University of Alberta

A Tour of the House: A Novel

by

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Abstract

This novel manuscript explores the connections between art, the city of Calgary, and political complacency. Legislated into the school and job chosen by her high school career test results, a law student attends a party at a heritage house in Calgary and takes a tour through the rooms, hoping to encounter a lost acquaintance. In this world, careers are divided into five ambiguous "Fifths" (labour, service, secondary service, small business, and corporate science) none officially more valuable than any of the others. "Fifth Fifths", though, are the best paid, their post-secondary educations heavily subsized. The characters adhere unquestioningly to the ideology of the government in power (as Albertans historically have done), though they resent their lack of choice and recognize injustice. They, like most of the characters featured in popular Calgary history books, are the ones ultimately benefiting from the system.

Table of Contents

Introduction: Growing a City

In 1913, the city of Calgary began promoting itself as the first western Canadian city to hire an urban planner. Council paid Thomas Mawson—an award-winning English-born architect whose previous work included urban projects for reducing unemployment—$6,000 to create a sustainable growth plan for a city with visions of reaching the one-million mark by 1914 ("Life and Work"). Already, in 1914, Mawson warned that Calgary was already "five or six times bigger" ("The Mawson Report" 3) than was cost-effective for providing sewage, water, and roads. He envisioned instead a centralized, architecturally permanent, fantastical cityscape dense with inhabitants, including a comprehensive public transit system, plenty of cheap multi-family housing and public parks meant to be enjoyed by people from all socioeconomic classes. His plan did not require demolition of some of the striking stone buildings already present, such as Knox United Church, but included them.

Mawson's plan was rejected as far too expensive. The city did not reach one million residents until after the 2006 census (Statistics Canada). According to researchers at the University of Calgary's Canadian Architectural Archives, it is not surprising that "Calgary today is in many ways the city Thomas Mawson predicted it would become if his plan was rejected" ("The Mawson Report" 3): sprawling, inefficient and expensive to maintain.

It is, importantly, not a walking city. Between 1951 and 1965, a major boom period in which the city began to take on its present-day shape, Calgary grew from forty to 155.8 square miles through a series of annexations of outlying communities (Foran 164). Private developers acquired land farther and farther from the city centre in order to

indulge Calgarians' "marked preference for single family dwellings" (Foran 165). The spread continues. In 2007, Calgary annexed the neighbouring eastern hamlet of Shepard, about 24 kilometres from city centre (City of Calgary "Annexation"). From the majority of the ever-increasing suburbs, a car is necessary to access shopping, recreation, and the business-heavy downtown. Calgarians lose out not only the practical but the political function of walking, and give up the possibility of revolution. "All the cities of revolution… are pedestrian cities," (218) writes Rebecca Solnit in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. Since "public space is the space we share with strangers, the unsegregated zone" where communal events are possible, when public spaces (like sidewalks) are eliminated, "so is the public" (218).

Grand plans such as Mawson's combined with a lack of the political will to effect change and fear of the price necessary to realize these plans—these themes anchor my dystopic revision of present-day Calgary. A city of entrepreneurs, visions of communal benefit lose out to promises of individual wealth—visions overwhelmed by the need to own a patch of backyard, no matter how isolated from the neighbours' properties and how far from city centre.

Presently, Calgary's city council pays lip service to the importance of greater urban density and community vibrancy as necessary for the sustainability of the city. A recent project, Plan It Calgary, developed over three years (McCormick), is described on the city's webpage as "a process of engagement between The City and citizens to develop a long-term growth and development plan for the city's land use and transportation networks" with a focus on "sustainable growth that supports the economic, environmental and social needs of all citizens" (City of Calgary "What is"), suffered a fate uncannily

similar to Mawson's plan. The *Calgary Herald* called the cost of drafting the plan ($6.5 million) "an outright scandal"—despite the "billions of dollars" (Klaszuz) it intended to save the city in the long run. Though "[t]ens of thousands of people participated, and most used the same kind of language to describe what they wanted: neighbourhoods where you can walk to the grocery store, where people of different backgrounds mix freely, where seniors can stay in their own homes, where kids can walk to school, where everyone can feel safe and welcomed, and where using a car is a choice, not a necessity" (Nenshi)—population-dense neighbourhoods which are, incidentally, cheaper to maintain than sprawling suburbs (Nenshi)—*developers* were cold to the plan (McCormick). Michael Flynn, director of the Urban Development Institute-Calgary, warned in the *Calgary Herald* that citizens were "better off just letting (free) market forces dictate what's going to happen with our city" (McCormick). Another lobbyist, Dennis Little, patronizingly said that Calgarians would change their minds about choosing not to drive when they found themselves waiting for a bus in minus 25 degree weather. The *Herald* itself, the city's largest (and corporate-run) newspaper (*Calgary Herald Online*), took a decidedly political stance against the plan, appending a convincingly-argued pro-Plan It editorial with a note reading "Read The Editorial Board's Differing Point Of View On Plan It" (Klaszus). Calgary author and journalist Chris Turner noted this rhetorical move was "way outside standard operating procedure for newspapers" and practically a supplication: "*please, Herald* reader, don't think we agree with this guy" (Klaszus, italics his).

The Canadian Home Builder's Association's Call to Action on Plan It, penned with the Urban Development Institute, argued that the plan's "targets are based on an

expectation for unprecedented behavioural change, which we believe is not based on market projections or reflective of Calgarian's preference for single family housing" (Canadian Home Builder's Association). It also dismissed the plan's assumption that a declining availability of gasoline will eventually force a change in Calgarians' driving behaviour. Developer hesitancy and media vilification took its toll. Before its approval, late amendments to Plan It watered it down considerably, changing its density targets from 70 people per hectare to 60, a number that is easily reachable without substantial changes to current suburban development practices. Naheed Nenshi, president of Better Calgary (and the author of the *Herald*'s censored editorial), noted that "if the whole point of Plan It [is that this] kind of urban sprawl is unsustainable, then we've just codified it, instead of getting rid of it" (CHQR Newsroom).

The private developer as city builder has shaped Calgary from its beginning, when the city had to acquire its breathing room from rich area ranching families who owned enormous parcels of land each now covered by several city neighbourhoods. One such family arrived in the Bow River area in 1887 (Glenbow Museum "Riley") when merchant Thomas E. Riley moved with his wife and children from Montreal to ranch in Alberta. Thomas and his seven sons acquired large portions of what is now central northwest Calgary and grew wealthy selling their land to the city around the turn of the twentieth century to create the now-desirable subdivisions of Hounsfield Heights, Hillhurst and West Hillhurst. A 1910 Heritage house (currently located at 8 Avenue and 26 Street N.W.), rumoured in the neighbourhood, Parkdale, to have been the home of one of Thomas' sons, inspired the setting of Friday's story. The house does not now exist and never existed exactly like the one portrayed. Riley Park, a donation to the city in 1910 by

Ezra Riley, Thomas' eldest son and an MPP to the Gleichen area, was the last of Ezra's vast holdings (Glenbow Museum "Riley"). Cricket has been played there since the Rileys' time and still is (Glenbow Museum "Riley"), (Glenbow Museum "Cricket"). Calgary's stories are of rich homesteaders upholding good old English tradition; what is not so prevalent in popular histories are stories of marginalized citizens such as non-Anglo-Saxons and the less affluent. Max Foran notes, "Because of their small numbers, non-Anglo-Saxon minorities were at least as wretched and probably more isolated than those in cities like Winnipeg, where ethnic cosmopolitanism was more in evidence" (89). During the 1910s, for example, cooks in Calgary struck to protest the Calgary Chinese community's economic success in the restaurant business, and Chinatown's presence in downtown was challenged several times by City Hall (people of Chinese descent numbered about 485 in 1911) (Foran 88).

Currently, slowly, some central neighbourhoods, the city's oldest, are becoming more heavily populated—often, neighbourhoods next to those undergoing the process of gentrification. For example, Mission, south of downtown, is one of Calgary's oldest neighbourhoods and has a large and notoriously active community association. A renter-heavy community composed largely of apartments, Mission has gained 762 residents since 1997. Its neighbouring community, Cliff-Bungalow, composed largely of aging single-family dwellings, has decreased by 334 as new housing projects—often detached luxury homes housing fewer, higher-income residents than before—replace existing heritage houses, which are currently often suited as rental units (Pashak 3). As Cliff-Bungalow's property values rise, so do Mission's. In 2009, several luxury condo buildings are planned or in negotiation for the Mission area (Pashak 3) (Williams 5). As

always, improvements to Calgary's communities often swing on the ambition of the upper class—a politically conservative class that, paradoxically, values individual wealth. In my piece, this process of gentrification of the inner city has only just begun after a desperate recession results in a publically-negotiated corporate buyout of most city-owned property. Calgary becomes a for-profit space, much like a shopping mall, that appears open to the public but is, of course, not—those who are not wanted, who are not economic contributors, can be promptly evicted. The Gallaghers, from an upper-class, politically influential family, are some of the first to move back to inner-city Parkdale, hoping to forge a connection to city-building ancestors.

I explore Calgary from the point of view of a hyper-individualist, politically loyal but ideologically confused, well-meaning, nouveau-riche class because this is the class that often gets addressed in history books about the area—a class of people such as ranchers, landlords, police chiefs and politicians. People like police chief Tom English, who in the early 1900s denied the presence of prostitution and gambling in Calgary (Kozub 41), deny the marginalized a voice by simply denying their existence. The Gallagher twins' characters embrace this tradition, living in a heritage house built by one of the Riley homesteaders. In the twins' Calgary, there are no visible homeless—those unable to work have been evicted. Career and personality tests determine each person's education, job training and livelihood; each is placed where she will contribute most to the economy. All five of the strictly governmentally-dictated classes ("Fifths") are equal in the eyes of the law, an attempt to mask the socioeconomic disparities between them.

My interest was in writing a dystopic novel from the point of view of the characters who reap the benefits of a repressive regime. The underclasses, the First and

Second Fifths, labourers and artists, are the people in the not-yet reclaimed downtown and in the farthest-distant suburbs. The astronomically tiny chance of moving up in the world, the possibility of being "upstaged", keeps even the poorest pacified, as the chance of realizing the dream and striking it rich has kept an overwhelming majority of Calgarians voting fiscally conservative—the Progressive Conservative Party of Alberta has been in power since August of 1971 (PC Association of Alberta). Socially fixed, unable to walk the streets, my Calgarians keep themselves obediently immobile—so immobile that the landscape changes around them.

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A Tour of the House

The Foyer

1

Do you know the Bow River? Rolling rocks like it belongs in the mountains, so shallow it looks temporary until something jams it up. Then that little rush becomes, warningless, six feet of mud, a full basement electrified, fire on the roof. A razor through rock, not the dull push mower of the glaciers that built this gravel pit of a city, but a hot blade, collapsing its banks, condemning its walls.

Eight blocks from the river, in the valley, the streets lined with elms, I pull my car onto a backstreet, looking for the party house. One lane paved and tucked away, 8A Avenue. Lasts just long enough to open a driveway for a single house on a huge plot.

I carry three letters in my purse. One from John, one from the government, and an invitation to the party on 8A Avenue. The single house stands in front of a hill, a park, *unusable space*, green-grey grass to my waist and browning poplars scrumming around underground springs. The last street fitted into the valley. I know the stairs, the two porches, top and bottom, wrapping the square foundation, spurting out around the unexpected turret. Right-angled brick, whitewashed windowsills. And a plaque: Heritage Site, 1910. I knew the house, when I was you. *You* knew the house. It is just past nine. A postcard view, if I cut out the street one block to the south, where the grid starts predictably. The land wears the old house like jewellery. Prized, unnecessary.

I dread going into the party. A party is just a party, should be disposable, never is.

Cait was pissed at me for missing the same event last year. “These boys,” she said of the

hosts, “they don’t like seeing people too often and you can’t afford not to know them. You know they’ve been to Africa? China? Britain?”

When I asked how that was possible Caitlyn laughed. “Money. Before the borders closed, their parents could still afford tickets.”

Caitlyn sounded like Stefanie, telling me who I should and shouldn’t know. I allowed myself one daydream, a single snapshot. Me in sunglasses, descending the steps of a plane onto a dazzling tropical runway.

“Trust me, Friday. You’ll like these guys, really like them.”

She didn’t sound anything like Stefanie then.

I can believe, looking at the house, that the rest of the city has disappeared. Down in the river valley, this is my old neighbourhood, when I was you, when you lived with your dad. You went to elementary school here, began high school here, though by then you had to be bussed in from the suburbs. This is the city of apocalypse. Now, I daydream constantly about plague taking hold, everyone dying but me. I wait, all planned out. I’d live in this old house on 8A Avenue, where fireplaces were built to heat. Break into houses and steal blankets and canned soup and drink water from toilet tanks, anything the mice can’t get, and as the spring came, stalks and stalks of rhubarb. You see, I know what will happen without herbicide and weed-whackers. The city lawns, grass, driveways, alleys, choked with shady rhubarb, as tall as my neck. If the sky got too big, alone, I could drop to my knees and crawl through that red-stalked forest, umbrellaed by poison leaves, invisible to birds. When your mom left, the rhubarb that grew wild in the back lane conquered the lawn in the summer, nuclear explosions of rhubarb, crowding the

sidewalk. You made sixteen brown betties and still most of the plants got too tough, went to seed. The next year was when you and your dad had to move away.

Quebec soldiers would find me here, months and months later, once the Alberta government gave in and accepted foreign aid. No one expected alive, left to tell. Alive, amazon. So proud and thin my ribs jutted out, my arms rope, wearing a big pair of glasses I'd taken from a dead man's face—my contacts would never work under the circumstances. My designer lipstick painting my forehead, my collarbones. Alive. I'd pretend not to speak English or French, to have no tongue. Am me, just *am*.

2

I smooth my hair.

You used to dye for performances. I will not dye for my performance, now. Not for the parties, not for lectures at law school, nor networking with firms, nor practice, nor for connections. My one hold-out on the biggest stage. You used to score 78 per cent on the career tests every single year, a solid F4, until you hit sixteen. Then, one year, your results letter said 84 per cent. My letter. I've been F5 ever since. In a peroxide sea of heads, me, five inches shorter than any other F5 I've met, a rocky volcano, lurking underwater. More like a zit beneath the surface of the skin.

I can't let go the rearview.

Always, a slender Bartlett pear in the mirror. Me.

But I push-up, thirty reps, three times, bicep curl, twenty reps, three times, butterfly, twenty reps, three times, bench press, twenty reps, three times, for the hourglass. Turn myself over, resift, restart. But, butt.

Calgary, a waiting city where plague will never arrive. Rats carry plague, and

there are no rats in Alberta. The foothills hold patiently to take back over, forever bluffing. One wave of illness, one mass evacuation, and the buildings, hushed and darkened, wind whistling through, would be mere prairie flora. This town always wants to be alone with itself. You and me have spent our whole life interrupting.

Time to go inside. Time to arrive to the party.

No, there's yet mascara. I dig in my purse. Crushed velvet with buckles, like I would've died to carry as a five-year-old. A piece of royalty. Mascara, where, where. My fingers know each jar and tube. I will leave that rock & royal purse in the car—it's not meant for evening. Inside the purse is a clutch, which only holds my ID, my cash and a travel tube of concealer. So I perfect before I arrive. I could put on my face in my sleep. Eyes closed, under covers.

The sun beats down here for only fourteen days in July—Stampede. Then we all go back inside till next year. I don't really want plague, I'm just daydreaming, I don't want everyone dead. Makes me feel guilty how often I think about it. I just want a chance to walk, really, to run, to mark the city with my feet. In the middle of the streets, leave prints. I spend half an hour a day on the stair machine in the laundry room of my apartment building but what I really want to do is walk outside with nowhere to go. It's not illegal. Just, maybe, irrational. Sidewalks are no longer an *infrastructure priority* for ABCorp, none of the new subdivisions have them. Maybe some Servant of the Government of the New Republic of North West North America will peer out between his curtains as I walk by, and maybe he'll think, can't she afford to drive, or is she exercising? Why isn't she riding a stair machine, it burns three times the calories. Inefficiency is unbecoming in an F5. Maybe Stefanie will be cruising through my

neighbourhood and whisper to the girl in the passenger seat, isn't that Friday, *walking*? Can't she afford to keep up her car?

Walking is always trespassing, maybe that's my dread. Sidewalks aren't common ground. The city's owned by ABCorp, a division of Black Landholders Inc. When I finish school, when I get my career, I'll get to pay usage fees and road tolls, just like everyone else. Much higher than property taxes used to be, but that's how the market works. I thought about moving back to my old neighbourhood, to the valley. But I haven't been here in so long. Garbage on the streets, For Rent signs all over the windows, even a few boards on windows. And empty, the prickle, should I be here, no cars on the streets. Did this part of town always look so abandoned, were you too young to notice?

For now, I'm subsidized, a paid apartment in Foothills Estates, an F5 student neighbourhood. As long as it takes for a proper education, three years.

This house was a neighbourhood itself. Still looks like it's sitting alone on a prairie hilltop. There is no space for my car in the garage and the driveway's already cluttered, so I park practically at the front steps, half on the grass island at the centre of the circular driveway. In the middle of the island is a big old apple tree, twisted and shivering in the moonlight. It is just past nine, and time to arrive. I shut off the engine, leave the keys dangling.

My phone buzzes twice in my clutch. I dig it out, hoping. Caitlyn? There are rumours about this party. The hosts know her, they don't, she might be here, she might not. Everyone I ask about her shrugs one shoulder. *She likes the Gallaghers, maybe she'll be at the party on Friday.*

I've left her six messages since Tuesday, three a day until her voicemail box filled up. Where is she? No glimpse of her at school, no calls, no emails, no messages. I click on the phone. Message from the Government of the NRNNA, third one in an hour. My heart's slamming into my forehead like it used to last year when I started getting the messages. This one reads, VIEW REVISIONS TO EMPLOYEE HANDBOOKS, IN INBOX, ASAP. The second buzz, because I have a new email in my inbox. It's a felony to message your friends in capital letters, part of the emergency response program. I check the rearview. Pale and drowned, seaweed roping my face. My daydream could end like that instead, with the soldiers spooning me out of the Bow River, dead as countless others. But only others die. I'm probably parked on the floodplain right now, this house is in the valley, only seven blocks from the river. River waiting for the mountains' rumbling avalanches, begging to be fed to bursting. No, the only story for me is the one where I am the one left alive. I am the only one who cannot die, that is death's nature.

My brain is really only built to take care of my body, myself, and it dies with me. Yet I answer party invitations because John wrote me a letter, because I filled up Caitlyn's voicemail box, because this anti-instinctual mind of mine won't stop circling other people's lives. I wouldn't survive plague at all. Too domesticated.

I face. Final check. I put my cheek right against the mirror.

3

John told me, *when I was you*, when you and he were in eleventh grade, about the big floods in the 20s and 30s on the Bow River. You sat on the riverbank in Kensington in the middle of October, a mild day, instead of going to Biology class. Watching the gulls. I can't believe how you used to skip class. "1929," he said, "the water washed right over

the Louise Bridge." He pointed to the Tenth Street Bridge, above your heads. Beyond, downtown's skyscrapers, acquiescent. Always half half-built because they were begun before the last recession and not finished before the bottom fell out, before ABCorp bought up. Building always took longer than the last boom.

"The zoo was on St George's Island," John says, "same spot as now. Just northwest of the sewage plant." Before the flood crested, he told you, at the water began to reach into the cages, the keepers waded around and opened the doors, let the animals swim away and fend for themselves. You felt like everyone knew more about this city than you did. Beyond the zoo island was the weir, where every flood year rafters got lost, drifting through broken barriers and warning signs and falling into the whirlpool. Sometimes bodies, trapped under and under and under by the water always coming over the top, didn't drift out from under the weir for a year.

"Except for the bears. The bears were left, locked up, to drown." You never forgot that story. I still remember sometimes. You told your dad when you got home from rehearsal after school. Then you hit the shower, because the day had been hot and you'd played ball hockey in gym, and then watched a little TV. A handful of older American sitcoms, *Family Ties*, *Happy Days*, *M*A*S*H*, were still in syndication on Canadian networks then. I don't remember if you told John this, but your dad called the zoo while you were in the shower, to see how long it would take to evacuate the animals from the island. You found him two hours later, a map laid out on the dining room table, searching the internet on his laptop. Felt like finding him planning a bank heist or looking up pornography. Your heart sped up, guilty.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

“Forty-eight hours, they said,” he said, forehead pressing down on his eyes, “to save all those creatures. That’s not long enough, I’m sure that’s not long enough.”

His finger hit the map, traced the Bow River from Bow Glacier,

“It’s different now, John says it’s a little different,” you said.

“The water shoots right down from the mountains, you see?” He was never loud, but his pitch rose so quickly you used to be embarrassed when your friends were over. He’d rush in to the living room with a picture of that bird he saw yesterday when he was walking. Or he’d crowd everyone behind his laptop to see the latest online video of his favourite troupe of stunt planes, or to test everyone’s heart rates with the blood pressure monitor he bought just because he was curious. He kept a twice-daily log of his own pulse, never once over a healthy rate.

“But there’s a dam at Ghost Lake now, look.” You traced a line with your hand over the map, down the line from the mountains, into the Indian reserve in the foothills. “And that’s not the only dam upriver now. And there’s the dam at the reservoir in town, too, in Glenmore. See, if they can control the water flow, there’s nothing to worry about.”

He shook his head, dismissive. “Look how far away that dam is from town.” Dead serious. He hits his hand on the table. “A matter of time, Friday. Just a matter of time.”

He hadn’t made anything for dinner. You left him there, poring over the map, and cooked mac and cheese from a box and he looked surprised when you put a bowl in front of him on the table.

“Look, Friday, look. A webpage some geologists at the university put up. It says that the dams are too far away from the city to prevent big floods. Look at the map, Friday, half the zoo’s in the floodway.” He squinted. His macaroni was getting cold. You

pushed it closer to him, and he thanked you again and picked up the bowl.

Eight already, but he'd forgotten to eat. See, I wonder about that. He's a plumber, F3, but used to get so lost in thought sometimes that, dead winter, he'd forget to put a jacket on before he left the house. Just who he is. You didn't think then about who was supposed to be doing the thinking. I'm not encouraged to eat mac and cheese from a box anymore, that's off my meal regimen. I can eat what I want, of course, technically, but I can't afford to gain a pound.

For the next month after you told him about the flood, your dad waged a war, phoning the zoo every five or six days to ask them about their evacuation procedures, making sure you were in the room to roll your eyes. He went as far as to switch between the house phone, his personal cell and his work cell so the zoo staff wouldn't figure out his number and stop answering.

"How long? How long?" He demanded into the phone, and waited, as if it would never come, for the answer, so he could cry, "Not long enough!" and hang up. Then, smirking a little at his own cleverness, he'd give himself a minute to calm down before he'd tell you,

"I'm just trying to make them think a little. Two days. Those poor animals."

You wondered then how hard he was trying. How much was for your benefit. Was he just phoning and harassing the ticket office, did anyone hear him?

4

Normally, I would've dreaded this party. Never met these famous twins, the hosts, Haydn and Shel Gallagher. I made an excuse last year, *fever of 99.5 degrees*, I believe it was, so as not to have to go into this house. *You remember this house*. This is a memory that

should belong to you. My stomach is rebelling. I'm stalling. I want so badly to see him. I want so badly not to go in. I get out of the car and walk across the gravel drive.

No one asks if I don't attend every party. Once every couple of months I have to skip school when I get a monster zit on my nose or between my eyes. Fifth Fifths don't have acne. *Then, when,* I—you—knew two kinds of pimples. The forehead bumps you put your hair over and forgot, and the singular monsters. Messed with the symmetry of a face. Once, end of eleventh grade, when you'd been dating him a few months, you asked John what happened to his chin. What appeared to be a sizable gash had opened on the farthest protruding point. "It's a zit," he said, after a considerable silence. That was the last time you spoke to John face-to-face before you got promoted.

The monsters did not happen at my new high school. I missed seven class days in senior year rather than show my face.

The letter from John says, *Friday, June 10. The old Riley place, 8A Ave. Say nothing to Stefanie.* He got an invite to the party. How, how. Will he be disguised, respectable? He ends, *I keep missing you. Maybe I waited too long. Hope hope. John.*

Hope, hope, what if he is gone already? What if I am too late? What if he is writing to you and I'm a wrong addressee with the right name? What if Friday is just the day where June 10 falls this year?

John. John, with the tip of a pen and intention. I put his letter in my clutch but keep the government letter and my party invitation out to have in hand when I arrive.

A trap. Maybe someone has found out what Caitlyn and I do on Mondays. They got to her, and they're baiting me in John's handwriting. No. Maybe, fifty-fifty chance John will really be there. Not the worst odds. Half-him and I'd be happy.

I climb the stairs to the porch in stilettos. No one is outside.

Turn the knob, fingernails glossed black against the brass. Swings smooth and I am hit by the party: laughter, polished tile, a smashing glass, a sportscaster on TV. Sweetened tobacco. Two breaths in, all the way to the bottom of my stomach so when I look down my abs distend. I switch my letters and clutch from left hand to right to take my arms from my sleeves and hang my coat by the door, and I arrive.

5

I clack into the foyer, onto marble tile. Checkerboard. I want to slide from black-to-back-to-black. Break-your-mother's-back! A boy making the rounds in the foyer hands me a glass from a tray. Canadian cocktail, he tells me—I sip. Raspberry Shimmer, my lipstick shade, sticks on the crystal.

Whiskey, lemon, curaçao, bitters (and baking soda, maybe, or crushed aspirin, or, unlikely, ecstasy). What matters is that the mixers taste a little off and that the guests believe they'll have a good time.

Compared to suburban houses, the spaces in this one feel choked. The new owners have knocked out some walls to remind their guests just how *big* the place is—the original owners, the Rileys, built this by hand, no doubt, and must've been so worried about keeping it *warm* that they never bothered to *open up the space* properly. Last time you were here, the original hardwood creaked when no one walked over it, settled

according to the feel of the air. Threatened to exercise its own power.

There's a calligraphic banner above the door of the cloakroom, which leads into the foyer: Mystery! History! Scandal! And an old-timey photograph of a cowboy with a pistol in each hand.

Pink smoke pools on the floor, curling around my ankles. I skid on an ice cube and almost wipe out into Dan and Stefanie, who, despite being a couple months younger than me, looks a sensuous thirty-five and unimpressed. Three nearby boys turn up their collars, sinuous motion, pretending to avoid spray from my drink. Their unison halts me. Don't seem to mind that they've just made the same joke. I untangle my pearls, which threaten to throttle.

When I changed schools I found Stefanie because she was my link to John, my only link as an F5. If not for the heady hope of thick blood, I probably wouldn't have made any new friends at my high school. I found Stefanie in my English class. The teacher, Ms. Albright, put forth the syllabus, Shelley's *The Cenci* and Shakespeare's *Othello*. Stefanie put up her hand and said,

"Does this matter?"

Albright checked the attendance list. "Does what matter, Stefanie?"

"Anything written more than two hundred years ago? I mean, we achieved it, didn't we? The perfect society? What have we got left to learn from these guys?"

I was astonished by the smirk on her face. Everyone in that class ached to be her for a moment, scratching her earlobe with a manicured nail, for the sharpness if not the breadth of her logic. No questioning qualms. Fear flickered in the teacher's eyes.

My years tagging along with Stefanie have been spent waiting. I'd wait and wait, ask a stupid question, wait again, so as not to look too foolish. Like, "I have four cousins, how many cousins do you have?" And Stefanie shrugged, "A ton." Always a bust. And then I'd have to wait again for a new opportunity, think of a new question, while Stefanie discussed who had fallen from her favour each week. I know she knows him. I'm sure she knows what I'm digging for. She's always smirking. I heard her say his name once, just once. When you knew John they still talked on the phone all the time. You saw her name over and over on his mobile phone's call log, scrolling through with the freedom of a new girlfriend and the heart-quick casualness that such liberty required, like the costume of an unfamiliar character.

"Who's Stefanie?" Perfectly slowly, even.

"My little cousin," he said, though he was only a year older. "My best friend when we were kids. She's the only girl who's always had my back."

"Competition?" I say.

"Not exactly. But she does have seniority."

When you wanted to meet her he told you it couldn't happen. "Even I don't see her in person anymore," he said. "Haven't for years."

Stefanie says, "What did you think of the revised employee handbook? You'll be able to handle the changes?"

The email came ten minutes earlier and she knows I haven't read it yet. I don't answer, let her look smug. Blue sequins sparkle in her hair. I don't quite understand what John liked so much about her. But I like to believe I never suffered under her reign during

my senior year, queen bee, because she was doing a favour for her big cousin.

If not for her grace, I never would've made friends at my new high school.

This is the second time I'm seeing her this week, once more than usual. We don't share courses this semester, and except for Monday nights, when the old clique gathers like a storm at Stefanie's, I spend nights lately studying or drinking espresso at Caitlyn's.

"Where's your partner in arms?" Stefanie says. She means Caitlyn.

"You don't know?" I hide my worry.

She shrugs. "Haven't seen her since Wednesday."

The last time I saw Stefanie and Caitlyn in the same place at the same time was Monday night, at Stefanie's weekly gin-and-gossip. Stefanie said to Caitlyn, liquorice smile, "You're my next appointment."

Does Stefanie know about me and Caitlyn, about what happens Mondays after we leave her house? Caitlyn's an F3. Stefanie doesn't need her. Weird truth about Caitlyn, she's arresting. She's someone, even Stefanie knows it, even if the government calls her 58 per cent. Councilman's daughter. Stefanie hates it. First time I met her, last year, she was smoking a cigarette right in the middle of the main hallway of the Geography wing and saying, as Stefanie applied hand sanitizer to her palms,

"The secret to perfect health is keeping a little dirty. Two reasons. I mean, first, you'll cause yourself stress and mental fatigue thinking all the time about everything that could make you sick. Just yesterday I accidentally touched the seat of a toilet in the bathroom in the Maths hall, and before I washed my hands I picked something out of my teeth at the mirror. Didn't even think about it. I'm not dead yet. I'm so immune to bacteria I could inject staph into my veins. You, though, first bug that doesn't fall to that

sanitizer's gonna kill you. You have no natural defence."

Stefanie, silent through this anecdote, nodded once at the end and then changed the subject. Caitlyn could admit anything. Invisibility let her look however she wanted.

Stefanie doesn't need me any more than she needs Cait. I'm only 84. F5, but barely. One mistake, maybe, and maybe I get a new letter next year. Maybe I drop back down to F4. Highly unlikely, but maybe. Congratulations, 79 per cent, you are an essential contributor to our society. As if the life of a teacher or restaurant owner is just as free as the life of a corporate lawyer or executive officer. In two years Stefanie's never made an appointment with me. I'm a favour she's doing her cousin she never sees. He's barely F3, and, unlike Caitlyn, easily avoidable. John doesn't go to college, like most F3s, she'll never run into him by accident. I'm not important to her but I'm glad he is. But I don't want to get too worked up. He probably won't be at the party. Surely Stefanie wouldn't let him in the door.

Every Monday after dark, on the way home from Stefanie's, Caitlyn and I stop at the reservoir and urinate into the water. Spur-of-the-moment the first time, driving along Glenmore at the edge of the black, Caitlyn said, "Not allowed to swim there. It's kept as clean as possible, hardly needs to be filtered. That water supplies the whole south half of the city." And we both had the same thought. Stefanie lived alone in a condo in the south half of the city, and both of us lived in the north. Under the big billboard facing Glenmore Trail, reflection from the spotlights let us see where we were stepping, but surely no one could see us from the road. I ruined a silk blouse splashing around in the water. "Jesus, it's cold," I said. "It's August, how is the water so goddamned cold?"

"I swear, humans aren't made to live in this godforsaken part of the world."

My lips turned blue. We stood ankle-deep in the water when I made the suggestion. Caitlyn said she could probably shit, but I didn't have to go and besides I stood awfully close to her. So I told her to hold that for home. Every week we drive by the dam after Stefanie's gin-and-gossip. Too tremendous to resist. We carpool every week now, and Stefanie turns up her nose because we ride together and because we wear cotton skirts without stockings to her *parties*, and she can't imagine why an F5 would leave home without stockings. She says so because she knows Caitlyn's not F5 at all.

Stefanie's 88, untouchable, heart of carbon.

6

I repatriate my drink with another Raspberry Shimmer stain. Used to make raspberry betties as well as rhubarb, when hundreds and hundreds of berries from the brambles in the neighbours' driveway all got ripe at the same time. Toss the raspberries in sugar and a couple tablespoons of flour, sprinkle the top with sugar, butter, flour, cinnamon, crumbled together. In the oven, the raspberries melt. Don't wait for them to cool before cutting in and the juice floods plates, stove, clothes, mouths, the most royal of purples.

Stefanie's talking. To me, hairspray curls and perpetual wakingness after two coats of concealer. My four-inch heels claiming Haydn and Shel's house. The roof (still) like a glacial cave. Stairs hugging the wall, black-and-white prairie landscapes frozen up the steps. And a chandelier like sharp ice, a reminder, like the wind in Calgary that waits until the darkest part of night. That wind rattles through the streets even after summer's hottest day, hinting at winter. I'd never met Hadyn or Shel. *Imposter*, I think, blood making itself known in the vein in my head, *party crasher*. Even though I still have the

invitation in my hand with my letter from the government, getting damp.

"You missed the tour," Stefanie says, "It was wild. You know the homesteaders who built this place used to own most of the north side of this valley? The city made them rich, buying them out."

Eyes bright, she's obviously entertaining real estate schemes.

"You ever thought about it, Friday, what it would be to actually own property? Not to rent from AB and sublet. Actually own, the sort of profits you could make."

"Sure," I say, and spout, orthodox, what I expect she expects. She's always testing. "Anyone with luck and really good sense could turn a profit. The guy who mows the lawn at my condo could get rich that way, who knows. It wouldn't work anymore. It's important we all only make enough money to own as much as we should, befitting our labour, no more."

"For the lower tiers I understand. But for us. Why can't we own property? You don't have to recite the bible. Just pondering."

I shrug. One word out of place and she'd be whispering, "Friday thinks we ought to be allowed to own property. You believe that?" The easiest way to handle her is to answer in monosyllables. Then the worst she can say is, "For an F5, Friday is really not very articulate."

A heritage site opens to the public one day a year. I—you—used to walk from your dad's house in Brentwood, thirty blocks, to look at the creepy old place. One June evening, you left a friend's sleepover after dark, on a dare, climbed the pillars of the lower porch, and landed on the upper porch. You crawled around to the back of the house, beneath the windows, and slept there, out of sight. Then, the house was owned by

someone else. I was unwanted, by design. By mortgage contract. Waking up there, like the mice in the walls or spring water in the basement, was a victory. The house was for me, too, a secret I shared with the building. The owners didn't know the boundaries of their own property.

Less than a month later, you attended the open house, ten years old, the only tourist, on creaking hardwood, through half-refinished kitchen and abandoned bike attic. The woman who owned the house told you, "The house was in bad shape. The city sold it to my husband, who was a landscaper for the city at the time, for a dollar."

You were the only one there to take the tour. If you didn't look engaged, you feared, she would guess you'd camped on her porch.

That plump woman, in her magenta tee and tapered jeans, ordered new wallpaper, one room at a time, from distributors in England, who sold antique patterns. She scoured the archives at the Glenbow. "This house belonged to Albert Riley. Maude's son. Maude was never in the Famous Five. You know who the Famous Five were? Because of them, you'll be able to vote when you're eighteen." She had no idea. "Should've been the Famous Six, you know that? She doesn't get the credit she deserves." She walked you around the porch, which had white-washed railings and said, "One day, I'll replace these railings with maple shingles. I saw a photograph in the museum that showed that's what used to be here." Now, the porch railing is maple-shingled. No wallpaper left, though.

Stefanie says, "So I told her, you can't hang cashmere to dry. An affront to the sheep, treating natural fibre that way. And woven, not a knit! Why is she hand-washing to start with? Turns out, she didn't *know* about the dry-cleaning tax credit. My good deed for the day—no, scratch that. My good deed for the week. Mustn't be too good, after all."

I say, “haha haa ha ha ha” to make it seem like I was listening the whole time but Stefanie looks for a minute like she knows I’m faking. Then she smiles, confidentially, and I smile back. I am always looking for people who can keep secrets, but Stefanie’s not one of them.

I whirl at a whisper in my ear, a voice not Stefanie’s. A spinal scratch of a voice.

“Welcome, miss, welcome. You’re late. You missed the tour.”

The young man wears green silk and a straight pant in chocolate and does not know you. Doesn’t know me much either. Long dark lashes and frown lines. He is only my age but his hair already greys. He puts his hand on my back and drinks brandy from a glass without a stem. I skim his collarbones—a warm chain filigrees under my fingers. I pull out his coin and dangle it in the light long enough to read 93. As rumoured, then. The highest per cent potentiality rate of anyone I’d met.

“Haydn?” I presume. I shake his hand. “Friday Garrotter.”

“That’s really your name?” He says.

He scores high enough that he doesn’t have to care about the number of anyone he meets. My coin’s on display but his eyes don’t roam. He looks at me like in four seconds looking at my face he has learned everything there is to know.

(Shoulders a little rounded from years of bad posture, opaqueness at the bottom of the eyes, a tendency to twist up my fingers or finger my pearls while I talk. Is that what he sees in me, clues? I listen closely, heart pounding.)

“I’ve heard of you,” he says, “unless there’s another Friday kicking around.”

I say, surprised, “What have you heard?”

He’s not really listening yet. “Did you not get word? Promptly at eight, a tour of

the house, a taste of the Old West." He points, triumphant. They've set up a big sheet of corrugated card, painted gold, on an easel next to the stairs, for guests to tack up their government letters. "Those letters are our lineage papers, Friday. Our connection to the grand people who built this town. Promptly at eight, we celebrate!" He face falls a little. "-Ed. Celebrated."

Yeah, Stefanie must've forgotten to tell me. The rule—always arrive late by at least an hour to a party, unless the starting time of an event dictates otherwise. I guessed wrong, I arrived wrong. I look a fool. I want to reopen the invitation, betting I glossed over a "sharp." Instead I keep the card hidden under my government letter.

"Don't fret," says Haydn, grand, "I propose a repeat performance, just for you. Will you take the tour?"

He knows something. What something? I cannot look at his eyes. Why me alone?

"I really just came here to meet a couple of friends," I say. "I'm not worth the trouble of another tour." But if he persists, I know I can't turn him down without looking rude. And his father's an alderman. City council's now the government board that advises Black Landholding, Inc. Servants of the New Republic of North West North America. What if his son idly said, I can't believe what maladjusted guests turned out to my party?

Probably nothing. Likely, just nothing.

But I *can't afford* not to know this boy.

The walls separate logarithmically until the old house stretches, room upon room, to the end of human space. The foundation goes around the world and joins itself at the beginning. I want to race through rooms but wait at the door, in case Caitlyn arrives, in case John arrives. Both already in the house, or neither. I am angry with Caitlyn because

she's dividing my mind, disappearing. I came here to see John, want to let my mind be absorbed by him, but her absence nags the corner of me. I should probably be more worried about her. John's a once-reunion; Caitlyn's there to fill in every boring ordinary evening with double solitaire. I will take the tour. The boys are alright, says Cait. And John must be in the house.

Unless he has not arrived.

"Is John Friedrich here?" I say, but Haydn shrugs.

7

Surely Caitlyn will arrive any second, burst through the door, a flaming head taller than any of the stilettoed women congregated by the front door. I give her a strict mental deadline of ninety seconds. She'll wade through bodies with red hands until she reaches me and she'll bellow, Happy Letter Day! Like it's a real holiday. When we embrace, my head will be buried in her tits.

Eighty-seven seconds, eighty-nine, then ninety-two Maybe it's best I go ahead anyway, find John. Maybe Caitlyn forgot about this party. Maybe she's no longer invited. My purpose here is to see John, why feel so guilty? I've tried, I tried. I filled up her voicemail box, what more can I do? Go to her house without warning? Inexcusable.

"I hoped a friend of mine might arrive here at nine-thirty," I confess. I'm not sure I'm talking about Caitlyn.

"It's past that. Maybe your friend's already here."

I'm not sure.

"Tack your letter to the board before we start the tour," says Haydn, and points. This ritual I know. I hide my copy of the invitation under the paper and tack up both

letters. Better to pretend I never saw the invite, ruder to be knowingly late than an ignorant crasher. My letter from the government is the same wording as last year. Based on your yearly achievement and/or career test results (if applicable), your Personality and Intelligence Potentiality has been assessed at the same numerical value as last year: 84. Congratulations—you are an essential contributor to our society. Until I turned sixteen, the percentage said, each year, 79. Otherwise, an identical letter. Just before the end of eleventh grade, my sixteenth test, I got something else. June 8, I got the letter. Saw the difference as soon as I opened the envelope, in the shape of the words. You became me and my hands shook.

Dear Ms Garrotter:

Your Personality and Intelligence Potentiality Verification results of 84 per cent on your most recent examination place you in a new Career Fifth. As of August 1, you will be considered a Fifth Fifth member. Acceptance at Leighton Academy , the secondary school in your district for your new Fifth, will be guaranteed, and your enrollment fees fully covered by the Alberta Department of Education. Please speak with the school's administration about enrollment before 1 August 2008, to guarantee entry for the September semester. A package accompanies this letter detailing the benefits you will receive from the Government of Alberta as a member of the Fifth Fifth. Included is a copy of the handbook *Becoming a Fifth Fifth* outlining some of your legal responsibilities. This overview is provided as a courtesy: legislation not mentioned in the handbook may affect you, and legislation is subject to change. Congratulations— you are

an essential contributor to our society.

Lydia Constad

Minister of Education

Appointed Representative of the People of the Republic of North West North America

Encl.

I know damn well no one else at this party has ever gotten a letter like that. As far as they know, at the end of grade eleven I transported my molecules to their school from my homeland near the third star in Orion's Belt. No one ever asks. When I ticked through the hollow halls the first time, in approved uniform and kitten heels, late, my face damp from a blanket of foundation, that was the first time I thought the unforgivable.

They have made a mistake.

They have made a mistake with me. Painted on my face, everyone must know.

"I need a man at least six-foot-six," Caitlyn declared when she broke up with her most recent boyfriend. Everyone knows where Caitlyn came from, the arts and sciences college. Would've been your college, if you'd never gotten the letter in grade eleven, the ascent to me. Unlike Caitlyn's dad, yours could've never afforded to pay your way through university without the F5 subsidies. "I want to feel small," she said. Bet she'd change her mind if she saw Haydn now, though she could comfortably rest her chin on his head. She could bag him in a second, too, though Stefanie's probably been after him all night. My chest fills with glee. Haydn's right, I think, she wouldn't miss this party. She's always the one dragging me along, making nice, drinking everyone under the table.

We'll run into her.

"You're a friend of Shel's," says Haydn, guessing.

"We've never officially met," I say. "Stefanie's my invite," I add quickly.

Should've been Stefanie who introduced me to Haydn.

"Stefanie," says Haydn. "We just met tonight. My friend Dan's date."

Stefanie's known Dan two days. Her fiancé, Eric, is the prettiest Neanderthal in the Law program. Not unusual that he's not here, it's fight night. Not unusual, either, that he's easily replaced.

"She's not as old as she looks," I say, since Caitlyn's not there to say it. From me, it sounds cruel. At parties, Cait always looks a glossy Amazon with a cocktail, like she could crush the glass in a manicured fist. I envy her miles of taintless neck.

"The tour," he says, "we must begin. Trust me, you've never seen anything like this place. Where has my brother got to? He'll have to catch up. You'll recognize him, he looks like me. Let's start here."

He dances a little tap on the floor, hems hopping, then expands his arms and exults, "Spanish marble!" Two doors lead from the foyer deeper into the house. One opens to the little den, half-hidden under the stairs, and one opens left, a wide entrance to the living room. Haydn points left and motions me to walk ahead.

Living Room

8

A paper-thin TV covers almost an entire wall and a group of ten or twelve boys, dressed in slim suits, jackets hung over chair arms, sleeves rolled, watch tonight's fight. Their

girlfriends have forced them to the party but there is no socializing on fight night. In the stadium, no rules, nothing to lose. The fights show every two weeks all year.

I turn around to look at Haydn but he's disappeared. I cross my arms and wait, pretending to watch the screen, but the blood on the mat unsettles my liver.

The sportscaster patters. Tunnels lined with cameras criss-cross under the arena so the fighters may sneak up on one another. Six fight at a time, each supplied with an arsenal of surprise weapons, a bizarre mix of professional wrestling and trench warfare. "Oh, no, surely he won't—that is a cheese grater, folks, that Jay Dynamite has pulled from his foxhole, and his opponents do not even see him coming."

Alberta kept its NHL teams for a few years after separation but now even hockey's got a province-only league. Alberta doesn't get international sports on TV, so all these boys have are the new sports leagues, for no-rules fighting and indoor basketball. They only come to parties at houses with bigger TVs than they have at home and huddle round, hoping one of the fighters dies.

I look at a corner of the ceiling just above the TV. Haydn cups my elbow. "Friday Garrotter," he says, and smiles again as if we're just meeting. I smile back to show I remember him. "Pardon me for keeping you waiting."

"No problem, Haydn."

"No, Shel," says Haydn. He has grown his hair an inch since we walked the foyer.

"Did you spill something on your other shirt?" I say, because he wears a mustardy vest, questionable, over a t-shirt. Then I see that his trousers are different too.

"I'm Shel," he says, looking at the floor, and I flush. The boys on the sofa cheer and I catch an accidental glimpse of Jay Dynamo raking his cheese-grater over a blond

opponent's face. "My brother has run ahead to set our stage. The tour doesn't really get interesting until the dining room." Stealing looks I realize that there is no grey in his hair, should've noticed, the colour shinier, more uniform than his brother's. He dyes. An immense relief—he must worry. I relax. "You're a friend of Caitlyn's, yes?" He says.

"Have you seen her?"

He doesn't answer, eager to say, "She's a friend of mine, too."

"Caitlyn Horton?" She's F3, why should he know her?

"Our fathers have worked together for years. We played together as kids."

Of course, another missed connection. I need to pay attention to him, make nice, make up. "A friend of Caitlyn's is a friend of mine," I say.

Shel gives a little sideways smile. "Likewise."

9

Shel says, "Shall we move on and catch up with Haydn?" Plotting a course, a map of footsteps only behind us. A trail. Ahead, an inevitable conclusion each time a foot lands. Even my heels don't make noise on this floor, cushioned beneath by air.

There is a bitterness in my nose.

John. A gap between his front teeth and baby fat on his tummy, muscular arms, and when you tossed a football back and forth in the field behind the school, he used to get two *v*'s of sweat on the neck of his t-shirt, one in front and one in back.

You led a drama production about Queen Elizabeth—the star, the queen. Used to laugh, you were so short. You wore three-inch platform heels under the skirts and they still needed hemming, and your courtiers dwarfed you onstage. Under the lights,

forehead glistening, cinched by the dress and blistered by the shoes, you were Elizabeth. When the lights went down you were startled for a moment to realize you were playing to an audience—they wiped their eyes. You felt the rush of administering torture.

In your two years at Queen Elizabeth High School, you played two-hundred and sixty-four characters. You performed for Drama classes, for English classes, at the city's high school drama festivals, or in full costume for whoever showed up.

You wore jeans from the Gap. Friends and family brought you t-shirts from shows wherever they travelled (outside). The ones that will show somewhere (outside) forever: *Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, *The Sound of Music*, *Phantom of the Opera*. From PEI, *Anne of Green Gables*. Off Broadway, *Movin' Out* and on Broadway, *Mamma Mia*.

The day you met John you wore your old jeans and your sweatshirt from the Stratford Festival, too small and worn almost through, and you pushed up the sleeves. You had your hair in braids and a pencil behind your ear and walked around the studio barefoot. Your second year in high school. The new drama teacher, Kelly Layton, replaced the old teacher, so you had to try out legitimately, like everyone else. Starting again with a new audience, a new set of sceptical eyes, your favourite feeling. Layton cornered you in the hallway the first week of classes.

"Randy says you're good," she said. "You had some power struggles?"

"I guess so."

"How come you aren't taking my Drama class this year? You spend more time here than most of my students."

You shrugged. You liked larger-scale.

"Well, I don't want to fight with you. I can see your potential and I know the techs like you. I'm running auditions for the fall show next week. I want you to try out."

You read the script and the characters clamoured in your mind. You went to the library two evenings before the audition for books on the Elizabethan era, and you pulled out your paperback *Much Ado About Nothing*.

One day, you figured, take a trip to the British Library, to the Shakespeare house, one day—outside, outside.

Thirty-four stage lights dangled from the ceiling. John, new boy, senior climbed down the fireman's ladder from the tech room.

"You Friday?" He looked shy. He looked shy and his smile disarmed. "Jena says you know where the blacklights are?"

"Why do you need the blacklights?" I said.

"The dance students want them for their show tonight."

You were protective of Randy's equipment. Someone had to be, with Randy gone. "The dancers know they can't use the blacklights. Last time they did, some thunder-thighs kicked one out."

"What am I supposed to tell the dance teacher?"

"Tell her it's bad enough having her troupe in our theatre twice a year."

The smile was cute, shyness belied. He clicked his heels together. "Fraulein."

"Dismissed," you said.

"I'm also supposed to ask you what lighting you want for the auditions."

"Wash downstage centre," you said. "For mine, I want number seven."

"With the wash?"

"Number seven alone."

He shook his head with mock uncertainty, as if he wasn't entertaining requests, and turned to climb the ladder.

"Hey," you said, "didn't get your name."

"Graham," he said, and ascended to the tech booth, God rising back into the heavens. You didn't find out for two weeks that his name was John. When you stepped on stage for your audition you walked under number seven, alone.

Dining Room

10

The other door from the den leads to the dining room, where Haydn waits for us. I wonder about the mouldings, the dark hardwood. Walnut, maybe, or cherry. All the antique furniture has the same gothic stain. Imported from some other part of the continent? Grand and reductive, compared with modern decorating. Dark moulding shrinks the rooms. I forget—this was a mansion, gloriously impractical, now the size of a house in the suburbs. Two staircases, one at the front and one, small with whitewashed walls, sneaking up from the kitchen.

A group of young women in tuxes, their hair slicked back, sits at a tall, small table playing poker, a mound of beer bottle caps in front of each. Haydn leans over the table. Shel says hello seriously and politely and Bennie holds out her hand for him to kiss. This is the high stakes game. Red lipstick and red roses in their buttonholes. They've brought

their own croupier, some high school kid who'd do anything to tag along, and he stands at attention, shuffles, deals like he's trained for months. They flick bottle caps in his direction, tips when they win a pot.

"Fill," the dealer cries now, pained, as if he'd call the word with his last breath. But no one's listening to him but me.

These girls show up for every party in drag. I think all of them always get laid, not that anyone admits to that. All in the 86 to 89 range, well out of harm's way. Almost no one lands above 85. "Haydn, my love," says Nicole, lashes to the top of her stark cheekbones. "You promise me something?"

Haydn feigns discomfort. "I don't know, you sure you want to keep the creature? I don't have the money for a ring."

"Eighteen, twenty years of your life, Nic," Bennie chimes in, grinning. "Try the easier solution, not yet illegal in North West North." She draws the outline of a coat hanger on the table with her finger.

"Oh my, no, that also is illegal," says Shel grimly.

Nicole pats his cheek, affectionate. "When will you learn the art of irony?" She says, and Shel opens his mouth too slowly to retort before Nicole barks at Haydn, "The poker chips, for Christ's sake, you said you'd bring us a set of chips. Our boy is near-mad." They all laugh again.

Haydn says, "Friday, you mind if I'm so rude as to leave for a minute?"

He can leave for an hour. I'll wait here for John to find me. No, I'll ransack the house. I'll put my footprints through the halls, even though, my soles clean, no one will see them. It is nine-forty.

Nicole nods to me. These girls know me as Stefanie's claim, not worth their time. Stefanie, the twins, a boy named Lynel, who likely won't show up until eleven, and these four girls will be the only ones at the party with scores above 85. They're nearly the only ones in the Social Sciences and Law faculties at all. There's a handful more in the Health Sciences. Do I dare to leave my stilettos at home, to twist my hair into a bun?

"We'll wait," Shel says, so Haydn leaves for the poker chips. "He's going to have forgotten our whole show we prepared by the time he gets back," Shel tells me worriedly. "We tried to rehearse."

I'm 84. 84, once 79.

When you were 79, you didn't understand the worry, worry. Am I dressed right, do I act correctly, do I walk at the right speed? Should I read this book? Shall I smoke another? Am I beautiful enough?

You are our face to the world, and your appearance was a factor in your placement in the Fifth Fifth.

A major factor, a deciding factor? Because no one is ugly at this party, no one shows up to my classes with her face untouched. Not because it is illegal to be ugly, just because appearance was a factor.

What's *illegal*? Certain drugs, murder, rape, assault, abortion, euthanasia, drinking too much, driving too fast, of course. Just like another nation, a nation of voters and justice by trial and ombudsmen. Smoking isn't illegal, nor joking about coat-hangers. Nor is sex outside your fifth. *Discouraged*, that's what the pamphlet says, and *certain expectations*. Who's watching? 84 per cent is four percent from the edge.

A corporate lawyer and a high school teacher, plus or minus four percent. Plus or

minus one hundred, two hundred, three hundred plus thousand dollars a year. Where do you want to be?

Whatever happened to Caitlyn? If she does wrong, pees in the reservoir and gets caught, if she gets bumped down to F1, recommended to become a janitor, can her rich dad still afford to keep her in university?

"I used to live around here," I blurt. Shel leans in the wide doorway to the living room, arms crossed. What I mean is *you used to*, before your dad was notified that he was being bought out. Resold. A series of letters. Dear Mister Garrotter, we inform you. Demolition for city infrastructure project, number. Assessed purchase price.

Shel looks like he expects me to say something else. I say, "But I'm glad I don't anymore. Used to worry me, being so close to the river."

The infrastructure project never got built. By that time the city was under the control of the provincial government and the following year, they sold to the highest bidder, ABCorp. Your old house, hardwood now, recessed lighting and red walls. I couldn't help but drive by on the way to the party. The curtains were flung wide, pride, some of the only owners on the street. Soon the neighbourhood, next to the river, will be sought after again. We can afford, we dare.

"What's wrong with the river?" Shel says. I've uttered blasphemy.

I say, "I used to have these vivid dreams that water was coming under the doors. I would wake up and I'd have piled half the things in my room on top of my desk or my bookshelf." You often included such essentials as the teddy bear you slept with, your pillows, and the contents of your dirty clothes hamper.

“Oh my,” says Shel. “I once had a dream I was putting my deodorant on and when I woke up and went to make oatmeal, I found it in the kitchen with the spoons.”

I don’t know how to answer.

“We’re not on the floodplain,” Shel says.

“You must be.”

“No, we’re just in the valley. That big flood two years ago, we didn’t flood here.”

“Calgary hasn’t had a really bad flood since the thirties.” I remember the photographs my dad found, mix them with what I saw in my head when John said that in 1929, the water gushed over the Louise Bridge.

“You kidding?” Shel expands his arms, delighted. “We flooded much worse two years back than any time last century. Don’t you remember? A hundred year flood. The reservoir overflowed for the first time ever. In our lifetimes!”

“The Glenmore reservoir?” I say, nervously.

“What else? Mission was underwater. Inglewood, Sunnyside, Prince’s Island Park. They had to rebuild the footbridges.”

“I saw a few pictures.” I’m astonished. “I wasn’t watching the news. I live in Foothills Estates now, farthest south I usually ever come is the university.”

“You never walk by the river?” Shel says, big-eyed. “Watch the geese?”

Walking by the river. I feel like you felt the time you forgot your mother’s watch. Lost time, the damning realization that it only runs in one direction and you could do nothing. You begged her to borrow it for a school field trip to Kananaskis and when you were playing tag you took it off and left it on a rock, so you didn’t break it, and forgot. She said, it’s okay, but before you left she’d made you promise to take care.

I say, I realize, “I probably only catch a glimpse of the river once a week.” For my whole first year of university, before Stefanie moved south side and started hosting Monday nights there, I probably saw the river twice a year.

“Last time I was walking there, couple weeks ago, someone had spray-painted on the path, *The Trees Consider You Food*. That scared me so much I had to come home right away.” Shel examines the doorway like he’s already forgotten I’m here. I get the impression he has never told anyone else this story.

I don’t know how to answer but Shel picks right back up.

“All along the Elbow, Fish Creek Park, underwater. We have hundreds of photos. We drove around the city wading in. Had to boil our water here.”

You used to get anxious, well before drinking age, making conversation as Friday Garrotter. When you were nervous, you couldn’t make yourself forget that you can only meet one of a person’s eyes at a time. Shel runs his thumb over a chip he’s found in the moulding. I ask him, “Why?”

“The irony of flood,” Shel says. “Water restrictions. Floodwater kicks up so much dirt and moves so fast that treatment plants can’t handle it.”

I can’t hold back my question, though I try to speak only one sentence for every three of his. A trick to making others like you. But he’s not enough of a talker. “What happened at the zoo?”

“Mm, they sandbagged,” Shel says. “That was on the news, but that kind of thing’s not public record. If I remember right they had to evacuate some animals and move some to a different part of the island.”

I remember the island map, only one half coloured pink. *Floodway: deep, fast*

moving water.

"Did any of them die? The animals?"

"Doubt it. They never said so on the news."

I wonder if, north of Nose Hill, my dad knew about the hundred-year flood, the inner city's problem. He probably did. The year of the flood was my first year of university and I'd been First Fifth only a couple of years. I talked to him three times last year, on his birthday, my birthday and Christmas.

11

Haydn's wearing a cowboy hat and carrying a little wooden suitcase. "Welcome again to our home, miss," he says to me. He lays the suitcase on the floor and I stare as he opens it—a full poker set, weighted chips, cards, Big Blind and Little Blind.

Some of the guests in the dining room, I want to believe, are the Rileys, posing in the wrong century. I want to think the past was better than now, that they conducted themselves with integrity. I imagine them milling around Texas Hold 'Em. I want the house to cry out at how it is abused. Riot! Riot! I want John to make an entrance with an axe, hack through furniture and pick me up and put me on the back of his motorcycle and drive me away. No more consequences than the heroine in an action movie.

John's name keeps gaining a guilty syllable in my head, changing itself, where is Caitlyn now? My friend Caitlyn? I cannot forget the reservoir. Does someone know? I must put her out of my head. I am making myself old.

I turn my head and face—in the dining room window, startled. There, my eyes. A reversed Haydn chews a date he's picked off the table. He looks unsettlingly different in

a mirror, nose hooked to the other side, grin crooked backwards. He must only know his wrong self. All the lights in the house are on, and from outside the party is a slideshow. I walk to the window, shade my eyes from the light, and look outside. Beyond the porch, almost thirty hares convene in a vegetable patch. The old owner used to garden too. She gave you a pumpkin to carry home. Hares have taken over the city. The coyotes are all but driven out. Though when you lived here, when you worked at the fish and chips shop and you just got your driver's licence, you saw a coyote once at night just after you exited off Crowchild. An unkempt dog, a best friend almost, turned to stone on a lawn by your headlights as you drove home. Oh, god.

You only saw John scared once—old with fear. He drove you home from a movie, to your father's house. Ten o' clock, maybe later, but it was May, the days long, the sky light. Ian Tyson on the radio. The hare's legs and back were crushed bloody on the road, but as John slowed and let the car swing out to turn into your driveway it jerked its head as if struggling to free itself from its maimed hindquarters.

"It's still alive," you said.

John stopped the car short of the driveway, in the middle of the road, shocked. "Jesus Christ."

"What do we do?" You said.

"Should I run it over again?"

"Yes, I don't know."

"I can't do that, who am I kidding."

"It will die? It's almost dead, right?"

"Must be, almost."

You got out of the car and John turned off the engine but left the keys in the ignition, folk music playing. Saw your dad part the curtains, look out the window. Waved at you on the lawn.

"Your dad, maybe." Relief in John's voice.

"Oh, no," I said, "He can't see this." When you turned back to the road, a magpie was approaching the rabbit, head cocked sideways.

"Dirty bird," you said, knelt to pick up a rock. You missed but the magpie, nervous, skittered back from the rabbit. The rabbit twitched, eyes white, frantic. Dad opened the front door, descended the stairs down the stoop, and stood a moment in the middle of the lawn, hand over his mouth.

"Dad, go inside," you said, too late.

"Can you kill him?" John was standing next to his dead car lazing over both lanes but that old neighbourhood, ten p.m. and no one was awake. Dad shook his head.

"How would I?"

"If you can bring yourself to hit him with my car, be my guest."

"No way," Dad said, edge of tears. You hadn't wanted him to see more than you'd wanted anything since, eight years old, you wished your mom's lost watch back. You couldn't rid yourself of the thought, and by how damp John's hands were you knew he couldn't either, that you couldn't stomach *right*. The right. Couldn't *do*, just watched, couldn't even keep your dad from the sight. The best you could manage was easing your own guilt, making sure the birds didn't get the rabbit's eyes while it could still feel. It still felt, no help.

City kids. You three sat on the curb half an hour, country music, scaring the birds

off, until the hare stopped moving, and then John went home and you and Dad went inside, quiet, and let the scavengers come.

12

In the dining room, both brothers wear the white Stetsons now, grinning, and Shel puts on boots, too, pointed, spurs clinking, and picks up something that looks like a mandolin from under the dining room table. All of a sudden I'm sure I can't remember which twin wears the yellow vest over his t-shirt, and the rumpled trousers. Shel, surely. Should he have ironed? Should he cut an inch from that coloured hair?

"She doesn't get treated to the chaps?" Nicole says lazily from the floor.

"You've already had the show," Haydn rebukes, and she goes back to her game and does not speak again except in a low voice to the other players. Shel begins to play, picking out a folk tune. Haydn opens his mouths to sing.

Well it may not be pretty and it may not be warm but

Alberta's bout the only place we've ever called home,

And—

"Really?" I demand, like a gunshot. They're both stamping their feet.

Nicole, from the poker table, looks at me as if she's caught a glimpse of something worth respecting. My liver skitters. Queen Elizabeth, remember. Ha, remember. If you could play her, I can play out this goddamn party.

"Friday," says Shel sadly. "You broke his concentration. You remember what your next line was going to be?"

"Don't worry, I'll think of a new start. God, you worry about everything." Haydn looks at me. "You know he wanted me to rehearse for hours for this party?"

Shel strums the guitar, then picks, and Haydn re-begins.

Well I may not be pretty and I may not be smart

But I'm from Calgary with a great big heart—

"Ow—hey." Someone with a great arm from the living room had pegged Haydn in the neck with a nickel, about thirty feet through the large doorway.

"Got Grant MacEwan's face on it and everything," a voice follows the nickel. "All the local history you could want, small piece of metal." Laughter chips off the walls, skittering to our feet. Sound bends in this spot, bringing to our ankles the noise of tonight's fight.

"Miserable bastards," says Haydn. "They seemed to like us well enough when we were playing for *them*."

"That wasn't your best work," his brother says. "The heart line was clichéd."

A heart-deep sigh. "You're right. Maybe let's skip the long introductions."

"The song introductions? If we'd only *learned our lines*, huh?"

"What are you so worried about? We're all having fun." Haydn puts his arm around me. "Forgive my brother," he says, "parties do not bring out his best."

They look at one another for a long moment and seem to come to a silent understanding. I wonder, unsettled, if they have rehearsed, copiously, their bickering, a performance within a performance for my benefit.

Then Haydn intones, "Calgary, Alberta. To summarize. We're here now. No one gives a huff. This town is like Houston, without all the stuff."

"Amnesty International's looking into us," says Nicole. I look at the twins to see if they're surprised, but Shel answers like she's said something ordinary.

"Not us. Not *even*. The F1s in the Beltline, maybe, stacked ten to a house."

Haydn continues, ignoring the interruptions, "Back in 1910, people lived here. No one gave a fuck. This has never been the big time. But they were people just the same."

Shel says, deadpan, "What do you remember, ol' boy?"

"The year was 19 er mer seven or so."

"1917," Shel corrects.

Haydn winks at me. "Like it was yesterday. Albert Riley built this house, and I don't feel slightly badly about calling him my great-grandfather."

"Was he your great-grandfather?" I ask, because I know he wasn't.

Haydn plucks out a little tune for effect. He looks in my eyes. His irises, dark blue with one brown spot. One spot of pigment, so they are, genetically, brown eyes. Dominant. "Not exactly. He's me, for tonight."

I check my watch.

Shel says, "Kitchener's under martial law because the Ontario government changed the name from Berlin and refuses to change it back. Soldiers are breaking the windows of the newspaper office."

Shel's eyes are coffee, with cream.

Louise, I imagine, once wandered past the dining room table, chewing on marzipan. Not pretty, a long boy's face. They have hung her portrait on one of the walls in this room, because she was an author, I'm sure, because she was famous. This was not Louise's house, said the woman who gave me the tour. How much of what I remember do these boys know? I feel suddenly like I possess something, a truth, possibly wrong, gained from someone else. Louise's cousin Albert owned this house. Maybe I remember

wrong. I swear I've read these names somewhere, on street signs, the names of parks and schools. The distinguished Riley family.

"The Amsterdam correspondent wrote to the paper yesterday," says Shel dramatically. "We are starving, tell everyone outside Germany we are starving."

"Tom's fighting in Europe," says Shel.

Nicole cuts in. "More importantly, it's The Annual White Sale at the Bay."

Maybe the Rileys sat stiff-backed around the dining room table at the same time each afternoon. Maybe Louise never visited this house. Her family was rich, so I doubt she was beautiful.

There was no one beautiful in Calgary.

13

London, damp and built on layers of fossilized soot. Rather than fossilized plants, oil and glacial leavings, like Alberta. I will carry the only white umbrella in London. Paris, where palaces border slums so the poor can rage to the gates, year after year, and pretend one day they will overthrow injustice along with this year's government.

Prague. I will ride a bicycle without stockings.

I have to stop thinking of outside. Thinking is ageing me.

In my mind, John boards the same jet plane over and over in an impeccable suit. Image so strong it could come from a dream. The plane flies in a circle over the airport and lands again. Never gets outside.

Soon after my first F5 package, the letter, the handbook, I was mailed a new passport, which said the same as what my F4 one did. *Not valid for international travel*.

I pile up useless old daydreams. I am sleepwalking, or you are.

The dining room contains a table, eight high-backed chairs and an enormous cabinet full of mismatched, filigreed teacups, the most delicate china. As Shel and Haydn act I've sunk into a plush cushion, head of the table, my head barely clearing the piles of food spread over the cloth.

Caitlyn would pile a plate with hor d'oeuvres. She metabolizes like a bonfire. I wish I could watch her eat. Fried eggplant with chevre, sweet potato fries with cinnamon, cherry tomatoes and sweet pepper, kalamata olives, rice wrapped in grape leaves. Anise cookies, marzipan, ginger snaps, date squares, fudge. I allow one ginger snap, savour the spice by eating it in tiny bites. Already consumed my allotted calories today.

Eating too much is not illegal, but there are no fat F5s.

On the walls are snapshots, dated, matted and labelled in silver ink. Besides Louise, there's Thomas Riley ca. 1916, in a military uniform. A group of soldiers in the picture, one of a lump, part of a sum. May Day, ca. 1912. Children in white cotton, a tent of streamers, in front of a storefront. West and Brown's. Whose children? The old owner never had these snapshots to hang, when you toured the house. They were archived at the museum then, no doubt, before the museum was sold. Another, casual portrait of Louise, ca. 1915, serious in a dress and pinafore. Tea party clothes, but not out of hand: plain cotton, bare brown feet.

"Please," Shel says, seeing me staring at the photos, "walk around, look around."

There's one more photo on the wall, a mug shot, a dark-haired girl. The face catches me. I get up to cross the floor and examine. The wrong spot, this room, she's not in the right place, surely. Black eyes, a look of fear, resigned—annoyed. She's asking

how she let herself get caught. Two portraits same girl, side-by-side. Profile, a receding jaw, hair in a bun. And facing. The girl wore a magnificent sunhat in the second picture, shining black band and elaborate carved stone at the centre. Written in white ink: 5719. A number, processing. Process her. I stared a long moment. Me. Me, other. You, maybe, when your hair curled, if your underbite never got corrected by jaw surgery, you were seventeen, two weeks of eating baby food through a straw, when you didn't cover those circles under your eyes. Lavender concealer. Stage secret.

A caption. Jenny Lebousky, aka Jennie "Babe" Johnson. June 21, 1917.

Haydn says, "Babe Johnson. You gonna play her part tonight?"

What has she done? What are they asking me to do? They're flakes. A pair of flakes, suddenly armed. I snap, "Is this a tour or a game?"

Shel claps his hands. "We could use some immorality around here. Tonight, you can be Jenny Lebousky. Inmate of a disorderly house, disorderly conduct on the street, robbery, you name it. All the vagrancy we need."

A whore. No one beautiful in Calgary but the whores. Figures.

"No!" I say, arch. I snatch Haydn's hat off his head and he laughs as I backhand it over the table, skimming a bubble-and-brown of artichoke dip. "You're obviously under-rehearsed. How dare you put me on the spot?"

The poker players applaud me.

"Oh my," Shel says, wide-eyed. "Please do pardon us."

Haydn grins, offers a hand, palm up. Truce. His lifeline is broken in half. I put my fingers in his. My heart calms. Hoot, hoot. The train on the other side of the valley. I feel like I've just gotten off the tracks in time. You used to hear that train every night in the

summertime, whistling at the Edworthy Park crossing, whirring along the river.

Watch out, I am making myself old.

1917 won't leave the room. Babe Lebousky is disappointed in me for not taking on her legacy. Haydn squeezes my hand and lets go.

Albert's family visits tonight. Harold, Maude's husband, serves the shiny new Province of Alberta. Straight-brimmed Stetson and a big grey moustache black at both ends. He shakes hands like he answers to no man, but smiles as he does. Deputy provincial secretary, he says. Named his son according to provincial pride. Louise wears a black skirt and boots and her hair is knotted to one side. She stands straight next to her uncle. How's Tom in Europe? Uncle Ezra and Aunt Harriet are in the great room, Albert would say, except I cannot spot the host anywhere.

"Story goes, a young man died in here in the 1950s," says Haydn after a minute. He looks a lot more relaxed than he did with the hat on. I'm relieved, like I've performed an exorcism.

I see that Shel wants, with his whole body, to tell Haydn that the 1950s are *outside of this year's party theme*. He opens his mouth and then gives up. You would've understood Shel. You would've worked well with him. You never took senior year Drama class with Kelly Layton when you'd taken it every year previously. There were no auditions, everyone allowed in, so you were expected to perform variously with the bored, the shy, the easygoing stoned, who didn't know which way was upstage. Those classmates, who kept you from the perfect show, were all rigid characters of their own, so

sharp their skin and costumes seem to tear on their bodies and show their bones right through. Not everyone can put on someone else. Haydn doesn't have to.

The story can't be stopped. "A painter, friend of Emily Carr's," Haydn says. He met her on a train from Victoria to Ottawa, when she was going to a show at the National Gallery. She was over fifty and he was twenty. When Emily met the Group of Seven and was embraced by the art world in Ottawa, she forgot him. He hanged himself twenty years later but his family was convinced it was because of Emily Carr. There used to be a big light fixture right there." He points above the dining room table. Pillars of light drip like icicles from the fixture, glitteringly sharp.

"Different fixture now," he says, "but you see how the wires are stretched and the roof sags? Something heavy hung from up there."

No photographs—who can say?

"Bullshit," I say, "everyone and his dog in this country has an Emily Carr story. Did the woman even leave Vancouver Island more than twice in her life? Where did you hear about this suicide?" Nicole looks at me again, appreciative, and then she turns back to her hand and folds.

"From my dad, from the woman who used to own the place," says Shel.

"You studied Emily Carr in school, too?" Haydn asks. "Where did you study?"

"I wasn't in the same school system as you," I say.

I never say so. The admission breaks like floodwater broke the dam, like when I told Shel I used to live in his neighbourhood. I keep thinking how Caitlyn says, *you'll really like them,* and I want to. I want to dredge up real affection for the twins, drop Babe Lebousky's fake smile off my face. I finish my Canadian cocktail and Shel takes the glass

from my hand as I talk and gets me another. I'm nervous, talking just to Haydn, who earlier shook my hand like he knew something.

"But let's see. I studied her landscapes in second through fourth grade, eighth grade, tenth grade and wrote an essay describing *The Red Cedar* for my diploma exam at the end of twelfth grade." For a project in seventh grade, I did a study of Emily Carr's life. Documents about most of her life had disappeared in the government archival amendments. What was left: a good long nap. Considering the years my teachers spent building Carr up as the pinnacle of Canadian art, I was pissed about how boring she was.

"Must be the place where opposing curricula meet," says Shel, handing me a full glass. "We also learned Carr endlessly."

For the first time, Shel steals a look at my necklace. Caitlyn carries around her reputation as an F3, tacked on the end of her name, but hardly anyone knows about me.

Most of the government billboards have Emily Carr's paintings on them. They all say things like "Litter: What Are You Willing to Risk?" and "Smoking: A Hazard to More Than Your Lungs." Backgrounded with cedars and totem poles. Emily Carr, official out-of-copyright artist for the New Republic. Littering and personal endangerment are criminal charges, grounds for downstage. "Where Do You Want to Be?" is the only Carr-free billboard I see regularly on the sides of the freeways.

Last Monday night—

I cannot forget, I cannot forget—

After our weekly duty, Caitlyn and I, empty, chucked rocks into the reservoir. She said, "I don't worry about money. Because money's not real, you know. People make the

mistake of thinking money is time. I work an hour and you give me fifteen bucks, my hour is worth fifteen bucks. But that's only how people who don't understand money think of money. People who understand it can turn money into money. Compounding other people's investments, you know, they take the risk and you share the profit. Ten dollars off everyone in the country's paycheque and you're a multi-millionaire."

I'd thought about it. Meant that the wealthiest people in the world operated by running an endless legal pyramid scheme. Get a job, I used to see bank tellers yell at bums, on the wrong end of the don't-work spectrum. Much better to be not working with a tenth of the nation's GDP at your feet, investing other people's savings. The bank tellers dream while counting other people's hundreds to lock safe in the safe.

I looked every day at my bank account on my handheld computer. A number on a screen. Automatic savings program. Without leaving my room I can move all I own into a mutual fund, a long-term bond. The number changes screens. The endless myth, money is time. So how come that fucking bum has so much time?

I don't tell her I think this stupid. Don't tell anyone.

I don't know which of us looked up at the billboard first.

Where Do You Want to Be?

Your POTENTIAL Decides! What's your potentiality percentage?

Five smiling men and women, each one saying his or her job with a speech bubble. The percentages are written across their chests.

80 to 100 Percent: I'm a Member of the Legislative Assembly.

60 to 79 Percent: I'm a Boutique Owner.

40 to 59 Percent: I'm a Civil Servant.

20 to 39 Percent: I'm a Painter.

1 to 19 Percent: I'm a Factory Floor Assistant.

Five smiling men and women, each one saying his or her job with a speech bubble. The percentages are written across their chests.

When we looked up, all five of the smilers had black moustaches worthy of any totalitarian dictator. Even the header, defaced. "Where do you want to PEE?" It read now. PEE, like the stroke of nine on an sombre old clock.

"Someone knows," I said.

"Calm down, how can anyone know?"

"Look at that, someone must know. Oh, Christ, Christ."

We ran, tripping on tree roots and squelching in our leather pumps as we ploughed up the shore to the car. Jesus, Jesus.

"No one fucking knows," said Caitlyn, "would you calm down?"

"Then why would they write that? Why *pee*?"

"Because it's an easy word to change *be* to?"

"We're being blackmailed, Cait. Someone's about to blackmail us."

"Maybe someone else pees in here too." Caitlyn smiled. She lights a cigarette. "Maybe it's a message of solidarity." She started the engine as I threw myself into the passenger seat.

"A list of demands, that's next. God, I hope it's not money."

We sped away.

For the past four days, I haven't forgotten the reservoir. Breaking a bylaw is a fine. Maybe a blip on the record. Where is Caitlyn? Maybe a new letter next year. Dear Friday, Congratulations. 79. You are a contributing member of society. As if they really believe that 79 is exactly as valuable and desirable as 84. Monday. Still waiting.

Kitchen

15

Everyone else belongs in a room. The twins and I are the only ones on tour, the only migrators. I walk on the black tiles of the chessboard floor, which reappears in the kitchen. This palace is a slowed frame rate shipwreck of the midday place you once toured with a woman in a magenta tee, when I was you.

I see the back of John's head. His name catches with hesitation in my mouth. It is not him. My heart skitters around. I remind myself he is probably not here. He cannot possibly be here. I will not see him again.

I'm ahead of Haydn, who lingers in the dining room with the poker players, and Shel's visiting the bathroom. A twinge of worry: the house seems to expand without warning, corners I don't remember.

A new possibility, loss. Becoming lost. Wasting unfathomable hours trying to find my way to John, the clock accelerating. Eleven forty-five skips straight until two, maybe he'll still be there but by then it's three. You used to dream like that before a performance. Sleeping through dress rehearsal, catching the wrong bus, jumping off, farther from the stage than ever, feet sinking in the pavement, trying to call without a

phone. You woke feeling as if you'd never slept.

In the kitchen, maple cupboards line the walls to the roof. Here and there, granite counters push them aside. What used to be a nook with a small kitchen table has disappeared behind a polished steel door. A walk-in freezer—a room of ice, the size of a wholesaler's—has been manoeuvred into the half the kitchen where the last owner used to have a little table and chairs. The door stands ajar like the hatch of a submarine, issuing screeches.

Does the freezer comply with the rules for refurbishing a heritage house? Those rules, rules for a woman whose husband landscaped for the city (I order only authentic patterns of wallpaper, fleur-de-lys, a little shop in Paris, takes six weeks and a fortune in shipping, I must, I am required by permit)—did those civil rules disappear? A dollar for a house. Or Haydn's father, a million for the house, two million, made liveable by someone else. (By who? A civic landscaper. A who?)

The woman who lived here when you were a kid, her husband landscaped for the city. A house for a dollar, do us a favour. When did they sell?

I handprint the door of the freezer, astonished by its solidity. You worked in a fish and chips restaurant with a freezer just like this. For an F4, summer jobs were acceptable. You smoked weed in the freezer, you and Dan and Gerris, on Friday nights. The exit handle glowed in the dark. The warmth of the kitchen when you opened the door burned slowly somewhere in your torso like drinking whiskey at Christmas. Steaming fryers, stinking of cod. End of the night, you all added up customer comment cards. Very friendly, extremely patient, nice smile, pleasant demeanour. Minus a point for slow.

Winner got five bucks from each of the others' tips.

Someone else's memory?

All summer you had small burns somewhere on your hands, variously healing. Across the knuckles, where you accidentally dripped fryer oil. Side of the palm, where you touched the grill. Despite the cream I use now, despite the weekly manicures, in certain light those little white scars appear. Only I know where they are.

I pull the steel handle and enter the room. My breath freezes and goose pimples rise on my arms. Ham hocks hang from the ceiling, legs of lamb and pork ribs, strings of sausages and whole trout, chickens with their heads and feet on. Shelves hold baking sheets the size of double beds lined with half-baked rolls.

I smell frozen onion. I scratch gristle with my French nail. I try to discern animal through the ice and imagine myself, all thin muscle at city's end, taking up the waste. Staking out this dead house, pushing newspaper in the cracks of the floor. I could live months and years on this town's leftovers.

I am hammered with shards of ice.

Framed by the uncooked feasts, the revellers pour trays of ice on the tile floor. They stomp with their stilettos and polished loafers to a crunchy wet snow and fling handfuls at each other. Girls in party gowns cower, shrieking, silk streaked with water. Feet skid on the floor and the fighters slide and fall, whimpering as their opponents dump their faces and shirts full.

Don't ruin this food, I say, unheard. To partake, to carve thin slices of pork tenderloin and sandwich them in those fresh rolls, with mustard and honey—I cannot gain weight. There are no fat F5s. My meal plans care for me: nutrition for maximum

health. But this food, so easy, with such abundance. How many thousands of dollars must this freezer hold? My dress becomes soaked, the silk ruined. I stand and sting with pelted ice. So easy, to untangle a string of sausage and drop them in the trunk of my car, where autumn will keep them from spoiling. But I have no stove, in my apartment at home, no grill or oven. I eat pre-packaged food, exactly proportioned, low-sodium, microwaveable, and a multi-vitamin. Free—my government provides for me! (Why would I dare to turn down such generosity? Am I not as intelligent as my score suggests?) To cook would make someone else complicit in my theft. Someone lower-status, a grocer. A food dealer. Or else someone so wealthy and high-status that taboos lose all power, with the balls to grow his own. Haydn, 92 per cent. Hares were in his vegetable garden but he likely has enough to share with the wildlife. Who will tell him he may not risk becoming fat?

For Haydn, a downstage means a drop of thirteen percent. For homicide, maybe. But anything less, why would the powers that be risk doling out such a drastic punishment? Who wouldn't riot in the streets, if his brother or his friend Haydn was downstaged to F4 for baking sourdough, or for packing on ten pounds? The system would stop making sense. The balance strikes. *All fifths are equally important, with equal value*, the country proclaims. In our new constitution, a few years after separation. What it does not say is that if we were all equal the collapse would've happened by now. Elections would've begun again. Every person who scores from 1 to 79 per cent would stop going to work if not for the beautiful possibility. Moving up. And F5s are the most dutiful children of all.

The ones, the only ones with breathing room are those few, that two or three per cent, maybe. The above-85 club. After all, the NWN can't pretend there's no one in

Alberta with outstanding potential. What kind of a glowing new country would that make? There is no one perfect, of course. No one can possibly score one hundred percent. Ministers, councilmen, lawyers. We are all human.

Whenever I am introduced to a stranger, I assume he sees that I have been thinking inappropriately, critically, for a long time. I pray he attributes it to the sixteen percent I'm missing. I wonder what he would think if he knew I came to this party looking for John.

16

I got a handbook when I became an F5, how to hold a fork, how to greet strangers, that sort of thing. The second-to-last year I took that stupid exam. Those test questions still hammered in my brain. Answer *honestly*. Answer *honestly*. In your spare time would you rather a read a book b watch a film c tidy the house d take a nap. Do you like best a always being in a crowd b being alone at home c spending time with one or two good friends d going out alone and introducing yourself to strangers.

"Let's make an apple crisp," says Haydn. We have too many of last fall's Mackintoshes. It can bake while we finish looking around at the house."

"An apple crisp," I say, disbelieving, as Shel agrees enthusiastically.

The apples are mounded in boxes on the counters, pink and green. I want to sink my teeth into the gloss, as unreal as the polish on my fingernails. Snow White ate the red-and-white apple that looked too good to be true. Asleep for one hundred years, awakened by whatever lecher found her. They all sleep for years, those princesses. Some prophet in the village intones, A kiss will awake her and implies once you've had your way. That's how the fairy tale used to go. That's what fairy tales used to be. When you were a kid,

you sat in the front room with the cuckoo clock, reading the Grimms'. Mom brought you a torn up volume, half-Grimm, half-Andersen and a sixties-era illustrated story of Jesus from a church book sale. She maybe should've told you that some considered one of the stories much heavier than the others.

That was the year after you took your first career test, when you were six.

After Mom left, Dad tried to get you to his old Unitarian church, you didn't know he ever had a church. Every couple of weeks. Then every month, then at least at Christmas and Easter. But as you got older your weekends filled up. By the time you met John you hadn't been to church in years.

A king asks his wife what should be done with a traitor. He should be put naked in a barrel stuck through with nails which is dragged through the street by two white horses until he is dead, says the queen. Then that is your fate, says the king, because you have betrayed me. That is the happy part. That is the story I remember best.

Am I mixing up the fairy tales?

Haydn slices deftly with a paring knife right on the marble countertop.

I close my eyes. Then I have to open them again.

I left John as soon as I got the letter. Wrote him an email, even that was more than I was supposed to do but not more than I should've done. Ended with, *we can't talk anymore*.

You got a message back three hours and twenty minutes later, when he finished for the day at his landscaping job.

damn, damn. should've worried, you were so close to the edge. should I act happy? guess

I'm no good for you after all. just want one favour: call my cousin Stefanie tomorrow. she goes to Strathcona, be good to her and she'll be a friend. for your sake, one degree of separation. for my sake, only one.

oh Friday, hope it's not hard. best from me.

The end.

From *Becoming A Fifth-Fifth: Young Women's Edition*.

Congratulations! You have achieved the Fifth Career Fifth, a challenging and rewarding level in our nation that will give you an unprecedented level of responsibility in society. You score within the top fifteen percent in your age group on intelligence and personality exams. You have the potential to become a lawyer, federal politician, ambassador, corporate CEO or another important public figure. Whatever your future career, you will be essential to our society, for you will keep our nation's financial and political situations stable and healthy.

One of the billboards on Crowchild North, backgrounded by *The Red Cedar*, read:

WELCOME TO THE GOOD LIFE! Free from violent crime. Free from poverty. Free from addiction. A place for everyone. A message from the Government of the New Republic of Northwest North America.

The police chief at the turn of the century, Tom English, loved this city.

CALGARY! There are no gambling houses (well, virtually)! No saloons!

There are certainly no houses of ill-repute!

He was fired, the woman in the magenta t-shirt told me, laughing. In 1909 after a shake-up. During his tenure, drunkenness and prostitution hit an all-time high.

But now, sure, there is no crime in Calgary. Now, we've really fixed it.

"I like the skin best," Haydn says, shall we leave the skin on?"

Haydn is bumped against by girls I've never met, who've appeared at this party to see him. Each pulls out his necklace, to verify the rumour. He greets each as if she's a suitor sent by his mother. Shel makes sure he's too busy paying too much attention to something else to be second choice for the cast-offs. Now, he's finding a record to put on the turntable in the corner of the kitchen. The turntable has a mock gramophone for show, with a modern speaker inside of it.

"The one thing we can agree on," he says, gesturing to his brother. "Rock & roll."

Haydn says, pompous Oxford scholar voice, "I *do* declare, dear brother, 'Ode to the West Wind' plus the Military Symphony equals 'Gimme Shelter.' Mathematically!"

"Ha-ah-ha," says Shel. He submits to a game, opening his mouth so Haydn can throw bits of apple at it, but Haydn misses a couple of times and then Shel gives up. They forget to play a record at all. I start wondering if they are already drunk.

They seem to leave out words. I am used to this. These parties—everyone speaks English, I recognize all the syllables but can claim nothing more. All the other guests are identical twins and I am the only fraternal. The purpose, to prove your agility with the most obscure of topics. Calgary, 1917, rock & roll, 1969, even Caitlyn wades through better than I do when she's invited.

Caitlyn. If I got the chance to leave tonight, leave the country somehow, I wouldn't even say goodbye. Ungrateful bitch, me. Just as I already left John as soon as I got the letter. Why should he still want to see me at all?

17

Stefanie always leans on Eric's big shoulder when she gets tipsy. He's solid. Be good to her and she'll be a friend. One of last month's parties was at one of Eric's friends on the university rugby team. Big suburban house, blue tile and chocolate martinis. Caitlyn brought her own fifth of Jägermeister in a purse and we got drunker than usual by taking a shot every time someone within earshot called someone or something darling. Two shots for me if the individual in question was calling me personally or anything I wore darling and ditto for Caitlyn. The game had to be kept dead secret. When I started to feel sick—I'm high-class in one respect, can see vomit coming five minutes before it happens—I said, "I have to go puke soon," and Caitlyn said,

"If you puke in the highest-traffic bathroom and someone else goes in right after you, they're gonna know you didn't throw up crème de cacao. They'll know the game."

This seemed logical, so I decided to sneak upstairs, off-limits, and puke in the second-floor bathroom. Stefanie had a rule, never take the party upstairs until 11.30. I felt like a rock star despite a sense of increasing urgency. Caitlyn posed at the bottom of the stairs to distract anyone who might walk by while I ran up.

I made efficient use of the upstairs bathroom and after I rinsed my mouth and tiptoed out onto the plush carpet, I heard a voice. Stefanie. Stefanie loud and clear, on the second floor. I rummaged through my clutch for my phone, in case I'd lost more time than I expected. The numbers coalesced slowly. 10.23.

Stefanie's voice, loud. She was crying. "What the fuck do you know about me?" And then a clatter and she swore. Shock, but maybe not surprise in her voice. Eric burst out of the room, slammed the door, and knocked into me with his shoulder. Unbalanced, the wall barely caught me. No apology. He took the stairs down two steps at a time. I once saw him throw his watch across the street when the battery stopped working.

I listened at the door to Stefanie sobbing. Sobbing, like he showed her her heart outside her ribs. Didn't think of John at the time, saying take care of her. Didn't think either that she deserved to be engaged to an asshole, nothing like that. But I listened for a whole minute, her lungs trying to take in more air than they could hold. Wanted to know if he hit her. Just to know. Caitlyn and I speculated, of course, but were stymied by lack of evidence—Stefanie wore enough foundation to cover a three-inch hole in her skull. She made up as for the spotlight, prepared for sweat. But I couldn't read her sounds, her breath, couldn't tune myself to the note of her hurt. I couldn't tell. I almost walked in, not to help but to see if, with her unprepared, I could spot rising bruises. An ah-ha.

What the fuck do you know about me? Just this.

All I knew, at that moment, was that it seemed fitting to me, her and him, eating each other alive. So I went back downstairs. If I take care of me, I thought, maybe I don't need her anymore.

I may be drunk. My glass keeps refilling itself. I put my drink down on the counter and leave it. Too much already, what about John, coming after me? What, god, if I forget?

Haydn's hands are juiced from the apples. He grinds cinnamon sticks and then fresh ginger in a coffee grinder.

There's a big old apple tree in the front yard, in the middle of the driveway, the sour green apples that grow well in Calgary. I wonder how many years old it is. Albert Riley must've had one just like it. The servants who climbed the back stairs cooked apple crisp for him and his family and I don't know whether they ate any themselves.

I still write the exams in my dreams, even though like everyone else I wrote my final one at eighteen. I thought I'd be done with the dreams of those tests when I finished them. And finished them better than I could have hoped when I was ten, or twelve. An F5! That beautiful letter! But I still wake soaked with fear. In the dreams, I'm not afraid because I've done poorly, but because I've lied. A lie, be lie, see lie. I was always sure they knew I could barely read the exam for the thought that expanded inside my head, angioplasty of the skull. *What if I don't answer honestly? What if I lie?*

GO AWAY! I banished the question, every year, every test, but it snaked back in as I scratched out the circles on the multiple-choice sheet. I am timed! Wasting time!

These sheets are marked by machines. Who would know?

GO AWAY!

What if I don't tell the truth, can I guess the right answers, can I guess and get upstaged? Can I say I like best to network with people, describe myself as a perfectionist, a workaholic—not necessarily untrue, just not the *best answer of the four*. (Will they know? Will the machine see that my tits are too small for these evening gowns? A little Bartlett pear on stumps of legs, my dark head stumbling around golden shoulders?)

Haydn sees me crossing my arms. "You cold?" He says, and dusts brown sugar off his

hands, runs upstairs to get me a sweater. A men's cardigan, angora. Looks ridiculous draped long over my evening gown. I push up the sleeves so they don't cover my hands.

"You have short arms," says Haydn, and measures his arms next to mine.

The hair on his arms is blond, but there is a mole on his forearm growing a dark, pernicious hair. So thick I am sure if he pulled it out with tweezers, a visible hole would remain in his skin.

"When I played hockey," he says, "I used to buy a shorter stick than my brother because my arms are so much longer. Only way the coach could tell us apart. He called me Chimp."

My dad played hockey. I never asked what position. Broke his collarbone in the first and only game in the minor leagues. Something still-Canadian, despite the generation gap. Whether when my dad was a kid or when my friends were kids, all little boys played hockey.

I wonder if the twins played together on the same team. When I was a kid, two identical twins played on an NHL team. They were traded together and played each shift together and passed back and forth to one another without looking to make sure the other was there, and the announcers always said, "They're a real threat because each always knows where the other is. They think just the same way."

I wonder if the Rileys ice-skated. In the mountains, probably, their Model-T carrying them for ski trips to Banff and Lake Louise. Such British names in this family. In this city. Louise. The bridge over the Bow River at Kensington Road was named Louise for the mayor's daughter for so long that when it washed away and had to be rebuilt as the Tenth Street Bridge, the locals still called it Louise for decades, until the

city officially changed it back.

Ice-skating is a man-made pastime in the city, where the chinook winds blow through and melt the rivers. Pour your own ice or fall through the Bow's, into quick black. I try to picture one of the stiff Riley men puddling water atop the snow so his family could zing around on it. I'm not sure. Just not sure.

Ezra, the patriarch, liked cricket. He sold the last of his land to the city as a park on the condition that cricket always be played there.

Always, four months of the year.

18

Shel, or the one with the short arms, is not the one with the elegant chocolate pants—I think. The longer I know them the less certain I am that I am still telling them apart. There's something off about the way Haydn's dressed. Should've noticed before; I look now. Hair almost in his eyes, a rumpled shirt. His cardigan smells of baby powder.

He must have a handbook just like mine, except for young men. I've always wanted to ask an F5 boy to read his but never dared. Never known one well enough. I've memorized mine, except for the update that came by email earlier tonight. Probably one sentence different, I must remember. I hope his un-ironed shirt bends the rules.

From *Becoming a Fifth-Fifth: Young Women's Edition*.

Dressing to Impress

Members of the Fifth Fifth are Alberta's most prominent public figures, and as such, you are expected to dress appropriately and carry yourself confidently. You are our face to the world, and your appearance was a factor in your placement in the Fifth Fifth. Your

daytime attire should be business-casual to business-formal when you appear publicly. Here is an example of an appropriate outfit:

High-heeled dress shoes, high quality, of polished leather.

Nylons

Skirt, tailored and dry-cleaned.

Blouse, tailored and dry-cleaned.

Jacket, tailored and dry-cleaned.

You are obligated to wear your identification chain at all times.

It's as simple as that! Sweaters and slacks are appropriate if they are properly fitted. It is suggested you retain clothing pieces no longer than one year, excepting shoes, which, provided they are in like-new condition and adhere to current fashion standards, may be worn for up to three years. Remember, clothing costs are deducted from your expense allowance. See the end of this booklet for maximum monthly amounts.

Fashions that may not be appropriate in public for Tier 5 members include sportswear and running shoes, t-shirts, short shorts, jeans, outdated or worn fashions, bare legs (except with evening attire), ill-fitting clothing and swimwear.

Hint: feeling good about dressing well starts underneath your clothing. Fashionable and properly-fitted lingerie makes you feel attractive and confident even though no one else can see it.

Consultant: Leeana Gericho, New York City fashion designer

I look around the kitchen again, now, for signs of a certain kind. Assurances. Anything

out-of-place that I can attribute to Haydn as an individual, now that I know he played hockey with monkey arms. My heart slows. Yellow chrysanthemums on the windowsill, like my mother used to grow. White paper napkins, 2-ply, stacked beside the sink. Mismatched cutlery. Above the cupboards, the original white-and-blue tile is still there.

How many triangles can you count in the larger triangle. a 4 b 6 c 13 d 17 Which number should come next. 144, 121, 100, 81, 64... a 19 b 36 c 49 d 50.

(Tick tock tick tock tick tock GUESS).

Would I be wrong, would I be wrong?

What if I guessed right, and became F5, and changed my mind? What if I didn't like wearing nylons?

Haydn puts the apple crisp in the oven. Just like I used to make with rhubarb. Sliced apples in the bottom of the pan. Cut flour into butter with a pastry blender. Leave crumbs of butter in the flour—these will melt and leave air.

Cut the butter into the flour. Mix with oats, cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice, brown sugar and lemon rind.

"You oughta wash your hands," Shel says, as I sift my fingers through the oats.

Sprinkle over the apples and bake at 375.We should've preheated the oven. Can we start again?

"Shall we move on?" Shel says. "You've yet to see upstairs."

We have done nothing for the past twenty minutes but stand around in a dumb-

eyed circle in the kitchen, watching Haydn slice apples.

Bathroom

19

We climb the back staircase, narrow, steps tall. Walls painted the same maroon, oppressive. Bare steps, bare bulb, no rail.

I feel a bit like Stefanie now that Haydn's shown me about his arms, now that I've seen the blue-and-white tile. Suddenly, a human being. Always disconcerting, to realize a person I've just met can see me at the same moment I'm looking at them -—not a one-way mirror. *You cold?*

I'm surprised Stefanie's not following Haydn and Shel around. She bragged about the invite to their house and how *important* they are. I haven't spent longer than two days with a man since I got upstaged. I miss John, the sweat stains on his t-shirt. I can't catch a ball now, would ruin the manicure.

The bathroom, tiny, tiled. One bath for a mansion, the oldest house. An enormous tub to the window, jets, decorated to look old-fashioned, as if it stands on four feet. An illusion. Its belly sags to the floor.

Girls and boys in their underwear fill the water, giggling at the sight of each other's nipples.

"Did you hear about Tom?" Shel whispers, and the revellers in the tub, they have taken the tour, they shout, as one.

"Tom is dead!"

The shriek echoes around this house. Tom is dead! Tom is dead! They laugh

hysterically. “You guys are pieces of work, ha ha.”

Ruined. Silk and satin, lace brocade, foam cup. Hand-wash only, cold water.

Such boys, in the big jetted tub in their silk boxers. I cannot protest the inequality of having my bikini line waxed. These boys all wax south too, the chugging thresher of cosmetic progress.

Tom is dead!

One hair, from one mole. Haydn waves his arm, clear out, clear out. I cling, a mite on that hair. A mite in the dirt.

Shel says, “Get out!”

And the bathers laugh again. There’s only one bathroom in the house.

Haydn seems equally concerned. “Not one drop of water on the floor, out, out.”

While I realize the enormous fullness of my bladder, the bathers reluctantly begin to stir. They stand, one by one, and step carefully onto the mat, and Shel claps a towel about each set of shoulders and pushes them out the door.

“Fun police,” says one of the boys, too drunk to think of better.

There must be a path out of here, across the border, over ground. Invisible until you’re walking on it.

I shut myself in the bathroom while Shel and Haydn wait outside. The tour, endless, Leader/Follower. I tire of walking, of standing, of smiling. Of what’s new. These Rileys, the homesteaders, who didn’t they want in their brand new city? The undesired, always called undesirable, don’t hold prime real estate. Who had to hide away on the outskirts of town then?

The woman in the magenta t-shirt, did you forget her name or did I? One of us is responsible, one of us should know, goddamn it. Laura? Lisa? She and her husband fixed up the house, a favour for the city. One dollar.

The province bought the house back, probably when you were in junior high. Probably right when you and Dad had to move for an infrastructure project that never happened. I can't help but wonder. What's the value of the house? One dollar plus inflation?

Maybe Shel's not lying, maybe his dad did buy the house from the government for a dollar, history again. A favour for improving the neighbourhood.

In high school, you stopped by the house just to look. Kept an eye out in the community newspapers. Didn't dare leave a note in the mailbox, asking, but you wanted to know about the annual open house. When was it? You wanted to see the place one more time inside. Us, you and me-to-be. The new owners surely kept expensive jewellery. Original works of art. It had to be kept private.

I sit, in the private room, where the bathers were chased out. No one emptied the dirty water. No one pulled the plug. I don't want to put my hand in there now, cooling, grey, old. Someone else's.

I wash my hands and sit on the counter, staring at the mirror. My legs, thin and small, curve over the edge. I put my feet on the counter to study them. My phone rings. I'm sure it's Haydn and Shel, that in the two minutes I've been gone they've found my number and are reminding me that they're waiting to finish the tour.

I can't not look in case it's Caitlyn, in case it's John. Stefanie. I don't answer. She leaves a message. I don't listen. She makes these appointments, who knows what they

are? She just taps a girl on the shoulder and says, you're my next appointment. And they meet where, what do they say? For the next couple of days the girl's glowing, strutting around, the chosen one. Usually.

20

I open the medicine cabinet looking for ibuprofen, don't find any, and try the storage closet. Almost shut the door again, catch a glimpse of white. A dead face in the space below the bottom shelf. Just like my friend, Caitlyn. I yelp. She says,

"Shut up for fuck's sake."

She's huddled in the shadows. My eyes adjust. In front of her, on the floor, is a half-eaten box of doughnuts. I crouch to peer in and say, "Were you watching me piss?"

"No, I was sleeping. But I've a mental list of people I did see piss tonight. I like knowing the worst of people."

"Where have you been? I've been worried sick, I thought you were dead." I squint. "You look half-dead."

"You've just never seen me without bronzer."

"Come out of there."

"No." There's something strange about the way the light is hitting her, like her face doesn't end at her hairline but extends all the way up to the top of her head. She looks like one enormous forehead, a movie alien. I say,

"I wonder if someone spiked my drink. What happened to you?"

"Have a doughnut."

I crawl in next to her, cave, and take one. A box of twenty-four maple-dipped. Fresh, melts when I bite. I take tiny bites and spread the icing on the roof of my mouth

with my tongue when I'm not talking. "What happens at Stefanie's appointments?"

"What happened to me or what happens to the other girls?" Caitlyn says.

Her face still looks like it's at the bottom of a whitish dome. My eyes adjust. Her hair. She's shaved her hair.

"Caitlyn, what did you do to your hair?"

"You think I would do this to myself?" She says. "I thought we were friends, Friday, can you at least pretend to be empathetic?"

I blink. I close my eyes for long enough that I can almost forget she's there for a split-second. "I'm empathetic," I say. How can I think too hard about her? My head's full already. A Fifth Fifth must be perfectly coiffed at all times. For women, this includes a stylish, well-kept hairstyle and full make-up on most occasions. When in public, why not take the opportunity to make an impression? Remember, you are a leader!

You must, you should, say the brochures. But I am me and you are in the past. I felt more human then, when I was you, what I have torn off from myself. I ripped you off. A once-conjoined twin.

"Stefanie?" I say.

"Who else?"

"You sure? I mean, she's a cow, but she's careful not to get implicated."

Stefanie told me one Friday morning in grade twelve to tell the principal of Strathcona High, when he asked, that she had spent a particular Thursday afternoon at the city's athletic club with me playing racquetball. In the locker room before gym, she scrubbed moisturizer on her face. Beautiful cheekbones, skin dry as sandpaper.

"You mean squash?" I said, pretty sure the upscale club hadn't kept racquetball courts since about 1982.

"No, Friday, racquetball." She layered powder. "Tell Baldwin we're learning to play racquetball. This is very important, okay." Stefanie changed the date stamp on her digital camera to the day before and brought it with us to Phys Ed. We spent most of class taking stupid pictures of us in shorts against a non-descript wall behind the gym, posed with racquets from the back of the storage room.

The principal, Alan Baldwin, called me to his office two hours later, "just with a few questions." Under the radar at your old school, you did what you wanted but there were always truants worse than you, so that you never saw the principal face-to-face. At Strathcona, he called me by name when he saw me in the hallway. That friend of Stefanie's. Stefanie, always suspected, never convicted. The rumours: lit a bottle of hairspray like a flamethrower, drugged a girl and dumped her in a locker room shower, framed an ex-best for vandalism of the roof. Cigarette burns, well-hidden, hard healed.

When I asked why, Baldwin would say nothing but "We had a pretty serious incident on the school grounds yesterday." I said what Stefanie told me to and quickly got into a half-hour conversation about the finer points of racquetball, a sport which he felt sure was making a comeback. I found myself agreeing that a bouncing ball gave the game a gimmick that squash, its successor, lacked.

"Squash takes itself too seriously," Mr Baldwin declared.

I think he just knew Stefanie was uncatchable.

You hadn't played racquetball since tenth grade, when you and John made a game of using your spare periods to test out your school gym's oldest equipment. In the old

school's basement were a myriad of dungeon hallways, near unknown to teachers. Buildings tacked onto buildings since the 1930s didn't always attach just right. One stairwell led to a blank wall. Next to the furnace room, a locked door into a never-used bomb shelter. You and John tried a racquetball in the squash court at the community centre down the street until it rocketed out of the court, narrowly missing the concession stand, and got you kicked out. After that you kept in the school, deep inside as you could get. Roller-skated the storage space behind the gym stage. In an empty boys' locker room you resurrected indoor kickball, your primary school favourite, since it was too cold to play outside.

First time you kissed John was in a storage closet behind that same old locker room. You had to go behind the showers to get to the closet where the drama department kept extra costumes and props. You and John left the theatre on a hunt for a plywood tuba and ended up making out so long under the bare swinging bulb, smell of musty clothes, that Layton came down looking for you.

I never found out from Stefanie what *serious incident* required an alibi like racquetball. Let something like respect bubble up for her tenacity, like you had for the mouse that lived in your dad's house for two months eating the bait out of all the humane traps without ever setting one off.

For the rest of the day after I did her the favour, Stefanie and I drove in her car around the northeast by International Avenue, stopping for lattes at a drive-thru café, taking every third left and every first right. She chain-smoked out the window, perfect waves cemented against her scalp. The only girl I know who drove everyday above

freezing with her window cranked all the way down. I'd always wanted to ride a boat fast over the weir, see if I could make it. Sudden urge to tell her, what a perfect place to hide bodies. Maybe she was only driving me around crappy neighbourhoods to dump me off in the middle of nowhere and making me wait for a transit bus while rednecks whistled at me out of pickup truck windows. But she didn't.

Stopped at a red light she said, "John's right about you, you're okay." The important moment, and I couldn't think to answer. Never heard her say his name again.

21

"My word against hers?" Caitlyn says. "Of course she won't be implicated. Are you even listening to me, Friday? You are such a fucking space cadet."

"I'm listening."

She looks at me seriously. "Sometimes I think the only reason you're F5 is because someone mistook your total cluelessness for vanity. All that's really required of you bobbleheads is that you be completely self-absorbed."

"You don't think I'm self-absorbed? That means a lot, Cait."

"I wouldn't go that far. Anyway, I'm gonna keep my fat mouth shut. She invited me to an appointment, to her house one Monday afternoon, when I had a class, actually. I told her so and she said, either you want the appointment or you want to be buried."

I'm impressed. "That's mobster shit, Caitlyn."

She smiles. "No, it's high school. She acts fifteen."

A few minutes talking to her and no matter how much I sometimes want to hold her at arm's length, I can't. Stefanie and I have grown apart because Caitlyn and I spent nights half-lit playing double solitaire. Relieved and miserable. I take another doughnut. I

keep myself so slim that I have to avoid large meals. If I get the chance to pound a few slices of pizza, two hours later I look three months pregnant. No place for food to go, like a cobra after it's eaten a lamb whole. But I can't help myself. I peel the maple frosting off in pieces and dissolve them on my tongue.

"So she gets me at her house," Caitlyn says, "and I have no idea what to expect. Most of the girls who get the appointments, you know, she's using them to build a security force. She needs a lot of stupid girls with hard heads so she can stand on top of them. But me, I'm no good for that. She knows that. I was nervous, tell you the truth. That ape Eric was with her. Almost the second I got in the door she said, I don't want to spend one minute more than I have to with you.

"I turned around to walk back out the door, but she said, Come to the kitchen. She gave me a glass of wine, which I drank like a camel taking on water."

"She makes a lot of alcoholics."

"She put something in mine. I had to sit down and I couldn't move my arms and legs too well. Then she said, I want to cut your hair. You never look up to the standards of the rest of us."

"Sounds like bullshit," I say, cautiously.

"Pure bullshit." She slams her fist on the toilet-paper shelf. "I measure 36-25-36 and I'm five foot eleven inches tall. Any other country in the world, I'd be a model. You think I'm vain, too?"

She's not vain. She's painfully logical.

"I ought to be famous. And here, in this asshole of a place, the only reason I'm not some primary school teacher cleaning blackboards with my tongue is because my dad

shells out to save my ass. You know how much, Friday?

"He doesn't let me forget. Hundred thou a year to put me through university. Enough for five people to live on, just to learn me. All I hear is how stupid I am. Well, Friday, I hate to break this to you, but I'm not too stupid to see that Stefanie's a babbling moron. Haydn and Shel are the only high scorers I've ever known who are close to intelligent, and you know what? All they worry about is making money, drinking, eating and throwing one killer party a year. No one here cares about thinking."

She's never talked to me like this before. I know she reads more than I maybe have in my whole life. If I ask her, she'll spout Plato and Proust and Flaubert and Dostoyevsky, things I didn't even know were kicking around anymore. I love to listen to her talk. In your high school, you nearly killed yourself to talk to girls like her. But at parties, at school, around Stefanie, she carries a leather clutch or her assigned textbook and shuts up, shuts down.

"Quiet," I say. "The walls are thin, Cait. If you were at Stefanie's on Wednesday, where the hell have you been since then?"

"I'm sick of quiet. I was quiet and went to Stefanie's and she and her ape boyfriend took her armpit razor to my head, just because. I think she used the word 'uppity.' To think I used to feel badly for her because her boyfriend's a sociopath."

"They're engaged now." I have to smother laughter.

"Serves her right."

"Oh, Caitlyn, I'm sorry." My eyes tear, holding in a funnel cloud of a laugh.

"Sorry, you have no idea. You'd've killed yourself already, if she did this to you."

"Come on, I'm not like that."

"You don't think I know that you're only friends with me because you're too twitchy to fit in right with Stefanie? If she wanted you, if she told you this second she'd book you an appointment if you stopped talking to me, I'd never see you again. The only two Fifth Fifths who deserve to be called human beings are Haydn and Shel."

She smarts me, pin-pricks, but might as well let her clear her system. I say, "You've been hiding here since Wednesday?"

"I live here now. I'm dropping out."

"Of school?"

"Of everything. I'm out."

"You can't just do that," I say, in a calm voice. "Are you fucking one of those brothers? They're keeping you here because—"

"No, Friday. Why am I not surprised you don't get the concept? There's nothing in it for them. They like me, I like them. Mutual respect, you ever felt that?"

Maybe the truth, maybe that's why Shel and Haydn were so quick to shoo the partiers out of the bathtub. Didn't care about the penny-throwers in the living room, the ice-skaters in the kitchen. But then again, maybe the bathtub's just a priceless antique. What isn't, in this house?

I wish I were her, tall and bald and angry. Because she's not me, I can say *if I were her I would* make a chain of daisies around my naked head and roam the streets at night, on foot. Run under the streetlights, like someone was chasing me.

"I came here tonight to see John," I tell her. Confession. I hold both of her hands as long as she'll let me, which is about two seconds.

"Who's John?

"My old boyfriend. From before." I know she'll understand the pregnant *before*.

"You still talk to him?"

"I haven't for years. He wrote me a couple of letters, I didn't tell you. Maybe he's the love of my life, I've missed him so much."

"You've never mentioned him."

"I can't mention anything!" I say, because I'm blindingly angry at myself for never telling her, Caitlyn, for never leaving concrete proof of where I've been with a living person, so if John asks Caitlyn, somehow, did she talk about me, Caitlyn can hold some kind of idea of John, inaccurate, incomplete though it may be. So she can say to him, if she and he are the only ones to live through plague, yes, I've heard of you, she loved you. She thought she loved you. I have to tell her something. So I say, "I don't belong here. I don't, I'm a mistake."

22

I'm filled with frigid water. I'm a mistake. I realize what I'm saying. *Caitlyn talked to Stefanie. She went to an appointment.* Shit, what did they talk about? The reservoir? Caitlyn spilled about the reservoir. She told on herself and me and Stefanie agreed to shut up about Caitlyn if Caitlyn brought me down. A set up, Stefanie needs someone to fall, and she picked me, me, and shaved Caitlyn's head so I wouldn't suspect. The perfect plot. I'm here babbling traitorous words against class and country. Caitlyn's going to tell. She'll be Stefanie's right hand right through law school, and I'm going to be downstaged. F4. No, I can't live not like this. The fear reflex, a tap with the hammer.

"Caitlyn," I say. "Did Stefanie put you up to this?"

"Up to what?" She narrows her eyes. I breathe again.

A knock at the door. “You die in there? We still have the rest of the tour!”

“Come with me,” I say to Caitlyn.

“I’m not leaving this bathroom. I can’t be seen like this. Once everyone goes home, I’ll roam the house.”

“We should still be friends even if you don’t come back to school.”

“Do you really give a shit, Friday?”

I open my clutch for the silk scarf I carry. I reach forward and she sits still while I tie it around her head. “Come on,” I say, “Come with me. I’ve only got upstairs left to see and then I’m meeting John. You know Stefanie won’t move the party upstairs until after eleven-thirty. She never breaks her rules. You must be cramped if you’ve been sitting here all night.”

I didn’t tell Caitlyn about hearing Stefanie yell at Dan in an upstairs bedroom. Never heard her cry before but maybe she’s just overdramatic. On the reg. I tell myself I would’ve told Caitlyn if I’d known for sure, one way another. He hits her, he doesn’t. He hits her. We all know, we think, we know.

Caitlyn crawls out of the closet and stands. In a pair of one of the boys’ jeans, two inches too short, and a grey tee, no bra, and my scarf, she looks the most beautiful I’ve ever seen her. She opens the bathroom door and stalks out, box of doughnuts in hand, me trailing behind. The hallway is empty, the twins nowhere to be seen.

I ask her how come no one found her in there. Not a chance, in this house of bloodhounds, that no one checked the bathroom closet to know more about the gracious hosts. We get a fashion magazine from the government every month, gossip, hilariously

sex-free. How to flirt. The most common mistake is overdoing eye-contact. Learn commonalities, it harps. You know, I think I should go to the doctor and be tested for diabetes (because I saw a blood-sugar metre in your bathroom). I feel so faint if I don't eat, in fact, I feel sort of woozy right now. Oh, you are? I had *no idea*.

Sitting two chairs down from Stefanie in one of the lecture halls in the law building every Monday, Wednesday, Friday, in Economics last year. Want. Throw a pen at her—in her face. My hand almost obliged countless times and thankfully, stopped itself. But I picture it bouncing off her sharp nose, a small red mark. She's never looking at me. But if I were to switch seats she'd never speak to me again. Want, want. So bad my neck cramped up with it. So easy. A pen, a book, a stapler. In the temple with the three-hole punch on the table next to the door. How is she so invincible?

"You nearly missed me," Caitlyn says. "If you'd just looked for prescriptions and shut the door again—"

"Okay, right."

Caitlyn says, "I want to feed all my hair to her until she chokes."

"Do you think she kept it?"

"I don't know."

"I'd be kind of worried, you know, maybe she's gonna do something with it. Make you look crazy. How in god's name did she get you to sit still long enough to shave your whole head? They must've used scissors first—"

A knock at the door. "Friday? Are you passed out?"

"Be right out," I say.

I told Caitlyn, "When I was in grade three, the boy who sat behind me chopped

off my ponytail with scissors. Just picked it up and chopped it off. My head felt so much lighter all of a sudden. He did it because he was bored. I think he was actually a really smart kid."

"That's not the same at all, thanks."

"What do you want me to say?" I say finally. "You're acting like she took a machete to your brother."

"I'm an only child."

If I were Caitlyn, if it were my hair. Might've jumped off my balcony, rather than face that nonstop forehead. What's the point, if you don't look the part? Look's the game.

"Whenever I feel like I'm feeling too good about myself, I paint my nails red," says Caitlyn. I look at her hands. The cuticles are neat, the skin smooth, but nails natural. She wears amethyst rings on almost every finger. I can't remember ever seeing her with anything but clear polish.

"Too good about yourself?" Heard her wrong, maybe. Misheard.

My governmental allowance more than covers professional monthly manicures for me. Never thought she did her nails herself. Course she does, who am I who am I? Never painted my nails before grade five six. Not me. You, you. Dad didn't let you wear makeup on your face yet but didn't mind you painting your nails. Skylight, neon orange.

Caitlyn opens the door. Haydn and Shel are nowhere to be seen.

"Why do you paint your nails red?" I say.

"You just came up the back stairs, right, means the master bedroom's the next stop." She tries the first door on the left, rattles the knob. Locked. "I can finish the tour, right, I'm qualified. I've lived here two days now."

“Why do you paint your nails red? I’ve never seen you with red nails.”

She pulls a bobby pin from my hair and bends it open.

“I have to take it off the second after,” she says, as if I’m an idiot. “I use my right hand for everything. When I paint my nails my right hand always looks like shit. Like a five-year-old did it for me. It’s my best hand but it can’t paint with itself. Reminds that right hand where the other one stands.” The lock, meant to be easily picked from the outside, stands a second and a half.

“Wait—knock first,” I say. “Maybe someone’s in there.” I tap, tentative.

“You likely scared them,” she says.

“Who?” I say.

She opens the door.

Master Bedroom

23

Someone’s hung strings of heavy beads over the inside of the doorway. Not decorative, surely. Threaded bits of tire rubber, bumping heavy against my dress.

“To keep them from getting out,” she says.

The room’s almost dark and empty. One dim white light hangs in the centre. A mist hangs in front of my face. I reach, concerned my eyes are blurry, going blind.

“Don’t touch anything,” she says.

The mist is a fine netting from ceiling to floor. First, I see nothing. A bed and a desk, outside the netting, are pushed into a corner.

“Haydn sleeps in here,” says Caitlyn. “I think that must be wondrous. So

peaceful."

A flicker near the ceiling, outside the netting, like a falling leaf. Lands right in front of me. My eyes adjust. A slow blink back at me. Two big black eyes stare, then disappear as soft wings fold closed. A moth, the size of my hand. Its legs hook the netting and it climbs. A cage, he's made his bedroom into a cage.

The light flickers. No—not flickering. Masked by hundreds of wings, some fluttering. Some of the moths hang unconcerned inside the netting and I can see their fat fuzzy underbellies. Antennae like feathers. I want to touch, for a moment, softer than air.

In one place the netting is hooked together with pins. Caitlyn unpins a couple and slips inside. She holds the netting closed with her hands and looks at me, waiting to see if I'll follow. I think of the wings in my hair. I slide through after her and she pins the net closed.

The insects crawl more than fly. I'm terrified of stepping on them on the floor, juicy crunch. Their bodies are huge. Wingspans the length of my palm. The tent is empty of branches, the netting stapled to a cardboard circle near the roof and the bottom edges weighted down. Voided chrysali, torn open at the bottoms and stained with dye the colour of blood, hang from the top half of the netting.

"There's no food for them," I say suddenly, indignant, "he hasn't left anything for them to eat." No escape, except for the lucky. Lotto winners. Children of councilmen.

"They don't eat," says Caitlyn. "They only eat as caterpillars."

One's landed on Caitlyn's back and she hasn't noticed. Shel's wool sweater's draped over my arm. Do moths eat wool? Here, take your clothes back. Destroyed by your own pets.

“Once they come out of the chrysalis, they don’t have mouths anymore,” Caitlyn says. “Most of these ones hatched in the last couple of days. Yesterday, Shel and I watched them for hours.”

Creeping up my unaware back, over my hair, maybe, brushing my neck. My spine prickles. Want to brush my hand over my back, brush them off, but the thought of accidentally hitting one with my hand, the powdered hollowness.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be in here without him.”

“They just live long enough to mate and lay eggs. He’ll spend most of the day tomorrow or Sunday harvesting. I haven’t seen that. I’m not sure I want to watch.”

“Harvesting?”

“I guess there’s a huge market in Europe right now for Alberta species. The government’s likely to make some of them extinct in the wild by pushing so much city expansion in the north. He’s keeping the species alive. The individuals will die soon enough anyway.”

“He kills them?”

“Once he’s sure they’ve laid enough eggs.”

The door opens.

“We’ve been looking for you,” says Shel. He smiles at us. The light from the hallway, unbearable, tattoos my eyes. He motions for Haydn, framed in the doorway behind him, to come in. Haydn puts up his hands, declining.

Shel steps in, closes the door. I half-hope for a song, Albert Riley sets out a-hunting moose in the foothills and instead gets swarmed by moths. Buffalo, maybe. When did the buffalo go? I’d rather not know than ask. But he looks serious, all traces of

the performance gone. He sets his hat down on the desk and unpins the netting, steps inside. Immediately the moths whirl, bumping unconscious around our heads.

I shield my face. He grins. Has a glass in his hand, a new Canadian cocktail, hands it to me. Can't remember how many I've had. The moths settle again, but three or four crawl about in Shel's hair.

"They've always liked us," he says. "Moths and butterflies, since we were kids, they've chased us around. But H is scared to death of them."

"They must get hungry, right?" I say. "Imagine waking up one day with no mouth. Is it starvation that kills them?"

"Don't know."

"You're going to kill them tomorrow?" I ask, feigning nonchalance.

"They are just moths, Friday," says Caitlyn, suddenly looking at me like maybe she's missed a few signs to my mental decline.

"One by one," Shel says, "with ammonia. I have to pin each right away, otherwise they get brittle. Really time consuming."

"You frame them?"

"Set and frame them, and ship them overseas."

"Is that legal?"

"Not even a little. You're not supposed to be sending anything out of the country without a permit right now, let alone organic material."

The insects huddle again around the lamp.

"Can I keep one? Poke some holes in the lid of a jar or something?"

"Sure. Won't live a couple days, though. I could pin one for you."

"No," I say.

"I don't like the framed ones either," he admits. "Never keep any of them here. I just like to watch them grow up."

"Do you do other bugs?"

"No," Haydn says. "English collectors, they say they want Alberta species. But they just want the pretty ones, don't care about the rest. I mean, how many times have you actually seen one of these outside? Never, not around here. They're rare, they camouflage and they can't live in the city."

Should be time to leave but none of us want to move our feet. We sit on the floor. The moths land on us, crawl, settle. Shel's crowned with them. Glad he took off the hat.

I say finally, "If I could get out of here—to England, or France, the States, anywhere else. I'd leave in a second. I'd fly away."

John.

Mind's fogging. The bugs, captured, capturing my attention. To think, for even ten seconds, I might've forgotten. What time, what's the time. Wish I'd brought a watch tonight. Didn't match my dress. Of course I haven't forgotten. It's still early. He's not here yet, he wouldn't leave without me.

"Dead moths get farther than we ever will," says Caitlyn.

"We wouldn't leave," says Shel. "We hate it here, but we're home."

"You've got everything you could want here," says Caitlyn. "And you're a homebody. But don't forget, Haydn doesn't think like you. Someday Haydn will want to leave. You won't let him go without you, I bet."

"What's the time?" I say.

Shel frowns. “Who cares if we have everything or not? This is our hometown.”

“No one who doesn’t have everything can say that,” says Caitlyn.

“What’s the time?”

Haydn pulls his watch close to his eyes.

“Twenty to.”

“Ten?” I know I’m wrong as I ask.

“Eleven.”

How? Lost time, maybe, a spring ahead, somehow. Time changes sneak up on me every year. “How long have we been sitting here?” John’s not upstairs, no one’s upstairs. I missed him somehow. “I better get back downstairs.”

Shel looks at me as if I’m rude. “We’re not done the tour. Relax.” He puts his hand on my knee. Jenny Lebousky, Jenny Jenny, named countlessly, always in trouble. Who does he think I am? Then he jerks his hand away.

Did she go to jail, and how long would she have spent there? I forget already her number. 5173? I plug everything into my phone to remember, let slip from the frontal lobes. I barely remember my birthday. How easy to fly? I’m not creative enough for escape, all the loopholes have already been filled. All my great ideas were someone else’s first. Retrospective is easy, that’s why I hate history. What can’t you know? Those smug boys in cowboy hats. On-this-day-in-1917. Doesn’t matter how much I study Jenny Lebousky, she won’t tell me whether someday, I can board a plane to Amsterdam, never come back. Her escape, or not, was far from mine. However she escaped, if she escaped, the jail was fixed up right after so no one else could do the same. Jailbreak is always ingenious, brand new, and unfailingly selfish.

“Shall we continue?” Shel says. “My brother will be wallowing in the depths of his loneliness out there.”

“We could scare him,” says Caitlyn. She raises her arm, where two moths rest. “Bring him a bug.”

“When he’s already missed out?” Shel says gently. He shakes his head and the bugs flutter off. We stand and for a moment stand in the eye of another hurricane of wings. Not so soft as I expect against my face. No muscle, just hardness. Flying skeletons. I close my eyes.

Attic

24

The hardwood up the stairs still creaks like you remember, like the set from a horror movie. We ascend to the attic. No one talks. My eardrums still ring with the shuffle of tiny wings and the tick of bodies bouncing off the netting, off my hair and Haydn’s shirt. Mobbed. I took off Haydn’s sweater before I left the cage and brushed them off.

The staircase to the attic, like the back stairs, narrow, tall. Squeak, squeak, my feet offend the steps. Caitlyn makes the most noise. Probably weighs the most of any of us, skinny bony people, rich and underfed. Likely there are mice in this house. A building full of the tiny. No matter how much money you have on the prairies you have mice. The hill behind the house seethes with them. Comforting and unsettling, knowing mice can always find a way in. At night, the skitter of *someone else*. Like the moths. They made me nervous, but I understand why Shel sleeps in the bedroom with them.

I am not the only one to hear the sounds. A suspended breath, a skritching

suspect. In the walls, the ducts. “What is that?” Haydn says.

Caitlyn pulls a mousetrap from her bag, dangles it between her fingers. “My good luck charm. Caught five mice with this trap.”

“I don’t think we have mice,” says Haydn. “Must be something else.”

“I’m not supposed to,” she says, proudly. “Exterminator’s job. It’s actually against my contract, I’m breaking labour regulations.”

Haydn high-fives her.

I say, “I’ve heard they can get in holes the size of a dime.”

Moonlight spills through the French windows at the top of the attic. They open to the roof and to nothing, taller than any of the trees.

Shel turns on the lights. What used to be a whatever’s left room, you remember a broken exercise cycle, an old TV and a stack of kids’ movies. Now, filled with shelves of books. A table, leather chairs. Knocked down the wall to the roof of the turret and now, a tiny room with six walls coming to a point with recessed lamps and a chaise. Tasteful, oh so. The attic, escape to the top with the heat.

“My dad had a mouse in his house once,” I say, “when I was in junior high school. I was going through a callous phase and I thought he should kill it and have done. But he set up traps all over the house, those ones that don’t kill mice, just catch them.”

Doesn’t it get hot in here?

“We don’t have mice,” Haydn says. “We would’ve seen them.”

“I bet you do,” I counter. “They thrive above the water level. This one never set off a trap. Got all the bait, my dad was just feeding it free peanut butter every night for two months, but never got caught. And the less hungry it was, the bolder it got. One

morning my dad was sitting at the breakfast table and he woke me up yelling. Broad daylight, and the mouse just gave 'er across the floor, ran right over the top of my dad's foot. Like it owned the place."

I'm hot now, face flushed. I take off Haydn's sweater and drape it over the arm of a chair, sink in. I have these dreams sometimes, where the light dims, where everyone I know and a few I don't categorically tell me *just so*, from my hairstyle to my hopes, in kind voices. *You're on your own, Friday. Everything done perfectly, and still not perfect. Too short, kid, you put on weight too easily. You can't afford not to know these guys. And you'll like them, you should really like them.*

"We probably do have mice," Shel says, peaceably.

"What happened to the mouse? In the end?" Caitlyn says.

"Must've died of old age," I say. "But it definitely died, in the furnace duct right above my bedroom. We couldn't get it out of there and for weeks all I could smell when the furnace came on was rotting rodent."

"You never forget that smell," Shel agrees, solemnly. He's right, but I'm not convinced he really knows. They tower over me, seated in the centre of the bookshelves, arms crossed as if they have an announcement.

"Caitlyn is a friend of ours," says Haydn.

"Mine too," I say, and Caitlyn crosses her arms.

"You wouldn't have taken her in," Shel says, gently.

"She didn't ask me to."

"She knew better?" Haydn suggests.

"Haydn," Shel chides. "He's had too much to drink," he says to me.

But no matter how well you hide it, I don't believe you really like anyone.

If only I had known about these boys, that they raised moths in the bedroom. Six weeks ago, two months ago, six months. Would I be here now, or would I have been the bald one in the bathroom closet? "Did you really give everyone this tour?" I say.

"Heavens, no," says Shel. "You know Caitlyn."

Haydn points to my hair. "Right off the bat, brunette. Like Jenny Lebousky. And sure, you said you knew Cait. When you pulled her out of the bathroom, well, you're all right. You never would've seen the bedroom otherwise."

"So, what. You think I'm what?"

"A foot outside," Haydn says. "Are we wrong?"

I take no classes with either of these boys. Do they admit they've read Plato? I never do, but I haven't read much Plato. I bet they sit in the back row and talk and learn at the same time, so the professors despise them but give them top marks.

Shel says, "I'm going downstairs a minute, behave yourselves," and no one dares to talk until he comes back upstairs with apple crisp and forks and lays a potholder on the floor, puts the casserole atop.

"Let it cool a few minutes," he says, cinnamon divine.

Cinnamon and butter, whole thick oats.

Caitlyn catches mice and Haydn bakes apple crisp, Shel kills moths. A jar of ammonia, as if the Handbooks were guidelines. As if that were the government-approved usage of nail polish remover. And I? Threw out my stage makeup, cut calories, emailed John goodbye. Emailed, and spent two nights awake in bed. Peed in the reservoir and panicked. Where are you, who slept on the balcony outside those French doors, the eight-

year-old braver than me?

25

You were born Thursday, 13 September. Dad said Mom named you Friday because her parents and grandparents, herself and her sister had all been born on Fridays, and of those who'd passed on, they'd died on Fridays too. Tradition breaker had to be branded with a memory of tradition, as unforgettably as if you'd been born Friday too. Mom said Dad named you Friday for that old saying "it's always Monday or Friday" because Friday was his favourite of the two and he had a wish for your life. He wanted you to have every single day as itself. When you realized today was a Friday, or a Monday again, he never wanted you to feel like you'd somehow lost the days in between.

The problem with this city is the river, no matter how high, can't get to all of it. Can't find this smug house's foundation and level it.

"What time is it?" I say. "Maybe I should get downstairs."

But I know the time is quarter to eleven, last I asked was five minutes ago.

We burn our mouths eating from the pan. Nobody talks. I look at Caitlyn, realize I haven't looked at her since we've come upstairs. I say, mouth full of apple, "Why didn't you call me and tell me where you were? How many times did I call your phone in the last few days?"

"I didn't want to get you in trouble with Stefanie." Caitlyn doesn't trust me, still doesn't. Adds, "But I knew you'd come tonight."

"Why haven't we ever seen you before?" Haydn interrupts. "We throw these parties every year. Where have you been?"

"I did tell these guys to keep an eye out for you," Caitlyn continues.

"You alone," says Haydn, charmingly.

"Maybe you won't see me again," I say, flippantly. "Maybe I'll flee the country tonight."

"You can't get out of here, Friday," she says, voice of authority. "You can't get out, okay, it's infeasible. All you can do is maybe find some like-minded people, you know. I *know* you don't like getting dressed up and coming to these sorts of parties every couple weeks. Your only social life outside of them is Stefanie's Mondays."

"Thank Christ for you." We always play double solitaire with the radio on. We should start holding tea parties in plain cotton, bare brown feet.

"Well, all I'm saying," Caitlyn says, "I'm not doing that anymore. I'm not dressing up and going to Stefanie's to talk about last month's romance novel. They're all written by the same government office. Two women write everything we read."

I look toward the stairs. No door down to the second floor, who knows who can hear her? "You won't even come for the reservoir?" I say, but she doesn't answer.

Shel stands, slowly. "Let me walk you downstairs." Sirens, far in the distance. It is ten to. The valley takes sirens and mutates them into bouncing screams.

"That's it?" I say. "We're done? Are you sure I've seen everything?"

"Except the den downstairs," says Shel. "Not much to see, but we can go and smoke a cigarette."

When you lived down here there used to be a pair of bloodhounds whose owners lived on 29 Street, two or three blocks away. Always in the backyard, and the sirens from the ambulances jockeying to and from the hospital used to set them off, low and long.

Twisted warnings, aeeeeeiiii, fired through the trees and back, with the mourning howls of the dogs harmonizing, not as loud, but so dense that the combination could be heard for almost a mile around, start your pulse. Sirens still get my back up.

"Goodnight, Friday," says Caitlyn, and Haydn nods his head.

Den

26

In the den, figures rise from the smoke like half-sunken statues. They stand, rather than sit around the fireplace. Anti-pollution laws preclude lighting for warmth, but not lighting to inhale, not yet. The private home, the last bastion of tobacco. Pipes are in fashion but Haydn chain-smokes cigarettes. A scene from 1917 and 1962 and now. The F5 student handbook says that reusing vintage clothing, even designer labels, is a questionable idea. Styles recircle but with each classic influence comes a modern spin, so fashion never lands in the same spot. Instead, buy classic pieces with modern details and you may wear them for several years.

F5s are always well-dressed, safely. Too much fashion flair means an artistic streak. And the artistic are better off as artists, F2. Best be unambiguous, black dress and pearls, pumps the colour of blood. Am I the only one who thinks this way? If I pin an antique brooch to my dress, I might become one of the handful of people in the RNWNA's history to plummet from 84 to 48 percent? Free paintbrush and a sinking house in Sunnyside to share with three waitresses, or. I don't know. *Congratulations, you are an essential contributor to society*.

The room circles a man with a mandolin voice. He is short, dark and drunk,

dressed as if his fine cotton has grown organically from his body. Above the chatter, he cries, “You tell me to name myself? I name myself Jugurtha! I am Darius the Great!” Laughter. It’s John, talking to the whole room.

It’s John. John Frederick, how did he get in the door?

I realize I never believed his letter. I never let myself believe he’d be here. What did I think I had to say to him? If I saw him approaching on the street I’d keep my head down, avoid his eyes. John Frederick. He’s lost weight. A couple of years older, of course, but clean-shaven and baby-faced.

His cufflinks, amethyst, glint with the reflection of a spark. I strain to hear more, but John quiets to draw his listeners closer, and they seal me out.

My mind jitters, every hour of every day, like it used to walking home alone from work at night during high school, approaching men on the sidewalk. People still used to walk on the sidewalk, then, in the inner city, the frost heaves still used to get occasionally fixed, wild chamomile dug out of the cracks, if the road crews had time. What if, what if. Hands out of your pockets, shoulders back. You wanted the newsreel to shut up, give you peace. *In the realization of a worst-case scenario last night, a girl, 16, was assaulted near Banff Trail*. But even as you wanted, you wouldn’t let it shut up. In case you needed your guard up, to fight your way out.

John gave you a whistle to carry.

I function on adrenaline, and its shaky after-effects. I am trying to watch John and decide whether I want him to notice me.

The headlines didn’t get really bad until few months after I got upstaged. Random

swarmings, beatings, rapes of women on the sidewalk. Never F5s, we never walked anywhere. I stopped carrying my whistle. We studied the papers in Social Studies.

The police department today is publicly blaming increased violence among Calgary's homeless population and is urging the government to do something about the vagrancy problem in the heart of the city.

Soon, ABCorp threatened to sue the government over the vagrants, who came like free rats with their purchased property. *They are trespassing*. So the government began a War Against Homelessness and moved the vagrants out of town, but by then no one walked on the sidewalks anymore. Downtown, ABCorp put up signs to block them off and removed the pedestrian signals at streetlights. A transportation allowance was built into everyone's government salary; no one *needed* to walk. Not that they needed to justify. Ten letters to the editor a day addressed the dangers of the sidewalk, urging drivers to lock their doors at reds.

I wondered what my dad would think. I didn't call him.

I realize my mouth is open and I am staring at portraits of the foothills on the walls, scrubbed with stunted trees. At fourteen-inch intervals. An old lie. The suburbs engulf those hills now. I am almost sure I don't want John to notice me. Hearing his voice has rusted my joints.

A moth sits on the cabinet by the door, wings spread, size of my hand. Black spots stare like bird's eyes. I cannot turn away. The moth says, "No—neither. I must be the prophet, because I am always the first with his balls nailed to the furniture."

Not the moth. John. That voice—where did he get those cufflinks? Spouting

bullshit at the front of the room like he's always belonged under the soft spot, a born F5. He changed the lights from a natural wash to a stage-left spot, soft, at your request.

Shel, watching me watch John, says, "Do you want an introduction?"

I almost say no. I almost can't. "Yes, please."

"He's a knight," Shel says. "You call him Sir."

"A knight?" Shel weaves through the tightening circle of bodies, me in his wake, until he stands beside the man at the head of the table. The man blows a smoke ring as he listens, lashes sweeping the hollows under his eyes. Haydn clears his throat. The man turns with a confidence of power surrounded by friends.

"May I present Friday Garrotter," Shel intones.

"Jacob," says the man purposefully. He winks at me.

"We've met," I say.

Did Stefanie recognize him? Does she know he's here?

"John," I say as he releases me. Bare breath.

"Jacob," he repeats.

I grip his hand. "I got your letters. I wrote back to the one you sent last Christmas, you never got it."

He's not an F5, not if he's lying about his name. Silk, gold cufflinks, I don't care, he's fooling—I know what he learned from actors. I see the gap between his front teeth.

"I never sent it." Maybe I do not say this part loudly enough for him to hear.

He stoops to my ear. "You better get out of here," he says.

"I just got here. We should probably talk."

"Not here. This party's going to be busted."

I laughed. “Busted? What F3 rent-a-cop’s going to walk in here?”

Shel tilts his head at me. Jacob’s fans are crowding him in, clamouring to know about his trip to Indiana. John waves them off, a minute, a minute.

I say, uncertain, “We can take a walk if you have something to say to me.”

“I just wanted to see you.”

“Here I am, I guess.”

He looks at me. “I’m glad for it. Listen, you really should leave now. I mean it.”

“No one’s gonna bust up this party.”

“Trust me,” John says. “We can talk later.”

I feel sick. Time only runs in what direction, what was I thinking? That neither of us would be any different? I realize I thought the sight of him would disintegrate my terror, turn me back to you, to a larvae feeding endlessly on carelessness. But there are circles under my eyes, darker each morning, I am slowly starving. Nothing to be done, of course not. I am continuously me, on a path of day-over-day. I say, “Do you want to?”

John doesn’t answer. He says, “Is Stefanie still in the front room?”

“Stefanie? Well yeah, last I saw, but that was hours ago.”

“With the groom-to-be?” John says.

“What?” He knows about his cousin’s fiancé. Only got engaged two weeks ago. They still talk. Rage at Stefanie threatens the solidity of my periphery. Two years, and just a word about John. Once, so I knew she knew how important he was to me. “I don’t know,” I say, “she was with Dan when I saw her. I don’t think Eric’s here.”

“He is.”

“I have something to take care of first.” He looks at his fingernails,

uncomfortable. Sweat under his jacket sleeves? His forehead shines.

"I want to get out of here."

"You can stay as long as you like," Shel assures. I want to glare at him for listening in but don't have the stones. John doesn't seem to mind.

"Where are you parked?"

"Middle of the lawn," I say.

"Oh, Friday, I just put new sod down two weeks ago," says Shel, disappointedly.

"Wait for me in your car," says John, cheerfully. "I'll only be a minute."

He's lying. He's the one who wrote me, couldn't get him out of my head the whole night. And he's lying.

Something's wrong, his smell sour. Only seen him like this once before, one night in May, pulling into your dad's driveway with you in the passenger seat. The night you saw the rabbit. He and you had eight months together, an October, November, December, January, February, March, April, May. One week of June. That Christmas and that New Year's Eve, that Valentine's. Never got a summer, the Alberta season worth living.

John waves his hand, smiles and turns back to the table, an eruption of noise. Shel takes my hand and walks me back to the outside of the circle while I reel, profoundest rejection. A clack echoes above the buzz as Jacob climbs on the fireplace. The moth is gone from the cabinet.

He has never talked in this pattern before. His words sound like mine, practiced, meaningless. F5 words. Of course I'll meet you later, wait for me in the car. We'll talk later, another time. Nothing but.

He has given me a Canadian quarter. 1922, the year his grandfather was born,

King George's head on the back. Lucky quarter. No one carries Canadian money anymore except for charms like this. He took this everywhere in his pocket, spinning it in his fingers. Used to drive you nuts, you bogged down with theatre superstition, by coming down from the tech booth before a performance and tempting fate. Quarter balanced in his fingertips. "Ready, Friday? Heads, I get the cues right, tails, I screw up."

"John." A couple times you tried to intercept the coin, tried to pretend the joke didn't terrify you, but he could throw easily above your reach.

"Oh, tails, Friday, hope you're ready to improvise."

But he never made a mistake in the booth, even when the actors missed their cues.

Old quarters are mostly silver, heavy and cold. The sound when he dropped it on a table was a shining noise more akin to water than to metal.

Laughter and mock hails from the front of the room. Jacob sits on the fireplace, leisure closing his eyes. A dozen revellers dissect my view. Face to the ceiling, Jacob brings his cigarette to his lips. I thank Shel and we slip back into the foyer.

"He drives a race car," says Shel, smiling vaguely, as I search for my jacket at the front door. "He's very famous."

"He drives round and round in circles?"

"Formula One," Shel says, as if reading from a sheet of paper. "He's driven tracks all over the world."

John was supposed to work a municipal job, likely a supervisor for road work or a paper pusher in one of the city's offices. I imagine him strong-arming the wheel of one of those space-age cars, sweat pouring down the inside of his suit. He's in terrible shape. A

lie, or has he too gotten an anomalous letter? *Your Personality and Intelligence Potentiality Verification results on your most recent examination place you in a new Career Fifth.* Encl.

Professional racer—an upstage or a downstage?

A celebrity, right, well-paid, surely, in great physical danger. Up?

He could be over 60 per cent now—there is a chance. He could be nearly risk-free. People whisper when F5s date F4s, but they don't confront. I picture myself on his arm at this party, the mark of *whether*. Two days ago I would have shrunk to imagine us, me polished, him gap-toothed, little potbelly, now distinguishing features. How is it that I must conceal and conceal, spots and blemishes and the pouch at my stomach.

Maybe John just wanted to put me behind him, remember that I ruined his life. Or *you* ruined his life. Sometimes my memories don't break cleanly into two when everyone else's lives arc past, unbroken lines. Like the cars just following a driver who spins off into a wall, all swishing by on the inside a split second before the caution flag gets thrown and the cleanup begins.

I care about you. Idiot, that should've been my answer.

I am almost crying. Shel keeps trying to take my hand, to comfort, I think, but I'm trying to stuff my fingers into my coat sleeves. "I don't know what his deal is, Friday," Shel says, softly. "We try not to turn people away here, even liars. But he better not make a mess of the place."

"He's here to meet me," I say. "He's the reason I came."

He is not a race car driver. He is, again, still, lying about his name.

The sirens grow louder. Red and blue bounces through the windows and off the walls. A cruiser has stopped in the driveway. Two car doors slam. A steady patter of footsteps begins toward the back door.

"The cops," Shel says, "why are the cops here?"

"Until eleven you're allowed to make noise that's comparable, in decibels, to a jet engine," Shel says, sweat appearing on his face. "You know that? I know the bylaw. They better not think they're coming in here." He pounds down the stairs, and Caitlyn and Haydn abandoned their plans to stay in the attic and followed.

"We have enough moths in this house to put us away for decades," Shel says.

"Cops!" Someone says from the living room, and the group of boys watching fighting pour in a stream toward the back door, passing the doorway to the front entrance one by one and waving goodbye to Shel, only audible from the way they scuff the bottoms of their shoes.

Bang, bang, bang at the door. "Police, open the door please." And Shel does, so quickly one of the men, a redhead, blinks at him.

"You the owner of the residence, sir?"

"Yeah, and I'm well aware it's ten forty-eight, which gives us twelve minutes of what-fuck-ever we want before we have to shut up."

"Shel," I say, shocked, but the cops are positively deferential.

"Sir, I do apologize. This isn't a noise complaint. We got a call about an assault."

"Assault?" Shel says. "I don't know about it."

"Beg your pardon, sir, but we have to enter the residence. We're obligated to

follow up on the call."

"There's been no assault. Everything's under control."

"Isn't there a chance something could've happened you don't know about?" The other cop throws in.

There is an unidentifiable commotion from the den. The cops look at Shel and at me. Crash, a hiss, and the irreversibility of breaking glass. Couple of shrieks and cheers. Fight! Fight! The chant begins.

"If that was my oak cabinet I will be displeased," says Shel.

The words want to tear out of me, compulsive. I managed to subdue them, make them line up. "Tom is dead," I whisper. "Tom is dead."

"Tom who?" Shel says. He has already forgotten.

"Who's dead?" One of the cops demands.

1917 shatters on the floor, cast aside already. Curtains rise and the crowd wipes its eyes and divides. Into the car, heater on, rubbing gloved fingers together. That was excellent, yes, solid acting, are you hungry, we can stop for takeout, or should we stop at the grocery store? Do we have something for dinner tomorrow? This house is Shel's, history acted. Reacted, as deemed entertaining.

A crowd of people, appearing out of nowhere, clutters the door to the den. "Hey!" We have to push past silk pants and skirts like the wings of moths, then knock elbows. I catch someone's hair in my mouth. I search faces for John. No one wants to move for the cops, too interested in seeing for himself what's going on. Shel walks in the path I clear.

"Fight! Fight!" Yell the party's obnoxious boys, and Shel body-checks one of

them with the balance of an ice-skater on dry land.

In the den, Stefanie's screaming, "I'm calling an ambulance," and the thump-thumping of bouncing bones.

"Would you stop being such *animals*?" Stefanie's soprano.

"All right, all right," the red-headed cop is shouting. "Break it up, now. Now!" But he still can't reach the fighters. It has been one second since I came through the doorway and it feels ten minutes.

"I just wish everyone would calm down," Shel says, frowning.

Centre of the room, their swinging elbows clearing them a perfect circle, a newly-married couple's first dance, Eric hunkers over John in the half-darkness. Headlock, groping for his neck. Glass litters the floor. The table and chairs are heaved aside or upended, make way, make way for the fight. Only casualty looks like the oak cabinet. Shel's lips thin.

Last Christmas I got a letter meant for you, from John. Handwritten inside a card, six days before Christmas. Clever. The holidays, acceptable time to talk to anyone. And a surprise, no return address on the envelope, my name all in capital letters. Heart-skip. Didn't get too many cards alone in my suite. Your dad used to get hundreds and hundreds of them.

Your last Christmas at Dad's, the first card to come, on December 8, was from the zoo. A photo of a baby elephant and six or seven signatures, and they wrote, *Merry Christmas to someone who really cares!* And a little smiley face. You teased him that they thought he was a crackpot but he beamed with the genuineness of the gesture. The

last time he phoned, sometime in the middle of November, the girl at the ticket office didn't let him get through "How long? How long?" before she burst in with, "You wanna come have a tour? You know, see what measures we've got in place?"

She mailed him a free admission. Dad went to the zoo on a Saturday, invited you and John but you made an excuse not to go and never asked John.

The Christmas card John sent to me, the second time he wrote me since my upstage, had a facsimile of Emily Carr's *The Red Cedar* with foil baubles etched over the branches, and a blank inside. Nothing of Christmas, as if he'd forgotten the premise.

Friday,

seventeen months, are you counting? Stefanie thinks you're happy but sometimes I don't think she remembers happy. please be sure and take care of her.

Shel, with the cops following in the path he makes, storms in to break up the fight, elbows out and a face like he's cleaning up someone else's vomit. "For Christ's sake." Me and you have seen so many more stage fights than real ones that we've forgotten how little space a real fight takes, a drawn-out hug, locked up, both scared of hurt. They tumble and fall.

"I'll kill you," says John, shoving Shel away, lunging for Eric, knees in the glass. He throws a shot to the face, knuckles torn, tears Eric's collar. "I promised, you're dead."

"I didn't mean it, Johnny," Stefanie says. Crying. Her mascara blackens her eyes. Maybe just overdramatic, probably not. Where the act ends, the acting ends.

"Did you start this?" Shel says to her.

"John, let's get out of here," I say. I'm not thinking. The cops will be on him in a quarter-second. He and Eric are once more a ball of indistinguishable limbs. They both manage to stand, locked around one another.

The cops get there, the dark-haired one throwing an arm around Eric's neck. Then Eric makes a noise like he's seen a car wreck.

He steps back into the red-headed cop, holds his hands to his stomach.

please be sure and take care of her.

The brunette cop has drawn his gun on John, drop it, drop it, and John drops a switchblade on the hardwood and the cop cuffs him, roughly.

The spaces between Eric's fingers turn red. Slowly, he looks down. Turns to stone but for the blood, half-bent into himself. Less and more blood than I might've expected. Only a few drops hit the ground. The cop eases him to the floor.

"What the fuck have you done?" Someone says.

Shel, a ghost, sits heavily on the fireplace.

I want to tell John to run with me, cuffs and all, but Christ, I'm bone-glad the cops are here, so guilty a spectator. So if Eric's guts fall out now, not my fault, the authorities were present. Don't want to know if I could've run away with him, raced for the airport, John cleaning his hands with the antibacterial wipes in my glovebox. Don't want to know that I could, could, could, for the salvation of an image, me in Monaco, sunglasses and a linen dress over a green bikini. John in his driver's suit.

What could be. The relief of what could be and the joy of knowing that it will

never be, not exactly. But when the plane touches down, something else, something I could never have pictured. The heat of the sun. And John, a fugitive, a vigilante. No risk of him succumbing to homesickness and skipping back to Alberta.

"I promised," John says, and there is a horrible quiet in the room. A few people, sensing the fight is over, sift out of the room. I hear the front door slam as a few flee.

The cop bending over Eric radios for backup and an ambulance.

"Everyone in the house, stay in the house," the cop who cuffed John yells. "Anyone who tries to leave now without my permission is gonna spend the night in jail."

He had it coming, surely. What's coming to him. Not that I'd think about it, except to tell myself a few times a day that Eric didn't look that bad, that he must've pulled through fine. A little surgery. Bedrest.

They would question my dad, if I disappeared. He wouldn't know what to tell.

I, coward, am glad for the cops. Out of the ordinary becoming, in proper sequence and with the application of proper protocol, ordinary again as fast as possible. I don't have to decide if I really could run. Already excitement turns to banality. We wait.

I turn on a lamp in the den. Scent of sour tobacco, no magic. A leak in the roof, I never noticed. Water drips from the furnace vent, from where? The bathroom upstairs, maybe, I'm turned around. A moth flutters toward the light.

Shel sees the water dripping from the vent and says, "What the hell?"

The sirens start up again, rattling the sky.

"John, no," Stefanie keeps mumbling.

"No one hurts you, understand?" He says, then, to me, "Nobody ever hurts her." I reach for his arm.

"Step back," says the cop, and pushes me away.

"You would've run away with me?" John says, but I don't know how to answer. Doesn't depend on me. Just like when he asked if he should kill the rabbit and you knew even if you said yes he wouldn't be able to. Fuck, it doesn't even matter what I could or couldn't have done. How dare he? How dare he ask me to meet him, how dare he pretend?

"The cops came quicker than I thought," he says, he's not thinking straight, shaky. "I thought I could—thought it would be quicker. In and out, meet you at the door."

"And fly away?" I say, but he doesn't answer. "Is he gonna go to jail?"

"I'd fucking say so," says the cop. He smokes a cigarette while he waits. Maybe the only place he can ever sneak one is on the job, in other people's houses, banal, on strange floors in his hard-toed shoes. Maybe his wife doesn't know he likes to smoke. This almost makes my heart break.

28

The first time John wrote to me was at the end of the year of the hundred-year flood. The June after you became me, the anniversary of me as me, that was the year the zoo went back underwater. I didn't know then.

understand if you can't write me but I had a dream that I passed you on the street and you looked so different I didn't recognize you. you had blond hair and everything. so I passed you without looking up or saying hi and then Stef told me later I snubbed you, I hurt you. keeps me up at night. can you send me a picture, in case?

Healing will probably cost Eric half his life and half his parents'. Medical treatments to be provided by Independence Health, Inc. Maybe he's insured. But in the end he is okay, of course, surely he'll be okay. How much blood is too much?

John did not come here for me. If he could get away with me, if he could be quick. Just if. I never answered his Christmas letter. I never sent a picture. A quarter for my trouble. He came for Stefanie.

29

I slip out of the den and climb the stairs. My knees feel cooked. All the lights burn in the bedrooms, in the upstairs hallway. Caitlyn and Haydn are in the master.

White water submerges the floor, a huge puddle seeping to the closet and lapping at the bed. A matter of time. The netting, ripped aside. The surface of the white wet is marred only by heaps of ragged bodies. Some still try to move their wings. Silent, but Haydn and Caitlyn mop the edges of the puddle as if racing for a world record. A bucket at the edge of the flood referees. There is a kitchen-sized fire extinguisher on the bed. Squish, skunky water and crunchy bodies fall into the bucket. Can you kill them? If you can kill them, be my guest.

"You know this is against labour regulations?" Caitlyn says. She squishes her mop out into the bucket, face sweating.

Haydn high-fives her.

Then he sees me in the doorway and curls his fingers down.

"Where are the cops?" Haydn says, urgent.

"He only had a handful of eggs," I say, "he told me."

"Where are the cops?" Haydn's arms pump, a cleaning machine.

"Downstairs. You really killed them all?"

"We oughta know better than to host these affairs," Haydn says.

I can't take my eyes off the muck, the mops mushing the dusty insects to mud.

"Fickle crowd," he says. "Should've kept the door closed. Animals, all of them."

"Is Shel okay?" Haydn says. "He's gonna flip. Christ, listen to me. Up here saving his ass from jail and I'm terrified he'll tell me off."

"Do you know—" I start to ask, cut myself off. I take Haydn's mop as he leaves, and begin pushing the moth bodies around. Stomach flip, tiny rodents, flattened by the water. Flying rats. The tide recedes. Voices quiet.

"What did he do to them?" I say.

Caitlyn says, "Me too. It was my fault too."

Measure my words. "What did you do?"

"We sprayed them to knock them down." She points to the fire extinguisher. "Then we poured water on them. I guess we panicked."

Haydn mops like he has no bones left in his body.

When I got the letter saying 84 per cent, my dad took me to the River Café on Prince's Island, in the middle of the Bow west of the zoo. Every few years a flood takes out the bridge to Eau Claire downtown, but the island always looks pristine, lush in the middle, no matter how muddied the edges.

I was going to wear the blue dress you wore for ninth grade grad but I'd already

outgrown the ruffles. So I borrowed a fifties cocktail dress from the costume room at your high school. Took it home to wash out dust and sweat, the old-socks smell of the boys' locker room. The smell of the first time you fooled around with John. Shyly, though, no rearrangements of clothes, no mess, peanut butter breath. I still have the dress. Navy silk with puffed sleeves and a belted waist. Its owner bought it from Eaton's, a sensible purchase, no designer label. The F5 handbook discourages vintage clothing. With each cycle in fashion comes a modern twist; nothing old is ever new again.

I meant to take the dress back, but after the day I borrowed it I never went back to your school again.

The restaurant perches on the island like a ski lodge on the edge of the cliff, lights beckoning orange in the silent silver park, bats flitting between the trees.

"Dad, are you sure you can afford this?"

We were the cheapest-dressed, the least manicured, the blotchiest. Dad wore a tweed sports jacket. A feeling like bombing an audition, reaching blindly for the wrong character. The silence of the unimpressed audience was not as bad as the silence of the tabled patrons, laughing softly, drinking wine. We did not exist. Dad did not notice. He beamed at the host.

"Soon you won't think anything of dinners like this," Dad said. "You'll be taking me out here once a month."

I strummed my nail over the menu. Dad ordered a litre of wine.

"Dad, be reasonable."

"Let me spoil you tonight, Friday. You deserve it."

I wanted to be grateful that he put on such a show. He joked that a high-class

daughter meant a free ride for him.

"You won," he said, like the whole thing was some sort of lottery.

We both knew I wouldn't see him much anymore. I didn't want to take the dinner for what it was, a so-long like to an old business acquaintance. Might as well wrap up with a handshake, best of luck in your future endeavours. I almost cried when the waiter came to prod me about my entrée. My head emptied.

"I don't know."

The waiter, who seemed trained for tears, said, gently, "I recommend the elk."

I ordered the elk, served with saskatoonberry compote and wild mushrooms. I always see Dad at Christmas, and on my birthday, and this year, on his birthday as well.

Outside the moon shines. All the lights in the house are on. Everyone knows who the Rileys are. Everyone knows the party house. Who can't walk by and watch us, unseen in the dark. Wallpaper hangs in strips from the staircase, a window broken in the front door. The guests, gone, no creaks in the floor, no clacks on the chessboard tile. There are the lucky ones, yet. A moth left alive in the den, maybe others. I'll catch one in my hands, I'll take it home, fluttering around the cabin of my car. It will die soon, a mess, but I will have it until then.