was accessible from a dark set of stairs by the front door. Entering the kitchen was like ascending into a warm, bright clearing. The walls were pasted with blue floral wallpaper and the exterior of the refrigerator was cluttered with magnets that held up school portraits. As a teacher, J's mother had more of these than the average person; her fridge was a collage of faces.

The laminate flooring was slippery and dotted with crumbs of brown sugar. The old yellow oven waited to be fed pans boxed brownie mix, which J's mom kept stockpiled in the basement. On Saturday mornings, J would make pancakes on an electric griddle. She was the only one between us who knew how to cook. I waited at the table like her child.

In the summer of 2019, the kitchen was demolished. I witnessed its destruction and subsequent transformation on J's Instagram account. I scrolled through images of the new kitchen: clean and white, with a large marble island and a window over the sink that looked out onto the garden. The floor had been leveled, eliminating the stairs that previously led up into the room. Because the kitchen was part of a new structure built onto the existing house, none of the walls or floors were the same. The layout of the room was flipped.

Seeing the renovation made me selfishly sad. I cherished my memories of that house, which I had not seen for years, and will surely never see again. I knew that J had graduated from an interior design program in Toronto, which meant that she likely had a hand in the project. Evidently, she hadn't envisioned an update so much as a complete overhaul. Something about that felt like being permanently erased from her world.

A few weeks after the remodel, another ghost appeared on my Instagram feed: the reboot of *Gossip Girl* was announced. The original show premiered in 2007, which, by no coincidence, was also the year that J and I formed our bond. We lost ourselves in the universe of Manhattan's elite teen socialites with the wholehearted attentiveness of two thirteen-year-old-girls living in the middle of nowhere. We were obsessed with the show's female leads, Blair and Serena, whose friendship is central to the show. The girls are longtime besties, but opposite personalities. Blair is preppy, reserved, and frequently prompted to mean, controlling behaviour by her hidden insecurities. Serena is a mischievous free spirit with cascading blonde hair and an appetite for trouble. Both girls are simultaneously perfect and imperfect, real and unreal. Their moments of vulnerability are always in conversation with their incredible privilege, so that even their pain transforms into glamour.

Probably because the show aired when I was at an impressionable age, I tend to imagine the world of *Gossip Girl* as inexorably tied to my own opposite existence in rural Alberta. I can imagine the series opening as if I'd lived it myself: Serena like a blonde statue in Grand Central Station. I watched from my bedroom, the window screen behind my bed clogged with spider webs, gravel dust, and the fluffy seeds from a thousand surrounding poplars.

In that first scene, Serena has just returned from an extended and unexplained stint at boarding school, which, we will learn, has left Blair without the support of her best friend in the

midst of her parents' divorce. As Serena wanders the terminal, her image is captured by a passing frenemy, who reports her location to the show's namesake gossip blog. The picture quickly travels across the Upper East Side, ending Serena's hiatus, and lighting a fire under long-abandoned Blair. Like this, Gossip Girl becomes a behind-the-scenes referee to the tennis match that is Blair and Serena's relationship: a hypnotizing back and forth driven by competition, jealousy, possessiveness, and ultimately, the fear that comes along with loving another person.

But can *Gossip Girl*, which was the product of an early 2000s, pre-Instagram age, be effectively reimagined? In addition to salivating over the show's designer wardrobe, its dazzling sets and cast, viewers tuned in to marvel at the dramas that could emerge when everything one did might suddenly appear online. This is a process most of us now engage in voluntarily, a kind of self-surveillance that would make the original Gossip Girl's head spin, or at least render her blog obsolete. Further, should a show that notoriously operated like a billboard ad for whiteness, valorized the rich, and routinely objectified its female characters, really be brought back to life?

What's worth revisiting instead might be the idea of the reboot itself. It is a genre that attempts to resurrect that which once appeared to be lost. It validates that the things we loved before were good and remain worthy of our adoration in the present. It takes the abandoned streets of our most beloved fictional landscapes and repopulates them, promising that all closed chapters can be reopened, so long as there's enough demand.

Unlike the remake, the work of the reboot is to tilt the familiar and make something *like* new. Reboots gather the rubble of the past and move forward, letting go of those pieces which formed the greatest clefts in its foundation. They imagine a future where what comes next could be better, though not totally divorced from the past. That's the vision I'm holding on to.

*

I've never loved someone as quickly as I loved J. We instantly gelled; we were carefree with one another, and also dedicated to spending as much time together as possible. I spent every weekend shivering in her poorly insulated bedroom, gushing over our favourite fictional characters, and eating all the food in her mother's pantry. J's mouth was overcrowded with teeth, so her dentist pulled out both her canines, to make room for the rest of her teeth to move in. Throughout junior high, J had gaps in her mouth that made her seem eternally youthful. Even then, it was a comfort to see her smile—like those gaps might have been able to stop time.

The summer before we started high school, J invited me to join her and her family on vacation in Ontario. That trip was the peak of our friendship; I didn't know then that it would also mark the beginning of the end.

I met J and her mother at the Toronto airport that August. They had arrived a few days ahead, so they picked me up and we drove two hours to the cottage where J's grandparents had retired. We travelled along what seemed like an endless stream of traffic circles, the rented car looping through space while J's mother swore under her breath. J and I were in the backseat, exchanging worried looks but also stifling our laughter.

The humidity hit me when we arrived at the cottage. My shirt clung to my skin as we hauled my bags toward the house: a small, brown walk-out surrounded by towering trees. I felt I could swim through the air.

I was introduced to J's granny, who had a stern, intimidating demeanour, and sharp features to match. I thought she hated me, but that Christmas she knit me a sweater and sent it in the mail, along with the ones she'd made for J and her sister. It made me feel like family.

For the most part, we avoided J's grandparents, seeing them only at mealtimes. We spent hours biking the dirt roads that surrounded the cottage. In the hottest parts of the day, we lounged around the less populated downstairs living room.

Sometimes we napped late into the evening, woke and didn't bother turning the light on. The fading sunset crept in through the glass patio doors and elongated our shapes on the carpet. Often, I'd open my eyes and see only the pale glow of J's face, illuminated by her phone screen.

I wondered who she was texting so much. At first, I assumed it was her sister, who was stuck at home (I don't remember for what reason) and would be joining us in a few days. But the texting was incessant, and no matter how bored she may have been in Alberta, there was no way J's sister was *that* interested in what we were doing. It occurred to me then that J was probably talking to a boy. In the semi-darkness, I asked the question.

"Who are you texting?"

"No one," J replied.

"Someone."

"You wouldn't know them."

"Why not?"

"He goes to another school."

"So, a guy?"

"We're friends. We met through basketball."

"Do you think you could be more than friends?"

She paused. "I don't know. Maybe."

We left it there, probably in an act of mutual self-preservation. I found some security in the fact that this anonymous male figure would likely remain unknown to me. His attending a

different school was ideal because it promised to delay the progression of their relationship and preserve my claim on the majority of J's time. I was flooded with relief that I could hold onto her, in the comprehensive way I had been, for a while longer.

But this sense of calm wouldn't last. A few days later, we packed up and said goodbye to the cottage. The next phase of our trip took us to Toronto, where we stayed with a friend of J's mother. She had a pool in her backyard, which would become a site of confession.

Our time in the city moved at a faster pace. We wandered Yonge Street, snapping photos of the buildings on my digital camera. We went to Canada's Wonderland and rode the country's tallest roller coaster. We wore dresses and had dinner in the rotating restaurant in the CN Tower. The sky darkened over dessert and when I looked outside it felt like the city lights below were stars and we were actually eating cheesecake in a spinning orb in space.

"We should go for a swim," said J from across the table. "When we get back." There was a look on her face that I recognized; it meant there was something she wanted to tell me, out of earshot of her mother. I remembered that we were still on the planet Earth.

In the long elevator ride down, J picked at her nail polish. A pile of lavender flakes gathered on the floor by her feet. Then a new one formed on the floor of the rental car. We changed into our bathing suits as soon as we got to the house.

The backyard was swathed in the blue glow of the pool. We both hurried into the water, desperate to escape the cloying grasp of our bathing suits, which were wet from an earlier dip. J dove below the surface and then reemerged, pushing her hair roughly from her face.

I crouched into the water and squealed, "It's too cold!"

"Don't be a baby," J rebuked. She hated when I whined.

"What are we doing in here?"

"I have to tell you something."

"What-t-t-t?" I asked, chattering my teeth.

"You know the basketball guy?"

I paused my shivering act. "Yeah?"

"He's transferring to our school this year."

I said nothing, just held my breath and anticipated what would come next.

"I do like him," J went on. "I think he might ask me to be his girlfriend."

"Really?" I said, and J smiled wide enough to show her silver braces. I wrapped my arms around my torso and dunked myself.

*

In the fifth episode of *Gossip Girl*'s inaugural season, Blair throws an extravagant sleepover for a select few of her cronies. The sleepover takes place in a room with six fluffy beds on the floor, each mattress topped with a shining silk blanket and matching pillows, every detail prepared to perfection by a small army of staff. Missing from the party is Serena, who has bailed on Blair's soiree to go on a date with her broody Brooklyn crush, Dan Humphrey.

As the sleepover attendees sip martinis, (even underage drinking is more glamorous on the Upper East Side), Serena's absence hangs in the room. Blair's resentment fuels her abuse of new girl, Jenny, who has taken Serena's spot at the bash, and also happens to be Dan's younger sister. Serena's choice to defy Blair by missing her annual party for a date signals her foray into the realm of romance, and foreshadows the end of a simpler age, when the two girls shared an exclusive and unrivalled allegiance to one another. These emerging fault lines in their friendship

hint at the fragility of relationships formed during girlhood, those bonds that can feel so deep as to emulate falling in love for the first time.

My great fear was that, like Blair, I would be left behind. The surfacing of J's crush felt like a direct attack on our friendship. Had I been older, or more secure, I might have understood that my friend had every right to pursue a romantic interest, if that was what she wanted. With enough time, maybe we could have learned to give each other room to explore our desires, while still offering the support of a friend, even if that looked different than before.

But adolescent female friendships rarely work that way. Rather than grow together, we tend to engage in a game tug-of-war, battling until someone decides to let go willingly, or has the rope pulled from her hands.

J and I spent our last day together visiting Niagara Falls. She was staying in Ontario a few more weeks, to visit her cousins with her sister. I was going home. The two of us strolled along the promenade, in awe of the deafening water and basking in the mist, which rose like breath from the swirling pool below.

I'd never been so close to New York. It was right there, on the other side of the falls. When I brought this up, J's mother reminded me that we were only looking at New York *state*; the island of Manhattan was a long way off. She was a math teacher, a realist. Her strengths were my weaknesses.

We paused to take a photo in front of the falls. J and I wore identical outfits: the same denim shorts we bought at the Toronto Eaton Centre, as well as novelty T-shirts from *Harry Potter: The Exhibition*. We wrapped our arms around each other and posed for the camera, momentarily a single force, united by whatever magic it is that tangles people together.

*

Most of us have fictional worlds that we hold dear and even feel protective over, and rarely is our investment in our favourite fantasy diverted by how little control we have over what happens to it. We hope the masters of the narrative will not ruin it, that the place we go to for escape will not be tainted, and, if things must come to a final conclusion, that it will wrap in the right way, whatever that means. We face a similar predicament in our real-life relationships, holding on to the illusion that we're in control of what happens to the people we love, that the homes we make in others will always be available to us, that if one day our ties to one another must be severed, it will happen in the right way, whatever that means.

The basketball guy, who was called Greg, registered as a student at our high school. In a few weeks, he and J became a couple. He was short, with dark hair and a large toothy smile. His mouth, in general, tended to draw the eye.

The main conflict of *Gossip Girl*'s first season is the love triangle that forms between Blair, Serena, and Blair's long-term boyfriend, Nate Archibald. In a flashback, we see Serena and Nate making out in a swanky hotel bar; like this, we discover that Serena's sudden retreat to boarding school was, at its core, an attempt to escape the reality of her betrayal.

When the secret eventually comes to light, Blair and Serena meet at Bethesda Terrace in a downpour. Serena's face is obstructed by the rim of a black hat, as though she's in mourning. Blair arrives with shining red lips and speaks with a voice broken by tears.

You're supposed to be my best friend.

My relationship with Greg was not one of passionate escapades in hotel bars. It was a betrayal formed out of ideas, proclamations, hypotheticals, and schemes. He arrived in my world

at a moment when I needed to feel seen and, most of all, loved. It was a kind of social currency to be somebody's first phone call, in both moments of crisis and joy, and I often felt disposable among my girlfriends. J seemed to have eclipsed me; she had a boyfriend and a cool older sister, who took them both to parties I wasn't invited to. When Greg started to text me, it was like a hand had reached into my little isolated bubble and offered to pull me out.

Greg made it his mission to convince me that we needed one another. He'd sometimes call me in the middle of the night to tell me that he'd gotten drunk, wandered off, and become so disoriented that he didn't know how to get home. "Can you please come pick me up?" he'd ask. I wanted to know who else he'd called for help, before telling him there was no way I could sneak out and rescue him. I wanted to hear that he'd thought of me first, even if it was a lie.

Part of me suspected that he was actually calling from the safety of his bedroom. Another part hung up the phone and for the rest of the night imagined Greg lying on a road somewhere, freezing to death, and it being all my fault. But he didn't freeze. The next day, I'd find him at his usual seat in Chemistry, grinning.

Flashback: a house party. J isn't there so Greg leads me inside a bedroom and locks the door. We sit on the bed. Every few minutes, he tries to kiss me, and I drift to the side, though in a way that is designed to delay rather than eliminate the possibility of one landing. The minutes disguise themselves as hours.

"Do you love her?" I ask.

Even in the moment, I can sense the dramatic nature of this question. But the distinction of love or not love seems imperative. My mouth tastes sour. I notice that everything in the room is shifting out of focus, except for the doorknob. It holds absolutely still, because of the lock.

Greg doesn't respond, so I repeat the question.

“I don’t know,” he tells me.

“Come on,” I press. “You have to know.”

He responds with a smile. “Don’t we have fun together?”

“Is this fun for you?”

“Yeah. I like you. You’re always on my mind.”

These are the words I’ve been longing to hear—that the person J most wants in the world also wants me. It’s a vicarious kind of being wanted by her, like electricity travelling through a line of people holding hands. It is also a direct kind of being wanted by a boy, which is appealing in a different way. I’ve imagined this moment before but can’t recall any of the responses I had concocted in my fantasies. Greg’s words evaporate.

He offers a playful shove, landing a hand on my thigh. “Did you hear me?”

“I heard you, yeah.”

“Well?”

There’s an explosion. Someone is banging on the door, rattling the knob.

“Who the fuck is in there?” demands an angry female voice.

“Go away!” Greg yells clumsily. There’s humor in his tone, a hint of mischief. “We’re having a conversation.”

“With the door locked?”

I look at him. “Should we open it?”

Greg rolls his eyes. The door continues to tremble. Watching it makes me feel sick, all that violent shaking. I rise to my feet, distantly aware of protest behind me. I fiddle with the lock until the door finally opens. The girl on the other side is pretty and blonde. This is her parents’ house, and her party.

"What the hell are you doing?" she says, but I've already pushed past her, as well as the crowd of people who have gathered behind. The girl joins Greg in the room; I suspect she's going to interrogate him about what we were doing behind the locked door.

The outcome of that interrogation is shared with me later that night, after I've gone home. My phone buzzes in my bed; in a text message, the host of the party informs me that Greg has admitted to betting his friends a hundred dollars that he would sleep with me in that locked room. She assures me not to worry—Greg was honest about his lack of success, and no one thinks it actually happened. For a moment, I'm distracted by my fascination with the dollar amount. What had brought him to that figure? Had the amount been up for debate?

I'm still not certain if what she told me was true, or whether I dreamed it, or if I want to have dreamed it because it was true. The disappointing thing is that my relationship with Greg didn't end there. We remained in contact and both moved to Edmonton to attend different universities. Once, we ran into each other at a bar downtown and got into an argument. He threw his drink in my lap, so I blocked his number. By that point, I hadn't spoken to J in months.

*

The next time I saw Greg was in the spring of 2019, when his face appeared in a CBC News article that was travelling across Facebook. He and a few other students in his Computer Science program had built a device capable of controlling a drone using brainwaves. Greg himself was credited with the idea, which, one could argue, seeks to make physical the usually invisible process of mental manipulation by performing it on an object.

Gossip Girl might be considered another such experiment, where the gossip blog functions as a compass for the show's characters, whose actions are often in direct response to claims made by an anonymous online voice. In small towns, gossip functions in a similar way; it reveals and obscures truths, and ultimately circumscribes much of what we come to believe about one another.

I won't say more about Greg, because I want to resist travelling down a path that might lead away from the friendship at the heart of all this. *Gossip Girl* makes that mistake when, in the show's final season, it's revealed that Dan Humphrey is the force behind the infamous blog.

The fact that Dan is Gossip Girl is not altogether shocking, since his status as a writer is critical to his characterization throughout the series; he is something of an intellectual, a deep thinker and sensitive type—unlike the shallow, materialistic peers he pretends to scorn. But the great shame of this creative choice is that it distracts from the show's tendency to reveal and even celebrate the complex platonic love(s) experienced by and between its female characters. When we discover that, in fact, there's been a man at the helm all along, a show that in its very title promises to put a *girl* at the forefront instead spotlights the so-called talent of a male puppeteer.

We can hope this might be something that is rectified by the *Gossip Girl* reboot. If that's wishful thinking, then we could simply take comfort in the ongoing possibility of transformation that the genre of the reboot claims to strive toward. In this sense, a reboot is also a renovation. It builds and demolishes and rebuilds.

The only time I see J anymore is when she resurfaces on social media—in the aftermath of a home redesign, or in the arms of one of our old friends from home. (Yet another girl I've lost touch with). They're at a party, bonfire glowing in the background. They're clutching beers

at a music festival. They're on someone's apartment balcony. J wears a tipsy smile that I strain to recognize; I don't know that version of her—a young woman, the life of the party. My friend J has her pajama pants tucked into her snow boots and is headed for the barn in the middle of the night because a new calf has been born. I went with her once, trudged into the wintery night wearing her mother's old jacket. The cattle stood silent around us, their enormous silhouettes humming with energy, their eyes glowing yellow.

Some part of me is still there, wandering after J in the dark. We're stepping inside mother's house, not bothering with the light as we push through the squealing front door.

J's curly-haired silhouette leads me into the kitchen. The blue floral wallpaper comes away from the walls in loose, ragged strips. Laminate curls up from the dust-covered subfloor. Cupboard doors hang from their hinges, exposing the empty wooden abdomens of the cabinets. The fridge has been tipped on its side, though it still overflows with school photographs, dozens of shadowy faces that I can't quite make out. The room smells of pancakes, cinnamon, sawdust.

Surrounded by the ruins of the past, we begin to gather the rubble.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

Sisters

In the fall of 2016, Wild Rapids Waterslide Park shut down. It stood on the shore of Sylvan Lake for more than thirty years and needed repairs and upgrades beyond what was economically possible for the owners. It was the first outdoor waterpark in Alberta, a bone-white, tangled up structure built on stilts along the waterfront. I spent several summers there, in a rented cottage with Ashley, her younger sister, Bianca, and our mothers.

We would split our time between the waterpark, the beach, and The Big Moo, a local franchise that sold ice cream, food, souvenirs, and water toys. One year, our mothers gave us our choice of any inflatable water toy that we wanted. Ashley and I chose a pair of ponies with pink manes, so we could ride tandem. Bianca, who was around four at the time, selected a massive purple octopus that would carry her so far from shore that her float became a pin on the horizon, and we had to swim out to save her.

The annual trip to Sylvan Lake was a long time in the making. Our mothers grew up in the same tiny Francophone community in northern Alberta and had been friends since they were teenagers. Ashley's dad was a truck driver, and mine worked in the oilfield for weeks at a time, so our mothers often spent weekends together. Over time, we all came to adopt one another.

Ashley's house was about an hour's drive from mine. I couldn't always predict when she might visit, but if my mother loaded me and a case of beer into the car, I knew exactly where we were going. Despite all those hours spent driving back and forth across the prairie, it didn't occur to me until adulthood that the friendship my mother shared with Ashley's mom actually required emotional and physical effort. That we would all be together again soon seemed like a wonderful fact of the universe, an inevitability.

Still, I understood that Ashley, Bianca, and their mother were not literally my family; rather, our relationship occupied a space that was family-adjacent. The fragility of this adjacent-ness only crept into my consciousness as I matured, and the responsibility of upholding my relationships with both girls turned toward me. We became adults, and several months could pass between my visits with Ashley. Then, just when it would appear our connection had been lost, one of us would turn up on the other's doorstep, usually wearing the same outfit as the girl across the threshold.

On one such occasion in 2015, Ashley arrived at my apartment in Edmonton with an overnight bag and a guy I'd never met. We went for lunch, to a perpetually empty Boston Pizza on Whyte Avenue, and she told me she was pregnant. She was twenty-one. We both laughed with fear and elation and disbelief. She cried between bites of fettuccini alfredo.

The guy she'd brought along was, predictably, the baby's father. He drove a diesel truck, but that could be overlooked in the event that he was a nice person, which it appeared he was. He had a frenetic, unpredictable energy but was also charmingly earnest. When I said I was a writer, he asked to read one of my short stories, and then actually read it. I'm easily won over.

Approximately seven months after their visit, Ashley gave birth to her daughter. She was born in March, like me. Wild Rapids Water Park closed six months after that.

The closure garnered some brief media coverage. Whenever an image of the slides surfaced online, all I saw was a massive, entangled uterus. A single column enclosed a spiral staircase that led to slides on either side. Each slide curled around itself, leading to one of two pools below, on the left or right. It had to mean something that a structure designed to propel children through space also resembled the female reproductive system. Or maybe I was just seeing uteruses in everything.

*

My mother believed that our first family home was haunted by the spirits of several children. She said that lying in bed at night she could hear laughter, and a sound like a soccer ball bouncing on the floor. We lived there until the property flooded so extremely that my dad had to drive us out of the driveway in his fishing boat.

Ashley's house had its own ghost. It once belonged to her paternal grandparents and had been inherited by Ashley's parents when her grandmother died. The house was small, and down an isolated road. The interior was a maze of black-and-white-checkered flooring and infested with mice in a way that could be managed but never conquered.

There was a sizeable playroom with carpeting the exact shade of butter. The room was crowded with toys, but we never played in there. Something about it repelled us, and we only rushed in and out to exchange items. Ashley's mom suspected that her dead mother-in-law was the one responsible for the house's uneasy energy, as well as all her misplaced jewellery. After a few beers, she'd exclaim, "I know it's her! She fucking hated me then and she hates me now!" Then, after everyone had finally gone to bed, the vacuum would turn on out of nowhere, filling the space with a tornado-like howl.

That property was eventually torn down and paved over. A new house was erected on the opposite side of the driveway, and we sometimes played on the concrete slab where the previous house had been. It was pale and smooth, better terrain for bike-riding than the gravel driveway, even though we could only travel in figure eights. Without knowing, we stamped the gravesite of Ashely's old house with infinities.

When she was twelve, Ashley's family moved to Grande Prairie, Alberta. Their new home was in a developing suburb and surrounded by neighbours. Some of Ashley's mother's friends criticized her for wanting to leave rural Alberta, which tended to reveal their own insecurities about living in comparative isolation.

I never resented their leaving, but I did miss Ashley's old place. I treasure the nights we shared there, a houseful of women and girls, our light beaming out into an expansive darkness. All the times my mother drove us down that empty highway, we were travelling toward safety. Together, we carved out a pocket of joy.

*

When Ashley and I were kids, one of our favourite games was to discuss our imaginary children while preparing meals out of Playdough and sipping ginger ale. We chose ginger ale because it was the soda that most resembled beer, the beverage we understood adults drank. The topic of discussion was typically how ungrateful and irritating our kids were. We gave them names and described the circumstances under which we had most recently been forced to punish them. We reflected on how the pressure of child-rearing was testing the limits of our sanity. It was obvious to us then that we would eventually have our own children. We apparently also knew, on some level, that motherhood would require personal sacrifice, at least insofar as it would be grating, exhausting, chaotic. Part of me is envious of my child-self—I want her certainty, the ease with which she could imagine a future as a mother, no matter its toils.

Ashley hated being pregnant. She was constantly nauseous and uncomfortable with the sensation of her pregnant body. I found her honesty on this subject to be a great comfort because

the image of my own pregnant body brought on not a feeling of expansion but rather one of such intense inner contraction that I wondered if something were wrong with me. Ashley's pregnancy also nudged me toward the realization that I had entered a phase where it was possible, as well as progressively expected, that I would have children in the near future.

What does a person do with so much uncertainty about potentially the most world-altering decision of one's life? I worry that the overwhelming, inner back-and-forth of this dilemma will only end after it's too late, and I'm a mother wondering who I might be otherwise, or someone else, wondering what my life would be like with children in it.

Sheila Heti: "On the one hand, the joy of children. On the other hand, the misery of them. On the one hand, the freedom of not having children. On the other hand, the loss of never having had them—but what is there to lose? The love, the child, and all those feelings that the mothers speak about in such an enticing way, as though a child is something to have, and not something to do. The doing is what seems hard. The having seems marvellous. But one doesn't have a child, one does it."[4]

Ashley did it and will always be doing it. In the space between becoming pregnant and giving birth, her boyfriend proposed, then took back the proposal a few weeks later, and moved out of the duplex they were renting. The years since have featured custody battles and expensive, emotional days in court. Ashley holds that motherhood has been unquestionably and unceasingly difficult, as well as unquestionably and unceasingly good.

As children fantasizing about having children, Ashley and I assumed that we would mimic our mothers and give birth around the same time. On some level, we may have recognized the ways in which our bond as children contributed to the bond shared by our mothers. We spent

[4] *Motherhood*, 21.

so much time together because, as a group, we had similar needs. Summers at Sylvan Lake are ideal for people with young children, and that's probably the only reason we ended up there. Over time, our makeshift family structure altered in purpose and meaning; as Ashley and I got older, our mothers drifted apart.

What will happen to my relationship with Ashley, now that the possibility of our raising children alongside one another has basically dissolved? Spending time together now feels a bit like how I imagine it would feel to visit a sister with whom one has nothing in common. Her toy-covered floors and fingerprinted windows make me uneasy. I can't offer her advice or maternal solidarity. We talk about the past more often than the present, reminisce about those summers at Sylvan Lake, when our friendship was effortless.

We always rented the same cedar cottage in town. One summer, my mother suffered a miscarriage there. She was three months pregnant, but I didn't know about the pregnancy or the miscarriage until I was a teenager. That place gave me the closest thing to a sister that I'll ever have. It took away, too.

*

In 2014, Ashley's mother invited a dozen or so women into her home to be read by a psychic medium. It was actually a duo of psychic mediums, a married couple. The wife was quite a bit older than the husband, maybe by fifteen years. Someone asked if they had children, and if so, whether the child had inherited their psychic ability. The couple didn't have kids.

We sat around the mediums in a circle and they listened to the ghosts in the room. The husband frantically scribbled things onto sheets of paper. The wife occasionally observed the writing and spoke to the circle.

Everyone knew that Ashley's mom was waiting to hear from her sister, Peggy, who had been killed in a car accident when they were teenagers. She also longed for a sister, and, I think, knew what it was to find something close to that in a friend.

Peggy didn't come through that day. Instead, the medium turned to Ashley and said that she'd be pregnant within a year. A few ladies cheered and teased her. She waved them off and shook her head vehemently, no.

When it was my turn to be read, the medium faced me and said that a man had entered the room and dubbed me Ann Landers. I assumed this to be my late paternal grandfather, who was an avid outdoorsman, and not much of a reader. Ann Landers, an advice columnist in the mid-to-late twentieth century, was probably one of the only contemporary women writers he could name. I saw the comparison as his attempt to slot me into that category and was elated at the prospect. To be a writer was the single thing I knew I wanted in the world—all the hard doing and marvellous having.

I turned to Ashley in the circle. She looked less guarded now that the attention of the room had moved elsewhere. I wanted her to meet my gaze, so I could offer a conciliatory look, an eyeroll, or some other expression of skepticism.

But Ashley didn't look up. She only stared at her hands, which were open in her lap, as if in prayer, or preparing to catch something.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

The Yoga Retreat

The deer-eyed instructor sat at the front of the room, looking silently upon her pupils: a hodgepodge of adults with our legs folded together.

She was about forty, and very thin, with dark, gray-streaked hair that fell around her shoulders. She was everything I expected from a Yoga Teacher Training instructor—reserved, long-limbed. Her hands rested on her knees, the backs of her wrists kissing the silky ends of the scarf that was draped around her neck.

"You'll notice there aren't any mirrors in this room," she said, gesturing toward the golden-yellow walls. "Mirrors shift our consciousness to those around us. Yoga is not a competitive sport. Let's set our intentions toward self-awareness."

My ears perked up at the mention of "self-awareness." I was freshly eighteen and on a personal mission to enter adulthood less enamoured by my own discontent. I was hungry for any environment that wasn't the endless expanse of rural Alberta, all that space where it seems that anything can happen and yet nothing does.

I didn't know much about yoga. My only exposure to it had come courtesy of my high school boyfriend's mother, who had gotten her teaching certification and encouraged almost everyone she came across to do the same. I attended the occasional class that she taught in her front yard and each time found that I liked the rhythm of yoga, the way it targeted my focus in my body. I'd never been athletic, but yoga accommodated my hyper-extended elbows and wiggly knee joints. It offered a sense of control.

I made the decision haphazardly. Online, I'd stumbled upon a 200-hour "intensive" teacher training course taking place in Edmonton. It was five days a week, eight hours a day, throughout the month of August 2013. I was moving to Edmonton for university that fall but

salivated at the prospect of getting out of town a little sooner and finally escaping my adolescent self. I convinced my parents of the program's many merits: it would help me get acquainted with a new city before the semester began, I could make some friends, learn a skill. They helped me pay the tuition, and I signed up.

Looking back, it almost seems that I fell into Yoga Teacher Training by accident. Like I stumbled into the studio one day and decided to stay. It was more intentional than that; I viewed my enrollment in the program as an express ticket out of a rural existence where I felt stifled. I didn't understand, then, the ways in which my invisibility had also been a gift. I'd grown up white in a predominantly white town, which had afforded me the privilege of fading into the background. Perhaps that privilege had made me impatient.

None of this is to say that I wasn't terrified to go. I almost tossed the idea when I came across a section on the application where I had to check a box affirming that I regularly attended at least two yoga classes per week. The purpose of this box was to discourage a total novice, like me, from joining the program. I checked it anyway and waited for my acceptance letter.

*

The first day of training began with a guided yoga practice. I hurried to the back of the room, positioned my mat where I thought the others might block the instructor's view of me, and then spent the next hour struggling to understand anything she said. By shavasana, yoga's final resting pose, a ball of dread had settled behind my sternum.

Soon after, we were asked to identify ourselves to the group, and also share our reasons for joining the program. I quickly realized that I was the youngest person in the room, and there for what reason? Because I wanted out of something?

Among my classmates were two middle-aged women trying to heal from their recent divorces, a mother of twins, a keen Lululemon employee, a white-haired doula, and a heavily tattooed graphic artist. There was an enigmatic oilfield worker who refused to wear any form of footwear except when he was legally obligated to wear steel-toed boots on job sites, as well as a leather-toting motorcycle enthusiast in his forties. One woman was recovering from a kidney transplant, her eyes still slightly jaundiced. Another had battled a mysterious stomach parasite that had nearly killed her. Each person referenced an ongoing relationship with yoga that had spanned several years.

Only a few among us were there with the goal of actually becoming teachers. Most members of the group simply sought to improve their skill or deepen their understanding of yoga and what it meant to them. I technically fell into the latter category and figured I could bring that up later if needed. In the meantime, I muttered something about pushing myself out of my comfort zone and passed the burden of explanation on to the next person.

Next, our instructor handed everyone their copy of the textbook: a homemade, coiled manual with a laminated orange cover. I flipped through mine and, with great relief, saw that it depicted and described every posture in agonizing detail. I clung to my copy like a life raft, and spent our breaks studying it, trying to make up for lost time. I was hungry for transformation and imagined myself contorting into each pose, folding and unfolding like a fleshy origami. This way a bird, that way a dolphin.

But my body struggled to match my vision. As the weeks wore on, my muscles only became more resistant to movement. I had permanent shin splints and hobbled around the studio. My arms quaked in chaturanga and my hamstrings seemed to be retracting. Sun salutations gave me a head rush, and I'd often fall behind while I waited for the room to stop spinning. By the time I'd found my footing, everyone else would be in downward-facing dog.

Our only physical break was when we learned theory. I'd write my best guess at the spellings of the seven chakras in my notebook, as well as their corresponding points on the body. I tried to memorize the physiological terms that our instructor repeated during guided practice: *sacrum*, *pelvic floor, lymph.* We wanted to avoid stagnant lymph, which, we were told, can make the body toxic. Many of my classmates chimed in with their own wisdom, offering lessons on the health benefits of ghee, or the healing properties of crystals. Amethyst protects against electromagnetic stress. Rose quartz opens the heart to love.

Anyone who presented information to the group tended to mimic our instructor's air of calm, meditative authority. She spoke in a neutral, controlled tone, and her face was similarly blank. I became distracted by her eyelids, which were perpetually half-closed, as if she were moments from dozing off. Still, she was knowledgeable and appeared wise in her aloofness. She sometimes shared anecdotes about raising her young son, or her trips to India, which gave dimension to her otherwise reserved persona.

She once posited that human emotion was stored in the hip joint and explained that she went through a period of several months where she could not enter pigeon pose without bursting into tears. I watched her face when she demonstrated pigeon to the class, desperate to see her expression contort as her knee glided toward her wrist. I wanted to witness some underlying sadness in her, a flash of anger or uncertainty. Instead, she appeared focused, skilled, serene.

There were plenty more opportunities for vulnerability. At the closing of each day, we would join hands in a circle and describe what had been on our minds recently, what we were hopeful or worried about, in terms of the training or otherwise. I began to feel resentful of my classmates who could share openly, much like I grew to resent our instructor for her refusal to break her rigid exterior. I was paralyzed by these conflicting resentments and offered nothing meaningful to the circle as a result.

One woman had recently lost her home to her ex-husband. Another opened up about a lifetime of shyness and insecurity. The mother of twins wept as she shared her struggle with postpartum depression. I gave shallow non-answers that referenced my enthusiasm for learning new things, when in reality I felt further than ever from any sense of genuine *knowing*.

But these moments of confession were not always comfortable, nor were they exclusively healing. On one occasion, a guy called Mark, who was one of two men in the group, divulged a lifelong "addition to love and women." A ripple of anxiety travelled through the fingertips of everyone in the circle. Mark had recently volunteered to partner with me for a demonstration in front of the class, which involved him deepening my hip stretch in child's pose by pressing his palms into my lower back. The discomfort I'd felt in that moment was reignited and amplified as he spoke to the group. I looked to my instructor, who refused to meet my gaze. I descended even further into the dense fog of information that each day seemed to bring.

After that, I started sleeping on my couch. There was more open space in the living room, and the couch offered a lower expectation for sleep than my bed. The hours I lay awake felt less wasted there. I watched a lot of television, especially episodes of *Judge Judy*, which I'd set to record while I was gone during the day. I craved her no-nonsense attitude, her precise ability to sense a liar, her refusal to let anyone off the hook.

When I dozed, it was only because I'd been hypnotized by her swift judgments. I lived for dark flourish of her robe as she spun from her chair and exited the frame, having delivered her ruling.

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The last phase of Yoga Teacher Training was a weekend retreat in Caroline, a small town in southern Alberta with a population of approximately five hundred people.

When that weekend finally came, I clenched my teeth together and packed my yoga mat into my car. Why had I enrolled myself in a course that culminated in a three-hour journey back into the empty arms of rural isolation?

I drove with the music blaring in an attempt to drown out my bitterness, which only intensified the further I got from the city. I passed through Caroline and saw that it was dusty and vacant, like most small towns. There was an western-style saloon downtown, with a square wooden exterior and a chuck wagon above the door that cast a cold, colonial shadow on the ground below.

I thought I'd gotten lost and entered some kind of Wild West fever dream. The southern Alberta air was hot and dry, and the sun was turning my skin pink through the window. Every building I passed looked alike—small, dated, sand-coloured.

Something about the scene called to mind an exercise we had done in class: we were supposed to move around room with our eyes closed, in order to heighten our awareness of our bodies in the space. I spent those minutes tripping over my own feet and longing silently for the month to end.

A tinny female voice interrupted my reverie, and my GPS directed me to turn down a dirt side road leading into the bush. I travelled that way for what seemed like too long and wondered several times if I should go back to town. Then my destination came into view.

It looked like a summer camp. There were a series of cabin-like structures, clustered before an expansive lawn. I parked in front of what appeared to be the main building and checked my phone. We'd already been warned that cell reception would be limited, but I didn't have a single bar of service. I'd also come to find out that there was no Wi-Fi anywhere on the premises, and (to my dismay, but not my surprise) also no television.

A few of my classmates had arrived before me. I lingered with them outside, sitting on my bags in the hot sun and waiting for the others to arrive. Once everyone had assembled, our instructor led us to a small wing of dormitories and gave us the keys to our assigned rooms. Each dorm had a twin bed with white sheets and a single quilt, as well as a small bathroom. The walls were bare, save for one rectangular window. Mine looked out onto foliage.

I ditched my bags and made for the dining hall, where we were to be served a vegetarian lunch. A frizzy-haired woman awaited us there with her hands folded in front of her. We each found a seat at one of three long wooden tables that were lined up against the wall, while she guarded the food, wearing the smug expression of someone with a captive audience and an announcement to make.

The woman asked for our attention. She then introduced herself as the owner of the property, which she managed with her husband. He was not present but would later appear in passing, sporting a long, gray beard.

We were welcomed to the property and told there were a few rules that all guests were asked to follow. Most of them had to do with managing the noise level.

“Voices should remain at a low register, especially when passing the chapel. Lights-out is at ten o’clock, after which time the dormitories should remain quiet. As you may already know, there is an outdoor jacuzzi on the premises. This should also be a silent space, used for peaceful contemplation. That means no whispered conversations, please.”

I scanned the room for a hint of skepticism or even controlled amusement at the absurdity of this last request. Those around me offered respectful smiles, so I smothered my judgments and gazed at the floor. Regardless of the terms and conditions, my long-aching muscles were crying out for a soak in hot water. And maybe some mandated silence would be a relief after weeks of enduring our daily sharing circle.

We lined up for lunch, which included an impressive spread of salads and roasted vegetables. Afterward, the group met a large room with vaulted ceilings and enormous windows that looked out on the distant road. This would be our yoga studio for the weekend.

We unrolled our mats and sat in a semi-circle for a guided meditation. Closing our eyes, we inhaled into our stomachs. At one point, the instructor asked us to envision a ball of positive energy growing inside our hearts.

“Now, release that energy into the world,” she said. “Imagine aiming it in the direction of someone or something you believe might need it.”

I wanted to send my ball of energy to a place where I might meet up with it later, though I couldn’t begin to imagine where that was. To be safe, I decided to send it north.

*

Late that afternoon, a few members of the group mentioned taking a dip in the hot tub. I asked if I could join, and we planned to go after sunset, when the air was cooler. It was dark by the time we had changed into our bathing suits and walked out onto the deck, and probably past the time we were meant to be in bed. The hot tub was above ground and positioned in front of our studio space. There were no lights on inside, and it appeared we were alone.

I lowered into the bubbling water, along with three other women: the doula, the mother of twins, and the girl who worked at Lululemon. The awkwardness of looking one another in the eye for several minutes without speaking created more tension than the hot water relieved, so we broke our vow of silence. Soon, the frizzy-haired woman materialized to scold us.

"No chatting, please," she said. "We take that rule very seriously."

We covered our mouths apologetically, and she left. Then another figure appeared on the horizon. This time it was Mark, with a towel wrapped around his waist. We all registered him at the same time, and the other women stood up, almost in unison, to vacate the hot tub. I hesitated, missing my window to leave with them.

This landed me in an uncomfortable social dilemma. As much as I cringed at the idea of being alone in a jacuzzi with Mark, it also seemed rude for everyone to abandon ship at the mere sight of him. Still, I felt my gut twist as I watched the other women retreat toward their rooms, and Mark descend the hot tub stairs. He sat on the second step, blocking my exit.

Neither of us spoke. Mark had shocking blue irises that held their subject captive. I tried to look anywhere but at his chest hair swirling in the jets. I stared at my feet, which glowed stark white in the underwater lights. My toenails were picked apart, the nailbeds exposed and tender—a bad habit I'd taken up while sitting on the floor during theory lessons. I watched the shadowy

wall of poplars beside us. I watched our strange, luminescent reflections in the window. I watched the moon, full as an eye.

My forehead and scalp became damp with sweat. I had my arms wrapped around my knees in an attempt to conceal myself from Mark's' unyielding gaze. I felt like a steaming mussel cracking open in the heat. I decided I would do it quickly, burst from the water and make for the stairs in one swift motion.

I stood. My actual movements were clumsy, and when I slipped past Mark, I felt the hot skin of my thigh slide across his hairy shoulder. He didn't move aside but remained perched on the stairs like a guard. I snatched my towel from the deck and heard Mark call goodnight as I hurried to my room. I locked the door and slid between the cold, thin sheets, my skin still damp.

For a long time, I stared silently at the ceiling. Then I thought about being a child and riding in the car with my mother. When I was younger, I was prone to random bursts of emotion that caused me to cry for no apparent reason. I would weep in the backseat, while my mom ran errands. When she asked why I was crying, I would tell her that I didn't know. "That's okay," she'd say. "You don't have to know. Just let it out."

Why hadn't her advice taken hold? If what I wanted was something gentle, or consent to be unapologetically in my body, I should have gone to my mother. But I was eager to test drive a new life, to enter a new space and see who I was in it. I didn't cry when she left me alone, for the first time, in my apartment. Tears came that night in Caroline.

*

I wasn't quite asleep when my alarm went off at a quarter to five. The room was very cold, and my body was stiff and achy. I heard my classmates in the hall, shuffling toward the yoga room.

Both mornings of the retreat were set to begin with a sunrise yoga practice. I decided three times that I wasn't going and then rushed into the room five minutes before the class began. A little more than half our group was there, many of them wrapped in blankets on their mats, half asleep. I scanned the space for Mark but didn't see him. I unrolled my mat and sat with my legs folded and my head heavy on my shoulders. Maybe he wouldn't come.

My instructor looked out at us from her position at the front of the space. She was bathed in the faint sunlight that poured through the windows, angelic beneath the fabric of her trademark scarf. She wore an indistinct smile that didn't seem intended for any one of us; instead, she smiled in the direction of some unseen presence floating behind our heads.

"We'll give the others a few more minutes to join us," she said.

I closed my eyes. My mind slipped in and out of the room as I resisted sleep, which felt almost peaceful. Each moment that no one entered the room was a false promise of Mark's absence. Then I heard heavy feet approaching and opened my eyes to find him unrolling his mat in the spot directly next to me. He whispered an apology for his lateness to the instructor. She nodded calmly.

My muscles were rigid as I followed our instructor through sun salutations: standing, downward-facing dog, back into standing. I had a heightened awareness of Mark's movements beside me, the weight of his body on the mat, his audible breathing. My head spun as I rose up from our final forward fold. By then, the sun had climbed higher in the sky and was blinding.

“We’re going to try something new this morning,” our instructor said, releasing her hands from prayer. “We’ve been practicing Wheel pose, but until now have only entered the posture from the floor. Now I’ll demonstrate how to enter it from standing.”

She described her movements as she did them. First, she positioned herself at the front of her mat, raising her arms overhead. She then bent backwards until her palms met the ground. It looked effortless, her body curling into a perfect dome. When we practiced Wheel previously, we had simply pressed our hands and feet into the floor to propel our torsos upward. This was something else entirely: a leap of faith.

We attempted the posture one at a time, moving around the semi-circle of mats. Some of my classmates were more hesitant than others, but each person ultimately entered the pose with some level of success. Then it was my turn. I felt all the eyes in the room follow me as I got to my feet, raised my hands overhead, and stood in paralyzed surrender.

“Don’t overthink it,” someone said. “You’ve got this.”

I knew without an ounce of modesty that I didn’t have it. But I felt, as I had throughout the training, incapable of refusal. I inhaled sharply and threw my body back. My arms reached out to catch me but touched the floor a moment too late. My head smashed into my mat, striking the ground with a hard thud. I crumpled like paper.

The room became immediately tense. *Is she okay?* I lay there for a moment and listened to the blood in my ears. Then I sat up and signalled that I was fine, asked for the next person to please carry on. That person was Mark, who flipped into a perfect Wheel as though his feet were spring-padded. He later fell asleep in shavasana and snored into my ear until, at long last, we were dismissed.

*

How we spent the remainder of that morning was left up to us. I fled outside and wandered the grounds as the sky turned overcast. In the afternoon, I changed into the white cotton shirt and pants I'd bought from The Gap for the graduation ceremony. The group had decided that we'd wear all-white outfits, to represent new beginnings.

We gathered once more in the studio space, where we were called to take our certificates; the cold sweat from my fingers quickly wrinkled the edges of mine. I changed out of my white outfit but didn't pack it into my bag. I left it folded on my bedside table.

Everyone departed at different times the following morning, so many of us missed each other. A few of the women who happened to be packing up alongside me offered hugs goodbye, but I felt numb to their embraces. I wished them well and then drove out of Caroline in a silence of my own choosing.

Somewhere on the QEII, I stopped at a gas station and bought enough fuel to get me back to Edmonton. The sky was spitting rain, and the air was hot and electric with the possibility of a storm. The only noise came from the gurgling gas pump and the steady whir of traffic on the highway. The scent of gasoline was heavy in the air.

Then I heard an engine in the distance. It grew louder and louder until its source came into view. A man on a motorcycle whipped past, his face obscured by a helmet. The bike wove in and out of traffic before blaring out of sight like a giant, roaring insect.

I released a held breath and the world returned to an even keel of noise. The pump clicked off and I got into my car. The air inside was warm and stagnant.

When I checked the rearview mirror, I caught a glimpse of what I thought were my mother's eyes: warm brown, concerned. I looked for myself in the back, to see that I was safely buckled in, and that I wasn't crying. But there was only the gray line of highway I'd left behind.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

Spring Migration

When I landed with my mother at the Palm Springs International Airport a few days after Memorial Day Weekend, the terminals were empty. There was no one in the airport restaurant, and only a few travellers were scattered around the secure outdoor waiting area. We guessed they were also Canadians, hoping to steal a few extra moments of sunshine before flying back to a frozen, delayed spring.

Southern California was already on the brink of unbearably hot. It was the end of tourist season, but after weeks of painful radiation treatments, my mother wasn't about to be deterred by the threat of a sunburn. We'd come to Palm Springs to be cured by the heat, regardless of whether that was a comfortable sensation.

The hotel my mother booked was small, and more like a house, since it had once been a private estate. It was quaint but extravagantly decorated, and, like the airport, nearly empty when we arrived. The chairs around the pool were unoccupied. So was the lounge area where wine was served in the evenings. A white-haired hotel manager grinned proudly as he gave us the tour.

"You pretty much have the place to yourselves," he said. "What a treat!" I exchanged a look with my mother. We wanted some peace and quiet, but this was eerie.

He took us to our room, where we received a long and detailed explanation of the bedroom furniture's historical value. Then he ushered us into the small, tiled bathroom.

"Oh, this is a special room," he said excitedly. "Clark Gable once bathed in this very tub! It's a piece of history."

We stared at the bathtub. I had a vague sense of what Clark Gable had looked like—a George Clooney type, only in black and white. His name had Old Hollywood star power, which

dazzled me despite its abstractness. The tub was a shallow, porcelain vessel that most adult men would have struggled to fit inside, and it seemed unworthy of such a prolific figure. I imagined a pair of knobby, bare knees sticking out past its edges.

"Well, I'll let you ladies get settled," said our guide, breaking my trance. "Let me know if you need anything!"

My mother tugged at her sweater. "God, I thought he'd never leave."

I laughed, "Right?"

"I'm going to change."

She went into the other room to unzip her suitcase. I was dazed from the major change in scenery and climate. The tight quarters of the bathroom were soothing, as was the cool tile under my feet. I stood still for a moment, eyes closing.

"You know, Clark Gable was a real heart-throb in his day!" called my mother. "Timeless. Classically handsome."

"What do you think he was doing here?"

"We're only a few hours from Hollywood. All the stars came here to get away."

My eyes blinked open. I joined my mom in the bedroom and lifted my suitcase onto the bed. She had changed into shorts and was choosing between crew neck T-shirts. Her dark bob curled around her jaw, a little dishevelled from the flight.

"You'll see," she went on. "This place is like stepping back in time. Mid-century modern, all that stuff. We can walk downtown from here and get lunch."

"Great, I'm hungry."

She pulled a shirt over her head. "Me too. Would you hurry up?"

"I'm hurrying!" I said, impressed by her energy. The trip to Palm Springs had been her idea, a long-time dream destination. I was simply along for the ride. It had been almost a year since my mother had completed cancer treatment. This extended weekend was our escape from reality. I was ready and willing to do any activity she wanted.

I dug an outfit out of my bag and found my mother outside. She was on the second-floor balcony, looking down at the pool. It was late in the afternoon, and I felt my face reddening in the heat as we descended the stairs and began the walk downtown.

We were staying in Old Palm Springs—the epicentre of Classical Hollywood kitsch. The sidewalks were lined with red, glittery stars engraved with names: Elizabeth Taylor, Sophia Loren, Loretta Young, Debbie Reynolds, Marilyn Munroe. Overhead, streams of cool vapor spilled onto the sidewalk, pumping out of mist machines attached to various storefronts. The mist gave the street a dramatic feel, like you were trapped inside a dream sequence in a movie.

My mother and I slipped past a few tourists who were clustered around Marilyn's star, and wandered into a souvenir shop. We browsed the selection of magnets, keychains, tank tops, mugs. My mother flipped through a coffee table book featuring photographs of Old Hollywood stars in iconic Palm Springs locations.

I spun the postcard rack lazily. There was one depicting "Forever Marilyn," which, according to the writing on the back, was an eight-meter-high statue that previously occupied a prominent downtown corner. Marilyn wore her iconic white dress from *The Seven Year Itch*, the aluminum fabric eternally adrift around her legs, her shining metal face turned toward the sun. I returned the card to its place on the rack, among a dozen scenes of cacti and desert.

It was nearly four o'clock when my mother and I finally sat down to lunch. We were alone again, this time on the patio of a Mexican restaurant, where we ordered tacos and lime

margaritas. The drinks were served in enormous, thick-rimmed glasses. I guzzled mine and then gorged myself on guacamole as though crossing the border had somehow rendered me impervious to my avocado allergy.

The stomach pain started before we'd even gotten the bill. A quick Internet search showed that we were a few blocks from a Rite Aid, so we headed there next, both of us feeling the effects of several ounces of tequila.

At the store, my mother and I filled our arms with whatever we wanted, which turned out to be junk food and more alcohol. The cashier gave us a worried look when we approached the counter with two bottles of wine, a case of beer, several varieties of potato chips, two Milky Way bars, a bag of gummy worms, and a bottle of Pepto Bismol.

I dropped my bags in the parking lot and took a few hearty swigs of the Pepto. Then we began the journey back to our hotel, which had been close to the Mexican restaurant, but was, evidently, very far from the Rite Aid.

We stumbled home, over-encumbered by our haul. I groaned about my heartburn and we laughed at the stupidity of our drunken impulse-shopping. The walk was long, and each passing block I began to worry that we might have begun the trip with too much of a bang. My mother's thin arms flexed with the weight of her shopping bag.

She fell asleep almost immediately when we got back to the room. I dumped our loot of junk food onto the antique furniture. Then I lay next to her and watched television with the sound barely audible. We would share a bed all week, sleeping side by side. Those nights, I felt like a child again, seeking comfort after a bad dream.

*

I learned that my mother had cancer over the phone. Looking back, it seems that I knew before I even answered the call. The ring had been off, somehow strange or ominous. More likely, it was her voice that did it. When my mother spoke, it was with the hesitant tone of someone who knew she was about to deliver a blow. The results were in, and the lump she'd found on the side of her neck a few months before was, as she'd secretly feared, cancer.

"We're still figuring out what treatment will look like. The oncologist wants to make sure it hasn't spread." She paused. "Most importantly, we need to make sure it hasn't travelled *up*."

Neither of us had the courage to elaborate on what that meant. And by some mercy of the universe, we didn't have to confront the reality of a brain tumor. Additional tests confirmed that the cancer was contained to my mother's neck—most of it isolated within her tonsils. She opted for radical treatment: an invasive surgery that was likely to remove all the cancerous tissue from her body but would leave her with a prominent scar on her neck. My mother insisted that she was lucky. She had been given the terrible gift of a treatable disease.

There were more complicated gifts on the horizon. Rather than endure dozens of trips from rural Alberta to see various doctors in Edmonton, my parents decided to move permanently to the city. My dad retired and closed the business he had built over more than twenty years. My brother would start grade eleven at a new school. We all gave up a home that had grounded our family for two decades, leaving everything familiar behind in favour of a future that promised to get worse before it got better.

I tried to distract myself. For the first few months, I was in Edmonton finishing the university semester, though I might as well have been on another planet. I channelled all my focus into my coursework and moved through the world robotically. Dwelling on the cancer only

made me nervous and angry. I couldn't bear the thought of losing my mom and hated living in a world where that possibility was ever-present.

When the term finally ended, I went home. My parents had sold the house by then, so it was a trip to say goodbye to an old life. I walked through the door and saw that my mother was the same as she had been when I'd left her. She was smiling. She looked good. I guessed she had immersed herself in cleaning and packing like I had buried myself in school; everything in the house was spotless and organized.

One night, I found some photo albums in a box and flipped through them. A few glossy images slid out from inside of an album and landed on the floor: a series of old modelling proofs that my mother had taken as a teenager. In one picture, she was dressed as a cute baseball player, her frizzy 1980s ponytail bursting from the back of her cap. She was holding a wooden bat over her shoulder, ready to swing. Her expression was focused but coy, her tongue poking out the side of her mouth. There was no scenery in the background, just my mother against a field of white, her feet planted in anticipation. I tucked away the photos and closed the book.

*

We spent the following day relaxing by the pool. It was enclosed on three sides by hedges and flowering shrubs, which were crowded with hummingbirds. They whizzed past our heads and drank from the garden's brightly coloured blooms.

Morning was the best time to sunbathe, when the desert air was more tolerable. The birds preferred the morning too and tended to dissipate as the day wore on. In the afternoons, I'd wade into the water at thirty-minute intervals, in an effort to stave off the heat. My mother didn't like

to swim and sat baking in the lounge chair beside mine, flicking through a gossip magazine that she'd bought during our intoxicated trip to Rite Aid. I pressed a cool finger against the side of her leg and a white oval hovered in the place I'd touched.

"You're starting to burn," I said. "Want some sunscreen?"

My mother slid her sunglasses down her nose. They were a sleek, cat-eye shape that she'd bought in the airport because they reminded her of Jackie O. "Pass me the lower SPF," she said. "I'm tired of looking pale."

I handed her the bottle. Her skin turned dewy as she coated her arms, legs, and chest. The thin edges of her scars were more susceptible to the heat and glowed crimson. My eyes traced the square, faded border of the skin graft taken from her upper thigh; the deep, rectangular patch on her left wrist, connected to a long white line, where a vein had been removed and then relocated to her neck; the long, smile-like scar just above her clavicle, which connected below either ear.

Behind us, I heard ice clinking against glass. The hotel manager appeared from around the corner, carrying a pitcher of water. He sat with us for a while, and we sipped from our glasses. He seemed lonely in his deserted hotel and was eager to chat.

"It's a beautiful little spot, isn't it?"

"Very nice," I said. "We've never seen so many hummingbirds before."

"Our gardener absolutely loves hummingbirds!" he said, suddenly electrified. He was so invested in this place, its secret details and histories. "She chose the plants that surround the pool specifically to attract them."

I spotted one then, hovering below a shady branch. It appeared frozen in place, except for the jerky movements of its tiny head. You could sense the strength of their tiny bodies when one went by and left a breeze on your cheek.

The bird I was watching took off suddenly. Hummingbirds have a weak sense of smell, but they can see colour: nectar-filled blooms in yellow, orange, pink, purple. Above all, they choose the red flowers first.

*

Not all of this story is mine to tell. My mother's illness was experienced differently by everyone in my household and, as a result, is a convoluted and ever-changing puzzle. My pieces are blurry in places, uncomfortably clear in others. There is a lot of empty space. I have a few bits from other puzzles that I try to jam together.

My mother spent the first two weeks after her surgery recovering in the Intensive Care Unit at the University of Alberta Hospital. She was only allowed one visitor, in order to limit the spread of germs in the unit. My father stayed with her most of the day, so I moved into my parents' house and tried to take care of him and my brother. I did the laundry and cooked simple dinners that we all pushed around our plates. My mother's kitchen was big and foreign and full of appliances that I didn't know how to use. What I did know how to use I couldn't find. I was always getting lost in there.

In the evenings, my dad would purge what he'd seen at the hospital that day. He launched images in my direction like someone throwing spaghetti at a wall. Some pieces stuck more than others: a woman missing half her jaw; a young man who had been burned all over his body, and never had one visitor; a shimmering bundle of helium balloons that had been allowed into the ward once, against the rules.

I had an abstract vision of my mother, swollen and bloody and connected to a lot of tubes. She had a tracheotomy and could not speak or make noise. The surgery had lasted sixteen hours, which was four hours longer than the surgeon had originally projected. Those four hours sitting at home with the clock had felt longer than the previous twelve combined.

My mother's surgery was an incredibly complicated procedure that I cannot begin to imagine enduring, and that I didn't witness in its immediate aftermath. Those are my mother's puzzle pieces, her trauma flashbacks and morphine hallucinations. Those are my father's puzzle pieces, which I imagine are hyper-real and helpless.

When I finally saw my mom, she was thin and paper white but recognizably herself. My dad helped her cross the living room and descend into a chair, while my brother and I watched from the kitchen. The energy in the room was intense and my mother cried privately for a while, before we approached her, touching her shoulders gingerly. She didn't speak, though now she could, with some difficulty. I saw the small opening in her neck, where the tracheotomy tube had been. It was a pink wound, and a perfect circle. It would close slowly over the next two weeks, as if retreating from itself.

It is a disorienting experience to see a person who has always been your caretaker suddenly in need of immense care. Every few days, a nurse would visit the house to check on my mother's healing and change her bandages. My mom didn't mind if I stayed in the room, and sometimes even invited me to do so, but I always left at the last minute. I'd hide in her bedroom, my body pressed against the dresser where she kept her lotions and perfumes. Their dense, floral scents floated up to meet me. The lids were coated in dust.

*

On our last day in Palm Springs, we took a bus tour of celebrity homes. We sat amongst a group of elderly tourists and basked in the air-conditioning. Our tour mates looked carefree and sun-spotted and I wondered how it was possible that so many people could come to be so old.

The bus looped in and out of several neighbourhoods, and everyone craned their necks to see the houses. Most of them were short, one-story homes with flat roofs and clean lines—not the kind of grand mansions that one might imagine belonging to the rich and famous. Marilyn Monroe's bungalow still had its original black and white striped awnings, which peeked out from a dense wall of shrubbery. According to our tour guide, Frank Sinatra's house had a pool in the shape of a grand piano, though it was partially obscured by the fence and indistinguishable from any other, ordinary pool. Elvis' Honeymoon House looked like some kind of run-down, mid-century mothership had descended upon a perfectly groomed lawn.

But even the most uninspiring houses maintained their glamorous façade. They'd been graced by the golden dust of Classical Hollywood, just like our hotel bathtub, with its flaking porcelain christened by Clark Gable. I imagined my mother as the owner of every house we passed, wandering around in her Jackie O sunglasses.

I left the bus tour in a daze, hypnotized by the winding cul-de-sacs. We celebrated our final night by having dinner at a trendy Vietnamese fusion restaurant. We ordered an entire fish to our table; it arrived steaming and gray and sat on a bed of lettuce. I said that if my dad were with us, he would have eaten the eye. He always ate the worst parts. I picked at the tastiest bits and drank a fizzy pink cocktail.

My mother had a new habit of pressing her hand against her cheek when she laughed. The radiation had caused some nerve damage to her face, and parts of her cheek were numb. She

didn't believe me when I told her that the slight unevenness in her smile wasn't noticeable. I wanted her to laugh without restraint. I wanted her to freely be anything she wanted. I wanted Palm Springs to be the end of everything painful for both of us. Ultimately, it was more like the beginning of an after that would be nothing like before. It was a reminder that a future was still possible, from the heart of a city obsessed with the past.

Our flight was the next afternoon, so that morning we got up and sat by the pool for a while. The hummingbirds were out in full force, darting above our heads, noiseless except for the drone of their wings. We didn't see the hotel manager, nor the mysterious bird-luring gardener, nor anyone else but our own reflections in the water.

In the fall, hummingbirds from all over North America fly thousands of kilometres across the Gulf of Mexico to spend the winter months in warmer weather. In early spring, they begin their migration back north, pausing in the southern United States. Some continue even further north, as the heat of summer approaches. It was still cold in Edmonton when we went home, but warmer days were coming. A few hummingbirds were bound to follow.

I moved back into my apartment after the trip. My mother bought a hummingbird feeder and hung it on the tree in her front yard. Summer finally came, and the feeder saw a few visitors. My Palm Springs tan deepened and then faded into the fall. My mom was scheduled to have a reconstructive surgery, and we all gazed up from at the bottom of yet another hill that promised to lead somewhere better.

Winter approached, and the hummingbirds retreated from Alberta, as they always do. They travelled south, in search of a place more vivid with colour.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

Flowering

Cam went missing in November. A few days before, we had gathered in our boss's living room, for a staff Christmas party. I was surprised by the emptiness of her big house. The open concept living area cried out for a rug, a floor lamp, something. There was a sectional in the middle of the room, as well as a square coffee table. Then ten of us floated around the space, sipping wine and munching hors d'oeuvres.

I made enemies with the dog. He was an ancient, overweight chihuahua that I feared would maul me if I took my eyes off him. He wasn't particularly fond of anyone but had a burning hatred for me. He stalked me relentlessly, barking and growling and nipping at my ankles until finally someone locked him in the bathroom.

There was a gift exchange, during which my boss handed out packages containing fancy chocolates and teas, scarves, ceramic mugs, bath bombs, candles. I received an advent calendar filled with essential oils. Then, once all the gifts had been opened, she brought out the hat.

Inside were torn bits of paper, on which my boss had written dares. We passed the hat around, each selecting a dare at random. If we carried out the dare on our turn, then we were allowed to keep our gift; if we refused, then one of the other women could perform the dare instead and trade her gift for yours. In order to keep my advent calendar, I shouted everything I wished to say (or was encouraged to say) for ten minutes. To hold onto an expensive romper, my co-worker ate a tablespoon of yellow mustard, followed by two tablespoons of mayonnaise. We gathered in the kitchen and waited for her to gag.

The party later moved to a casino, where we had more drinks. I sat across from Cam at the bar. Her boyfriend had recently broken up with her, or she had begrudgingly broken up with

him, the details were unclear. At any rate, she was devastated and angry and everything else that comes along with heartbreak.

"Fucking Tyler," she groaned. "*Fucking* Tyler! I have to stop dating musicians. And alcoholics. That bartender is hot, right?"

I snuck a glance at the guy behind the bar. Bags under his eyes, in need of a shave, a little bit skittish. "He looks like damaged goods," I said. "So, just your type."

Cam flinched, "Ouch."

"Sorry. It's just hard to see you get hurt by losers."

She shrugged and finished her drink. I took a few long gulps of mine to keep from saying anything else regrettable. Then we got up and played a machine, cashed out with 20 dollars each and no idea whether we were ahead. At some point, I lost track of Cam and my co-worker told me she'd left. We hadn't said goodbye.

*

I applied to work in a flower shop because it seemed like a way to get paid to make something. I expressed this hope in my interview, and my future manager was forthcoming about the ways in which the creative aspects of the job often became buried beneath all the hard labor of running a profitable business. I didn't want this to be true. I was still holding onto hope that the workforce could double as a place of creativity and pleasure.

I got the job and quickly came to understand the particular demands of working at a high-end retail store. All the shop's merchandise came at a luxury price point; as a result, our client

base was primarily rich, middle-aged women with good taste and a high expectation for service that I was too impatient to supply.

Some of this impatience was brought on by the claustrophobia of the space itself, which was tiny and overcrowded with candles and glass bottles of soap and ladies slinging Gucci bags. There was a small cooler by the front door, stuffed with cut flowers and arrangements. We had roses in every shade, with names you might sooner expect to find on a bottle of nail polish, like "Miss Piggy" and "Quicksand." Peonies were everyone's favourite, including mine, and priced accordingly at twelve dollars per stem. There were also lilies and dahlias and ranunculus, which Cam said looked like beautiful swirls of toilet paper, lisianthus and gerbera daisies, chrysanthemums, sneeze-inducing viburnum, long stalks of snapdragon and delphinium, short squeaky tulips and bulbous hyacinth, with its oniony base, prone to peeling apart.

During holidays, the shop's flower inventory overflowed from the cooler, so the inner perimeter of the store was lined with large buckets of greens and puffy Dutch hydrangea that brushed up against shelves, tables, hips. I discovered this as early as my first shift, which came just before Mother's Day, 2018.

I was horribly sick that weekend. After a few hours spent floundering around in the chaos, my boss allowed me to retreat to the storage room. I unpacked boxes filled with vases, priced and stacked them in rows. I filled dozens of water picks, small plastic vials designed to hydrate the thirstier flowers, like roses, in transit. I answered the phone, which rang every other minute, and wrote down new orders. I called countless mothers and grandmothers to confirm upcoming deliveries; some were thrilled at the surprise of flowers, others annoyed at having to interact with a hoarse shop girl who didn't already know their name or address or who their son was. My throat burned.

That morning, in the mirror, I'd aimed my phone flashlight into my mouth and found white, popcorn-like spots on my tonsils. Compared to an online search for "white dots inside throat," which produced some truly disturbing graphics, I thought my condition looked worse.

By that point, I'd already been to the University of Alberta student clinic. The on-call doctor had pressed a stick against my tongue and assured me I was only dealing with a virus. I asked to have a swab taken anyway, and he obliged, though the roughness with which he jabbed the swab into my mouth conveyed his annoyance a little too plainly. He dropped the sample into a tube and said he'd call in seventy-two hours with the results.

When I arrived at work, around the forty-eight-hour mark, the nagging discomfort in my tonsils had developed into a raw, festering infection. The pain was so severe that I'd begun spitting into tissues because each contraction of my throat felt like my insides were closing in on shards of glass. I knew that it was absurd and suspicious to call in sick on the first day at a new job. I was desperate, so I did anyway, and was understandably urged to come in.

"Oh, you don't look sick," my boss remarked when I arrived. "And anyway, you should learn this now: my girls *show up*, even when they're sick."

Her words were like an incantation and when she uttered them, I wanted instantly to embody such a girl—the type that *shows up*, no matter what. I wanted to be part of the ecosystem that made this local, woman-owned and woman-powered business work. There was more at stake than just minimum wage and an employee discount, and I seemed to have stumbled onto something even bigger than a potential solution to my longing for a means of survival that could also feed some of my creative spirit. Before me was a beautiful, rare, and fragile operation that needed the energy, devotion, and commitment of its entire team in order to flourish.

But, from my position on the periphery, it was unclear where I fit. I made it my mission to squeeze in and find a way to become a necessary block in the Jenga tower that was my new workplace. My boss was a force of nature—six feet tall with a commanding bob. Her business partner (and my manager) had a chic, eclectic fashion sense and an intense, almost manic energy that she projected onto everyone within vocal range. She had a brilliantly sweet-yet-searing way of speaking, which disarmed even the most defiant customers. I tried and failed to emulate it. The shop also employed a few florists, and another part-timer, like me, who had worked there for five years. She had a cool, volleyball-team-captain vibe that reminded me of everything I wanted to be in high school but never was.

Cam was at the helm of the store's daily operations. Although she appeared, at first glance, to be an unexpected player, she gave that place much of its gravity. She came to work every day dressed head-to-toe in black, the edges of her tattoos peeking out from her sleeves. Her hair was chopped at an angle, the shorter side tucked back, revealing a side shave and a stretched ear lobe, which swayed with the weight of a black plug when she turned her head. Her presence was a challenge to the sparkling, sometimes saccharine atmosphere of the store, which, looking back, may have actually been unbearable without her.

In the beginning, I spent most of my time at the shop working with Cam. We were both relatively recent hires, and clumsy floral designers. Cam had an art degree, but "flowering," as she called it, wasn't at all like painting. (I'd come to find out that it wasn't at all like writing, either). Putting together an arrangement felt more like solving a math problem than a creative experiment. The placement of each stem needed to be calculated for cost and aesthetic balance. There was a formula for what sold.

I was averse to formulas and also pretty ambivalent about flowers. As badly as I wanted to learn about the business and improve my skills on the job, I struggled to find a rhythm in the dual roles of Junior Florist and Sales Associate. Whatever semblance of love I had for that job was a side effect of how much I adored Cam, which at the time felt like more than enough to keep me there.

At thirty, Cam was a few years older than me, with more wisdom, and, paradoxically, also a more child-like spirit. She was sensitive and generous, bold, fun-loving, and a devoted worker. She had a soft spot for guys in bands, as well as guys with long hair, because she was an ex-barber. She liked to go out at night, and whenever I came in hungover on Saturdays, I knew she would be too. She remedied our ailing heads and stomachs with green juice and her mother's Chinese steamed buns.

Cam was also an expert listener and remembered everything you told her. This was, in part, what made her great at her job. I strained to recognize even our most loyal customers, yet Cam knew all their names, as well as to whom they were married and how many children they had. She knew what school the kids attended. She knew where our customers lived in relation to the shop and could estimate whether there was time to get a last-minute delivery to their door, before they got home from work. Often, when I'd answer the phone, the person on the other end simply wouldn't have me. "Can you put Cam on?" they'd ask, before I'd had a chance to help. "She'll know what I want."

And she did. Cam's heart was in it to a degree that I could never match. I didn't care to find the redeeming qualities in our entitled regulars, nor could I be bothered to get to know the pleasant ladies who came in to browse after Sunday brunch.

I was in it for the sense of community, the intense relationships that sometimes emerge when people are forced to rely on one another. That's what I thought I was committing to that first Mother's Day. I wanted to feel part of an entangled web of women, give myself up to it completely, build a home there.

In the name of that mission, I scrubbed scummy buckets in a fever. I swept mountains of wet leaves and stems and discarded blooms into garbage bags and lugged them to the dumpster. I wrapped fifty arrangements for delivery, under the guidance of an exhausted florist, who kindly tried to show me where to put the tape and how to cut the ribbon. I forgot everything she said instantly. I disinfected the phones.

When I got home that night, late, I spat a sticky glob of phlegm into the trash can in my apartment's parking garage. Blood rushed into my head and I considered throwing up. But it wasn't time. I went upstairs, undressed, and passed out on the couch in my underwear. My insides were burning hot, but my skin was cold and clammy. I woke up several times in the night to vomit, each wretch a burst of pain, followed by a lasting acidic burn. I knew seventy-two hours were almost up and that the morning would bring the results of my swab. In the early hours, I watched time pass on my phone and waited for the doctor to call.

At five minutes after eight, he did. "It's strep throat. Not a virus, after all. I sent a prescription for antibiotics to the pharmacy we had on file. It's ready now."

Exhausted and stinking of puke, I made my way to the bathroom to shower. I sat on the edge of the tub and waited for a wave of dizziness to pass, then turned on the tap. Nothing came out. I wiggled the nob and tried again, as if that had ever solved anything.

I couldn't *show up* anywhere in my current state, so I made a plan to shower at my parents' house and pick up my prescription on the way. I packed a change of clothes and, when I

turned to lock my door behind me, found a notice for an emergency water shut-off taped below the peephole. I carried on to the pharmacy and took my first dose of antibiotics with a swig of old coffee from my cupholder. At my parents' house, I ran the hottest shower I could stand.

My phone rang for the second time that morning while I was still in my towel. It was my manager, letting me off the hook for my shift.

"We'll be fine without you," she said. "Why don't you come back next week, when things have settled down?"

At first, I thought she was referring to the bacteria. Then I realized she was talking about the store—when *business* had settled down. I muttered a thank-you, as well as a confused apology, then hung up the phone.

The next moment brought on a confusing sense of injustice. Had I been pre-emptively disqualified from something? Why was I suddenly exempt from the *showing up* rule?

I resolved that the time to prove myself would have to come later, then crawled beneath the covers in my parents' spare bed. When I closed my eyes, I descended, half-sleeping, into a dumpster pile of stems.

*

Things did settle down, and then picked up again in September. It was back-to-school season, for the kids of south Edmonton, and also for me. I kept my job and planned to work a couple days a week while I attended graduate school at the University of Alberta.

"A master's in English," a woman said, tapping her credit card on the counter and tossing her hair wistfully. "How romantic!"

I pulled taut the ribbon I'd been tying around her bouquet. "Not really," I said.

She shrugged and punched her pin into the machine. I looked at Cam, who returned an empathetic glance. I was only a few weeks into the semester, but she'd already endured a plethora of complaints about the trials of grad school. I knew what a privilege it was to dedicate two years of my life to the practice of reading and writing (which, I'll admit, does sound deceptively romantic), but the program was rapidly draining my life force.

I felt an impending sense of doom during that time. On some level, I was prepared to fall into the trap of believing that my exhaustion-induced anxiety was also the exclusive source of my power. I accepted that the coming months would be one continuous inhale and that if ever I paused to catch my breath it would all be over; I'd never be able to recreate the intense state of panic that was required to get everything done.

The woman took her flowers and left. I groaned into the counter and Cam said, for the thousandth time, not to take the comment personally. She was often reassuring me this way; many of our customers had a knack for condescension. They also seemed able to sense that I lacked the inner material required to manifest an outer shell.

"Don't worry about her," Cam said. "Come look at my new boyfriend."

She held out her phone to show me a picture. I leaned in to inspect a guy with a scruffy beard and a distant look in his eyes. He held a beer in one hand, the neck of a guitar in the other. The photo was blurred slightly, like whoever had taken it had moved at the moment of capture.

"So freaking cute," Cam gushed. "He's an amazing singer. But he's kind of short. And gambles too much."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Tyler. I seriously love him."

"You love everyone. It's not normal."

A bubble appeared above the new guy's forehead, and Cam yanked her phone away. I could see her body stiffen as she read.

"What is it?" I asked.

She rolled her eyes. "Somehow my ex always finds out when I'm seeing someone new."

"Is that him?"

"Yeah. He texted last night too."

"What did he say?"

"The usual nasty stuff. 'Fuck you, you fucking whore…'"

"Can't you block his number? Like, now?"

"Trust me, it doesn't matter. He finds a way." She set her phone on the counter with the screen open. I could see the full scope of the bubble: a long, rambling attack.

"He beat me up," Cam said, matter-of-factly. "After that I left, moved back in with my mom, and got this job. The whole flower industry is sort of absurd. It's just waste and plastic and packaging. But I needed a place to go every day."

The shop door opened with a jingle and Cam's cell went back into her pocket. "How *are* you?" she asked, her voice shrill enough to put me on edge. Her trademark cheeriness suddenly seemed pushed out of her, a forced jubilation erupting from her body. The customer didn't notice; she smiled and said that she was well, pressed her nose into a bouquet.

"Doesn't it smell *divine* in here?" she said.

It did smell divine. We were in the business of fleeting pleasures, little temporary spots of brightness, the hope inside a thing of beauty. Sometimes people would call to complain that their

flowers had died, as if they weren't headed there from the beginning. We told them to bring them in. If they were *really* badly dead, we replaced them for free.

*

The Christmas party was in late November. I'd been working at the flower shop for around eight months. My desire to *show up* remained unshakable, though much of it had been channelled into the part of me that refused to disappoint Cam. I tended to ride on the wave of her intense care for her job, which, I imagine, was partly inspired by her desire to keep her safe place, as well as her position within it, alive. The store wasn't a refuge for me like it was for Cam; rather, she was a tonic against the disorder of the store itself, as well as my life outside it. I came in twice a week and performed the list of tasks she had set out for me, and we caught each other up on whatever gossip had accumulated since our last shift together.

Those Saturdays were a reprieve because my job removed me from my coursework, in exchange for a different kind of collaborative pressure. Cam, on the other hand, was often left to juggle the daily stresses of the shop on her own. She made it her burden to be the first to arrive as well as the last to leave, whether or not she was getting paid for her time. She sank everything she had into her job, and then took the rest of her energy to the tequila bar where her boyfriend performed on weekends.

I didn't know that Cam's life force was also draining during that period. After the Christmas party, she responded to what must have been a growing impulse to drop everything and run, to resist the inner voice that told her to *show up*, no matter what.

Cam didn't open the flower shop that Monday. The store remained closed, until a customer notified the owner.

After that, every call made to Cam's cell phone went unanswered. Her vehicle was not in the driveway at her mother's house. Her friends were contacted, and even Fucking Tyler was questioned about her whereabouts. No one knew where she was, nor had anyone heard from her for several hours.

I learned all this from my boss, via the staff group chat. She assured us that we shouldn't panic yet, but the condition of "yet" was enough to make pins and needles bloom throughout my body. When I cried, I dripped watery snot into an already stained library book on Joyce.

I was in the middle of writing a term paper on the child characters in *Dubliners*, how coming-of-age in that book means discovering that one lives in a world of abuses. I knew enough about Cam's past abuses to know that it was within the realm of possibility for something terrible to have happened to her. She had a habit of dropping her hurt into causal conversation, laying it bare and then carrying on as though she hadn't said anything unusual. She would offer glimpses inside, then close the door so suddenly that you didn't know what side of it you were on, what to say, whether or not to worry.

The police were put on alert. Cam's picture travelled across Facebook with red letters superimposed on her face. *If You See This Person, Call 9-1-1 Immediately!* I hoped desperately that the reason no one could find Cam was because she didn't want to be found. I wanted it all to be an illusion—a disappearance followed by a reveal.

Meanwhile, the flower shop remained open, and I picked up a few extra shifts to help fill the void Cam had left amid the holiday rush. I struggled to match her talent on my best day, but the stress of her disappearance had scattered my thoughts and made me brittle. I was defenseless

against our customers' jabs, which tended to become even more frequent during the holidays. One woman said something particularly chilling. She had just purchased several arrangements and stood at the counter, looking aghast. I asked if she'd like help carrying the items to her car.

"You shouldn't ask people if they need help," she scolded. "You should just *give* help where you see it's needed."

I followed her outside, trying furiously to form a retort. What about agency? She opened her car door, and I set her flowers in front of the passenger seat. Before I knew it, she'd rounded the vehicle and gotten behind the wheel. She cruised out of the parking lot and I stood empty-handed in the snow.

*

Cam was missing for three days. Then, out of nowhere, she came home. I went into the shop to see her, and we embraced in the storage room, among the boxes. I didn't want an explanation, or her apology. It only mattered that she was there.

She took a week off after that, to recover from whatever had driven her to vanish. But a shift had already begun to take place among the staff. By disappearing, Cam had *showed up* for herself in a way that threatened the terms of the contract which rendered us "one of the girls." She'd demonstrated that there was a limit to how much one could give to a place that only gave so much in return. And when she eventually returned to work, it was with a mandate to simply do enough, instead of going above and beyond.

That spring, I'd also begun to drift to the sidelines of the flower shop in an entirely new way. I was tired and near the end of my first year of grad school. My anxiety had ballooned out

of control, culminating in a fainting incident in the middle of a seminar. As the fluorescent lights of the seminar room began to pull away their glow, I imagined my body flopping fish-like onto the carpet. I asked to stop the class, and someone opened the doors, allowing cool air to trickle in. My professor found me crying in the hallway a few minutes later. She was carrying a neon net filled with oranges, a sugary reprieve.

I cut back to one shift a week at the flower shop after that. I worked Sundays, when it wasn't as busy. The downside was that I worked alone, and never saw Cam. It began to dawn on me that the only saving grace of working retail is the camaraderie one can find there—a sense that your torment is shared, and your collaboration is meaningful. Otherwise, you're just selling someone else's stuff, which is lonely and depressing.

My old fear that I occupied a peripheral position within the group now hardened into an undeniable truth. I'd become a failsafe in the event that someone needed an emergency shift covered. I was also in the throes of burnout, and had lost track of the days, so that I only planned in the extreme short term. I went places on autopilot.

I also ended up working so few shifts that I wasn't making enough money to pay for my commute to the shop once a week, where I didn't see the person who I felt I was sticking it out for anyway. My job was no longer serving me, but wouldn't my failure to *show up* (even in my meagre way) harm the other women I worked with? We were all stretched thin, and my quitting would only stretch someone thinner. If history served, that person would be Cam, and I couldn't do that to her.

On the other hand, the *showing up* rule had begun to lose its power. A few weeks before Mother's Day, 2019, the girl who had eaten all those condiments at our staff Christmas party left for a month-long vacation to Southeast Asia. This kind of hiatus was previously unheard of,

especially in the lead-up to our busiest holiday. (In the midst of the Mother's Day madness, my boss would give everyone a speech about how such an absence could *never* happen again).

It was also around this time that I ate some bad lettuce and contracted E. coli, which, you may know, essentially launches the human digestive system into an emergency evacuation. I was left to ponder what it was about Mother's Day that compelled me to expel my insides.

Unlike the previous year, I didn't bother calling in sick. I manoeuvred through my shifts, weak and emptied-out, but, in a way, accustomed to the sensation.

Down one staff member, Mother's Day was already bound to be chaotic. Then, only a few hours in, one of our florist's teenaged daughters called from the emergency room. She left to be with her, and the shop descended into a state of total disorder. We fell so behind schedule filling orders that, when her daughter turned out to be suffering from ovarian cysts and not a life-threatening illness, our florist had no choice but to leave her at the hospital and come back to work. Not five minutes had passed before she broke down crying into a fistful of tulips. And who could blame her?

I remembered when Cam had called the flower industry absurd. In that moment, it struck me more completely than ever before that *our shop* was absurd. The wonderful and rare thing I thought I was protecting was actually depleting me. Nothing about being there was empowering or cosy or world-making. My stake in the business was small, and my contribution disposable. There would always be another girl in the wings, another block to slot into the precarious Jenga tower, which may actually have been precarious by design, and shouldered by a group of women willing to take on more than their share.

I quit my job two days after Mother's Day. A few days later, our weeping florist quit, too. A couple weeks after that, Cam was fired, and so was the girl who went to Southeast Asia. New women were hired in our places, and the Jenga tower retook shape. We moved on.

Cam was shocked and devastated, because there is a difference between letting go and being let go. Her defect, like all of us who aren't there anymore, was only in her human inability to surrender herself completely to something that demanded more than she possibly could have had to offer. (That being said, I finished my first year of grad school).

In my time spent flowering, I found that I could drag myself across a city, flecked in vomit, if it meant *showing up* for a group of women that was counting on me. I also found that I could leave a harmful place in the interest of one day *showing up* in a better way someplace else. Cam was the catalyst behind that discovery, and even though she left unwillingly in the end, I'd like to believe that she left an important mark on that place.

I figured I'd continue to see Cam, despite the fact that our common ground had been taken away. I believed this despite the dissolution of so many of my past friendships, which formed in the similarly claustrophobic environment of a small town. But I have a hard time holding onto people as well as letting go. I write love letters half-disguised as essays, which never quite stand in for the genuine vulnerability—and, I imagine, sometimes the reward—of reaching out.

We all fail at friendship in different ways—or, maybe we don't fail so much as we succumb to the various pressurized environments where friendships often form. What matters is that we carry on loving anyway and *show up* for love's sake for as long as possible.

Maybe I'll do what I rarely have before and go after the person my heart is hurting for. I'll call Cam and tell her I've been writing about her. If I can find the nerve to break this silence

then the best thing might again happen, and a disappearance will not end in loss. It will be followed by a reveal.

Hey, sorry tons of questions. Just wondering what do you think about me? Do you have a phone? What is your number? Do you want to hang out today in town? Where do you live? And if we hang out I have a question for you I will ask in person.

A Heart Premonition

I dated the first boy I fell in love with for nine years. In high school, he was a lifeguard at our town's Aquatic Centre. When he worked an evening shift, I'd bring him a plate of whatever my mom had made for dinner. One night, I walked in and everything was apocalyptic. No one was at the reception desk or in the break room. The fluorescent lights flickered blue.

I looked out at the pool deck through the viewing window and saw people clustered around the hot tub. It was like watching a silent movie. I couldn't hear anything through the glass; there was only action and expression. I saw someone bent over on the deck, their body pulsing up and down. A few people shuffled out of the way, and I recognized this figure as my boyfriend, performing CPR on a child.

An ambulance came, and I saw the child on a stretcher, sitting up and alert. I waited around for a while after the incident and my boyfriend came into the lobby to meet me. His face was drained of colour. I embraced him and his body was cold, in shock. I was full of adrenaline and felt so in love I wanted him to breathe life into me forever.

Last spring, about six months before he broke up with me, I acquired a heightened sense of my own heartbeat. At any given moment, it was either too slow or too fast. A skipped beat followed by a runaway spasm. I was short of breath throughout the day, and sometimes became so dizzy that I'd have to stop in the middle of a conversation and stare, transfixed, at a steadying object in the room. Maintaining consciousness became uncomfortably intentional.

I brought these concerns to my doctor, who referred me to a Cardiac Centre. There I stood topless in front of a tiny nurse whose eyeline was exactly level with my nipples. She scraped my chest, stomach, and sides with a strip of sandpaper. Then she stuck electrodes to

those raw areas, and clipped a monitor around my waist, like a fanny pack. I was given a journal in which to record cardiovascular "events." I worried that my heart would be able to sense the surveillance and start to behave normally as a result, but it performed a few palpitations.

Those were enough to warrant a stress test, and a few weeks later, I returned to the cardiac clinic. I was hooked up to more electrodes and monitored while I walked on a treadmill. My resting heart rate was 155 BMP, which, the cardiologist admitted, was pretty high. "But you're still young," he told me. "Come back when you're old. Then we'll worry."

I already felt old. It was an anticlimactic ending to months of waiting for an answer. If it wasn't yet time to worry, then what was my body trying to tell me? Maybe all those dizzying quakes in my chest were some kind of subconscious bracing, a heart premonition.

At the time, I didn't know that my relationship was quietly deflating around me. I read *Lives of Girls and Women* and wondered why Alice Munro had chosen to end her book with the least interesting thing about it: her female protagonist's heartbreak. How could Munro offer such a conventional conclusion to a work that seemed to guarantee an exclusive focus on the complex relationships shared between women and girls? Moreover, how could she give so much influence to a late-appearing character like Del's boyfriend, Garnet? That glittering gem who, at one point in the narrative, forces Del's head underwater in an attempt to baptize her, until she wonders if she will drown. This event puts their breakup into motion; meanwhile, Del has already thrown away her chance to enroll in university and escape the grip of her small town. Even in the wake of all that wasted opportunity, she still longs for the boy she loved.

To suggest that the text offers any steadfast endorsement or rejection of romantic love or its relationship to feminine independence would be too simple. It would also be an injustice to the subtle nuances of reading Munro. Besides, in the weeks since my own relationship ended,

I've come to understand Del better. Heartbreak, like all kinds of grief, transcends everything. It fills every space you enter like a constantly inflating balloon. It is the world-bending pain of letting go of an imagined future while also forming a new self. It is the terrible mind-fuck of being abandoned by your greatest confidant. And so, there goes Del, agonizing over a boy at the end of *Lives of Girls and Women*. What treachery, what truth.

I'd been lonely in my relationship for a while, but I also believed that our coming back together was simply a matter of time. I was not like Del, and in love with a perpetrator of near drownings; my partner was a guardian against them, a second pair of lungs. He ran out of breath when I wasn't looking. My *not looking* was also part of the positive feedback loop which drained us both and dismantled our equilibrium. Hindsight sometimes tricks you into believing that you could have identified and avoided every pitfall of the past, if only you'd paid more attention. But I think we are usually paying as much attention as we can, in any given moment. I was doing my best to juggle the other pieces of my life and banked on the universe giving us more time to sort out our romance.

The end of this partnership came (and still is, all the time, coming) in the middle of a period of reckoning with the ghosts of my past. I wrote essay after essay about the lost and precarious connections I had with the women in my life. I told my boyfriend not to worry about how infrequently he appeared in my work; it wasn't that he didn't matter, he simply didn't fit the theme. But, as Munro reveals, men do have great bearing on the lives of girls and women, whether it fits the theme or not.

I didn't plan to be someone who dated their high school crush for almost a decade. It just happened that way. He was my constant. He was the final link to the place I came from, after my childhood friendships dissipated and my family moved away. And I still adore him, despite the

fact that he left me, without warning, two weeks before Christmas. I was shocked, not because our relationship was perfect, but because until then it had persisted when everything else fell apart. He didn't tell me he was unhappy. I never suspected he could desert me. I thought our love was subject to Newton's First Law and would always remain in motion.

My sense of self has never been more fractured or more alive than in the aftermath of this particular ending. In breaking apart from a person who once felt like an extra limb on my body, I am irrefutably singular. This heartbreak is the hollow stab of despair; it is also a crescendo.

I want to share a memory. When I was twelve, on a family vacation in Vancouver Island, we went on a spelunking tour in Horne Lake Provincial Park. My legs were still adjusting to a recent growth spurt and carried me precariously toward the cave entrance, which dropped down immediately into a deep cavern. The tour group clambered inside, one at a time, by way of a metal ladder affixed to the cave wall.

When we had each touched down on the slippery rocks below, we were instructed to switch on the lights attached to our helmets. The guide explained that soon we would enter an area of total darkness—a dead zone the likes of which only exists at the bottom of the ocean and in the depths of some caves. We followed her in a single-file line, surrounded by clusters of stalagmites, which rose from the wet cave floor like giant mounds of wax.

We rounded a few corners, then entered a small, enclosed room. The group clustered together on one of the larger rocks. Our tour guide stood opposite us and explained that we had officially entered an area of absolute darkness. We would now extinguish all our lights.

"Some people get nervous during this part," she said. "Just try to relax and take in the sensation. We're completely safe."

One by one, we switched off our headlamps. In the all-encompassing black that followed, it seemed impossible that the cave was still there, that it had always been there. I blinked hard to remind myself that my eyes were open, and that I was witnessing the truest form of nothing.

In *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson writes, "We cannot read the darkness. We cannot read it. It is a form of madness, albeit a common one, that we try." Although it might be a form of madness to try and make sense of nothing, I suspect it might also be our only means of enduring. As time passed in the dark zone, I began to think that I could see the contours of the cave, the silhouette of the person beside me, even some faint spindles of light. I knew that I wasn't alone when a disembodied voice said, cautiously, "I feel like I can see…"

"We get that often," responded our invisible guide. "But it's a trick of the mind. We feel vulnerable in such concentrated darkness, so our brains simulate shapes, and sometimes light, in an effort to compensate."

The group was quiet for the remainder of our submersion. My previous interest in the dark transformed into a fascination with the possibility of an imagined light capable of pushing against it. When we reignited our headlamps, the world reformed and was new. I turned around and climbed back up the ladder.

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