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'BE THERE FIRST THING'

**Emily Vanderploeg
(447080)**

**Submitted to Swansea University in fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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SUMMARY (Abstract)

This thesis is a work of creative fiction accompanied by a critical/reflective essay. The dissertation is a novel (*Be There First Thing*) comprising thirteen chapters, each in the style of a short story, that give glimpses into the life of the protagonist, Lily Sled, beginning when she is eleven-years-old and ending when she is near thirty-years-old. The first seven of these chapters are set in southern Ontario, Canada, while the last six are set in and around Swansea, Wales, employing a juxtaposition of place and the theme of the foreigner via linguistic and cultural similarities. The structure of this novel is similar to a Composite Novel, as it consists of story-like chapters, yet these stories are not autonomous, thus it is more closely aligned with the Bildungsroman genre, employing the technique of vignettes to illustrate the coming of age of the protagonist, while functioning as a novel of development. The accompanying essay seeks to analyse both the writing process and the literary significance of the novel itself.

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DISSERTATION

'Be There First Thing'

CHAPTER 1

Grackles

The grackles are nesting. Or, at least, that's what I tell my Grandpa. Right now there are seven grackles eating voraciously at the feeder. The little, pretty birds – nuthatches, cardinals, chickadees – are waiting patiently in the shadowy boughs of the spruce trees that form a glen outside our kitchen window. Gramps says the food is meant for the little birds: grackles are greedy, they'll clean out the feeder in a day.

But secretly, or perhaps, not so secretly, I am on the grackles' side. Why shouldn't they be allowed to feed here too? I accuse Gramps of bird discrimination. He grumbles.

It has started to rain. The birds are always hungrier when it's raining. The little ones are twittering now, venturing out from the safety of the evergreens. They battle for a place to feed, but are flummoxed by the scrappy grackles, their black feathers frayed with a sinister teal-blue sheen. I stare at their yellow eyes, darting wildly and looking over narrow shoulders. Their sharp beaks peck at the sunflower seeds as though this is their last meal.

Gramps and I are sitting at the kitchen table, drinking hot chocolate. He holds out a shortbread cookie to me; *sablé*, he calls it, and keeps watching the birds. We both perk up when a goldfinch appears. So rare and yet so common, according to our book, *Birds of North America: Southern Ontario, Western Quebec, and Northern New York State*.

The goldfinch seems to float in the air, hovering like a hummingbird. We are mesmerized. The chickadees sing, *chicka-dee-dee-dee*, and then out of nowhere, Georgina, my orange tabby, leaps into the air, paws extended, and snaps the goldfinch in her mouth. “*Merde!*” mutters Gramps. The other birds, bold grackles included, scatter. Georgina sits triumphantly beneath the feeder. Droplets of rain glisten on her thick fur. Her whiskers twitch; a mouthful of yellow feathers. She looks up at us through the window and gives us a Cheshire grin.

“D’at cat of yours is a devil.” Gramps scowls at Georgina through the window.

“She can’t help it,” I say quietly, looking at the table, “it’s her nature.” I drop

more marshmallows into my cup, poking the dry, dusty white pillows so that they are submerged in the warm, milky chocolate. They begin to melt and I lick my fingers. Gramps looks at me then, but I stare into my cup, my cheeks flushing pink. Out of the corner of my eye, through the screen of droplets on the glass, I see feathers fluttering on the wet grass, a flash of red soaking the down.

I'm waiting to ask about my Grandma. Nan, Mum calls her. I've been waiting for an opportunity since Wednesday, when Jane and I found the shoebox. Gramps slurps from his mug; I pounce.

"Where's Nan?" My eyes widen with expectation.

Gramps looks up at me, his eyes glassy. His brows are knitted; two furry grey caterpillars over deep stormy seas. "Nan?"

I wish I hadn't asked. The lines in Gramps' face have deepened into brown ruts and crevices. He puts down his mug. Rain spatters the window as the wind picks up outside. Georgina has moved beneath the spruces, shielded from the rain and washing her face.

"Nan went back to Wales." He presses his lips firmly together. The prickly grey stubble on his chin seems to stand on end, warning me off. Gramps gulps down the rest of his cocoa and his chair scrapes loudly on the floor as he stands up. Georgina is gone, seeking out better shelter from the rain, but the grackles are back. The remains of the goldfinch – purple entrails, a flash of white bone, yellow feathers, half-red – disappear into the grass under the pattering rain.

The rain has turned to wet snow. This is always a shock in early April, even though it happens every year. I think it has something to do with how spring looks on television in countries I've never been to. Jane and I are in our fort – a warm cove behind her bed where the wall slopes down to the floor. For important meetings, we push the dresser aside and hang the thin blue blanket with the hole in it (for peeping out) over the back of the headboard. We keep all of our secrets in the fort; this is one of the pacts of our twin-hood.

The shoebox is between us on the floor; while next to it the flashlight shines upwards, giving my sister's face a feverish, shadowy glow. She puts a finger to her lips and lifts the lid off of the box. We were in the basement looking for supplies for our raft

when we found it next to a pile of old paint cans. At first glance, it seemed to be filled with just a bunch of old photographs, a few letters and newspaper clippings, now just brittle, yellowed paper. But as we sifted through the contents, I imagined us as a twin pair of Nancy Drews, sleuthing in tandem, and I went prickly all over when we found the Polaroid of Nan. Jane and I agree that it would have been better hidden in the leaded glass cabinet where all the other photo albums are, but we're glad it wasn't. No one will notice it's missing. Looking through it now, I touch the papers lightly with the tips of my fingers. There's a picture of mum on a pony: *Carole, Dawn Horse Show, 1959* is scrawled on the back. We like this one because our mother is terrified of horses. There's another of Gramps in his uniform from World War Two; he's standing with a goat – *Jean-Marie et "Baptiste", Les Van-Doos - Cardiff, 1942*. That's how we found out his name isn't just "Jean". But these are nothing compared to the Polaroid: Nan is on a merry-go-round at what looks like Centre Island, but is actually in Wales: *Gwyneth, Ynys Barri, Gorffennaf 1985*. She has short, fluffy blonde hair and she's wearing a pink tracksuit. She's laughing. So, this is The Mystery: Mum's always said that Nan died before we were born – our birthday is June 21st, 1983. Nan went back to Wales. Nan is dead. Nancy Drew would tell you – the facts do not add up.

I crack open a can of orange pop when it fizzes a bit and we both squeal, afraid it will spill onto the photographs. We freeze when our bedroom door creaks open.

"What're you girls doing in there?"

It's Mum. Jane kicks the shoebox under the bed and I try to hide the can in my lap, just as Mum pulls back our blanket curtain.

"Mum!" Jane shouts hotly, "This is our private fort!" She pouts and I twist around to look at our mother, contorted by my cross-legged position.

"Who said you could have a can of pop, eh?"

Busted, I hold the can out to Mum. She shakes her head and says we can have it, but no more this week. The blanket falls back into place and Mum exits the room, leaving the door ajar. Jane and I both sigh before I crawl out of the fort and cross the room, leaning hard on the door so it shuts with a bang.

By now our investigation is in full swing. We've written down all of our

findings in our special book and our first line of questioning – with Gramps – is out of the way. Even though I’m eager to find out what happened to Nan, I don’t really want to be the interrogator again. I’ve had that funny, sick sort of feeling in the pit of my stomach ever since I asked Gramps where Nan is. It’s almost like I feel guilty, but I don’t really know what I’ve done wrong. And another thing is, there’s this creeping feeling going up my back too, like I’m being watched, or I’ve stuck my foot in my mouth, only I don’t think I said anything that bad either. All I know is something doesn’t feel *right*.

Jane and I find Mum in the kitchen. She looks up at us from her cooking as we enter the room. Janey looks at me sideways as we sit down at the kitchen table. It seems to me there are too many eyes on me right now so I lay my chin on my hands atop the marbled yellow melamine and watch Jane at work.

“Muum?” Jane draws out her question in her best innocently inquisitive voice. I’m only half-aware that she’s doing this voice on purpose; my sister has always been craftier than me. “Will you tell us about when we went home?”

Mum smiles. That’s what Mum calls Wales, *home*, even though she’s always lived in Ontario. She likes to remind us that we’re Welsh, so sometimes we have to sing *Calon Lân* to her on Sunday afternoons. When we were two we went as a family to Wales—the only time we’ve ever left Canada. Jane and I don’t remember it, so we ask Mum about it to make her happy sometimes.

The snow and rain have stopped and now the low sun is filtering through the kitchen window, making Mum’s hair shine like a golden halo. The way she has it cut, the same length all around, dyed blonder than ours, curled and teased out, makes her look like Nan in the picture. It occurs to me that we could just show her the Polaroid, but my sister and I are both aware, somehow unspeakably, that we must be subtle in our sleuthing, especially after my earlier ambush of Gramps. Mum is rolling a meatball between her palms. She does it with a smooth rhythm that makes her rings click together through the mushy sound of the hamburger. Watching her makes me want to put my hands into the bowl of raw meat, to sink my fingers in and roll it up so that I look just like her.

“We went home, to Swansea,” Mum begins as she always does, “and you girls

were so good on the planes and trains you didn't cry once – though you did try to make friends with all your fellow passengers!" She laughs and I think of wind chimes. Janey and I smile at each other. Our Mum. This is how we like to think of her, always. "And we went to Nan's old house, we did, and had cockles and laverbread," we both scrunch up our noses at this point in the story, as is customary, sticking our tongues out even though we don't really know what those things are, "and Lily loved them both!" We don't believe her, but she always says it. "Then we went to the beach and Janey ate sand!" Again, we feign disbelief, but urge her to go on. "And we all paddled in the sea." Mum's speech always changes when she tells the parts of the story that happened in Wales. She'll never, ever say we waded in the ocean, even though that's what we did. There's a picture of Jane and me holding hands, with our feet buried in the wet sand, cut off at the ankles of our bare, chubby little legs. Dad says anything to do with Wales makes Mum put on a fake accent. She always strongly denies it and says she's just talking the way Nan did, but she never turns Francophone like Gramps.

The story is usually longer, but Mum has trailed off and is now rummaging through the fridge. We can only see her bum, and the word 'rump' pops into my head. I try not to laugh as she bends over more, searching for something. She's wearing a long purple wool dress and pantyhose, but her tiny feet – she wears incredibly small shoes, barely bigger than ours – are tucked into green velvet Isotoner slippers. She re-emerges holding a bottle of ketchup.

"Muumum?" Jane has a shrewd look on her face, full of concentration. It makes me feel slightly afraid, but I don't know why. Mum looks up at her, her eyebrows raised in expectation. "Was Nan there when we went to Wales?"

Mum stares at Janey, the ketchup bottle still clutched in her hand and suspended in the air, as if she's forgotten what it's for. Her mouth parts briefly and we wait for her to say something, but then she shuts it firmly and the same lines that appeared on Gramps' face earlier now cloud her own. The sun has moved and she is no longer our angelically illuminated mother, but instead just tired and frumpy in her purple dress covered with the stained Crown Royal Rye apron hanging slightly askew around her neck. Dad appears in the kitchen and we all look at him as though we're confused. His presence in any room has always felt like a surprise.

He looks from Mum to us and says, “Why don’t you girls go play by the crick for half an hour? Mum’s trying to cook supper.” Mum is annoyed now, and won’t look at us. She’s started poking at the meatballs with a wooden spoon in the electric frying pan and fat hisses and spits angrily up at her.

“How come you say crick and not creek?” Jane asks, trying to buy time. We giggle.

Mum exhales heavily and looks up at us sharply, “What’s the difference?”

That’s when we realise Mum says ‘crick’ too. Sometimes we forget that Mum and Dad are from the Boonies. Later we’ll decide that she was probably embarrassed, because she’ll give us real tomato sauce with the meatballs for dinner, instead of just ketchup.

Desperate to escape the weighty stares of our parents, we scramble out the back door, running down the slope towards the wild land where the creek lies.

Mum would prefer we didn’t play down here on our own, but she probably forgot after what happened in the kitchen. Dad doesn’t usually have authority over what we do, so his telling us to play outside was unexpected. Once when we were playing down here, Janey said she thought she saw Mum spying on us from the house, but I never saw her. I think my sister is paranoid.

As we skip down through the long, wet grass, I’m eager to discuss *The Mystery*, but suddenly Janey doesn’t seem interested. She snaps at me, “I don’t want to play that right now!” and pouts, stomping ahead of me to get to the water first. I feel oddly left out, even though there’s only just the two of us. Out of the corner of my eye I see a flash of orange and I realise Georgina has been following us. She skulks smoothly through the wispy, pale pampas grass that separates our lawn from the scrub and I remember why we love coming down here. Lately, we’ve been playing ‘*Anne of Green Gables*’. With the exception of the ‘Drunk on Raspberry Cordial’ scene, which is enacted in the living room when we’re home alone, we play this game exclusively down by the creek. We think it’s a romantic setting, even though right now there are only red buds on the trees and the shrubs are still mostly leafless and winter-brown. This afternoon, though, everything looks wistful – like a memory of spring, rather than the

real thing. This game, as well as our occasional covert Barbie-sessions, is our second most carefully guarded secret and part of the pact of our twin-hood, which mostly involves things that we don't tell anyone about at school.

The raft we've been working on is for the 'Lady of Shalott' scene. Jane has been insistent about being 'Anne' because she's desperate to pretend to almost drown and be saved by Gilbert Blythe (me). Jane's also desperate for a boyfriend, but she only shrugs when I say that. I wish I could be Anne, but Janey won't let me and I just don't see much point without an actual Gilbert to rescue me anyways. Ideally we'd have two boats like in the movie, but we're still pretty proud of our raft, which is made out of a few old planks we lugged down here from the shed, dry sticks, rope and nails we found in the basement. It's meant to sink eventually to enable the big romantic rescue, so fingers crossed it'll actually float first.

Jane always gets to be the best people. She's always 'Anne', except when we do the Cordial scene, when she's Diana Barry, because Diana is the one who gets drunk and Anne just gets in trouble. Normally she says Diana's fat, so she doesn't want to be her, but I said she only was kind of fat in the movie and it's probably just the dresses they have to wear. The truth is Jane hasn't read the books, she only pretends she has. Otherwise she'd know Diana is considered the most beautiful and then she'd change her mind.

I catch up to Janey and she's not angry anymore, but I can tell she doesn't want to talk about Nan, so we get ready to launch the raft. We've hidden costumes under a milk crate that we stole from the garage. Jane does most of the stealing, though; I don't really have the nerve. I pull on an old brown and grey striped sweater vest that I found at the bottom of Dad's closet. At least, I think it's old. It might just need a wash, but Dad isn't the type to notice if things have gone missing. My pink turtleneck sweater and jeans with patched knees that I'm wearing underneath kind of spoil the effect – not to mention my 'cool', but Mum won't let me dress grungy. I think she's afraid Jane and me will start doing drugs or hang out in the parking lot at *Tim Hortons* when we're teenagers – but I'm happy with how it looks when I put on one of Gramps' old-man-caps. "Hey, Carrots!" I say, and wink at my sister, tipping the brim of my hat. She smirks at me and shoves my shoulder. Normally she'd laugh and become Anne, all

huffy and interested. I don't know what I've done wrong.

Jane pulls on a long, white, flannel nightgown over her clothes. She looks sufficiently old-fashioned and romantic in a billowy sort of way, even though it hangs over her like a tent. We found the nightie in a box in the basement marked '*Dillad Gaeaf*', whatever that means.

"Ready?" Janey asks and grins. I nod and help her drag the raft towards the edge of the creek. The twiggy branches from the dogwoods that line the stream flick at us and sting our cheeks, only just missing our eyes. I slip on the long grass that hangs over the edge of the bank, but catch onto a shrub and Jane reaches out to hold me back, narrowly preventing me from falling into the creek. Jane and I squat down next to the water and each hold onto the corner of the raft. It bobs and we're both pleased and surprised that it actually floats.

"Okay, you go down to the bridge and I'll fall off the raft after I pass the willow tree."

"Okay!" I say breathlessly and run up the creek a ways, startling a couple of grackles that launch themselves off the spindly branches of a Manitoba maple.

There is a small iron bridge, only slightly rusted, about twenty metres downstream. Between the bridge and where we are now, the canopy of a willow tree overhangs the creek and makes a secret room above the water. We love this spot, especially in the summer. We're very fond of secret places. The creek doesn't actually belong to us though, it just borders our property. Sometimes people come down here to walk their dogs, and once we found a condom wrapper in the grass by the bridge. It was after we told Mum that that she said she didn't like us playing down here. We found instructions too though, and that's how we learned what a penis looks like.

The brush around the creek is thick and overgrown, even though it's been flattened by the heavy snow over the winter. Reaching the bridge, I walk to the centre and lift an eyebrow as I tip my cap, practicing how to look smug and bemused like Gilbert. From here I can see that Georgina has climbed into the discarded milk crate, the soft orange tips of her ears appearing above the rim, while her sharp eyes peer through the holes in the hard red plastic, stalking the birds. Holding onto the iron railing, I lean as far back as I can and swing to and fro on the sandy wooden planks. My palms grind

against the cold rusty bar, flaking off burgundy paint that flutters down to pepper the toes of my shoes and sprinkle the water below like cinnamon. Hauling myself up again, I lean over the railing to look down at the flowing creek. Long brown grasses swirl beneath the surface like tendrils of mermaid's hair, while the water flows over itself like a never-ending Cat's Cradle. I could stare at it for ages, like when I watch Mum braiding Jane's hair after a bath. I imagine what it would feel like to dip my fingers into the flowing rivulets until I realise how cold my hands are from holding the metal railing and I rub my palms against my jeans to warm them up. Thinking about it now, I'm glad I'm not 'Anne' today. The wind is cold and I'm vaguely aware of how cold the creek must be too, though I'm not concerned enough to remind my sister. When we were little we used to play Billy Goats Gruff here, taking turns being the troll under the bridge. One time when I was the troll and Jane was being the big billy goat, she shoved me so hard I almost did fall off the bridge and I got so scared I couldn't breathe for about five minutes. After that, Jane let me hold the butterfly net the whole time when we were looking for tadpoles in the deepest part of the creek and she gave me her cookie after supper too, so I never told on her for shoving me. Leaning my elbows on the railing, it occurs to me that Jane is taking an awful long time to float down the creek. The rope-like boughs of the willow hang over the water like a curtain, churning their leafy tails in the current like snakes and I squint my eyes, trying to see her through the pale yellow switches.

"Janey?" I shout out, but there's no reply. I wait and call again, but still, just silence. Pacing back and forth on the bridge, I listen to the hollow sound my footsteps make, the echo reverberating off the surface of the water. Skipping and zigzagging along the boards, it occurs to me that I can't imagine Mum ever having been a child. I can't seem to imagine her in any other time or place at all, even though just today we were looking at that picture of her from when she was small. All of this makes me feel strangely frustrated, like Mum has done something wrong. I think again of Billy Goats Gruff and I wonder where we learned that story – did Mum teach us? Somehow I doubt it, and I can't remember her being with us when we played here, even though she must have been. My eyebrows are knit now like Gramps' and Mum's were earlier, as if there's something I'm missing that's right in front of my nose, when I'm startled from

my thoughts by the sound of a splash and a squeal downstream.

Gripping the railing, my knuckles turn white and I cup my hands around my mouth to shout, “Jane! Are you okay?”, but I can’t hear anything but the breeze. Thundering off the bridge, I believe for a moment that I have to get to Jane because the troll won’t let her pass and she’s about to be eaten up, so I run down the length of the slippery bank, my feet thudding on the half-frozen earth as the wet grass squeaks against my rubber-soled shoes. Jane is nowhere to be seen and I realise that she must be inside the willow room. I look at the thick trunk of the tree where the ropey branches turn and twist in the current and suddenly the creek looks much deeper than I thought. I call out for my sister again and there comes the sound of another splash. The wind is picking up and I’m getting frantic. I look west and the sky has turned red. Sailor’s Delight, I think, climbing the willow tree. Fixing the toe of my shoe into a knot in the trunk, I hoist myself up onto a sturdy bough and part the reedy leaves. My sister is floating face down in the water, not moving, the raft just beyond her, tangled in the willow’s swirling branches. I let out a scream and throw myself off the branch and into the creek and the water splashes around me, as though I were a flat stone being skipped across it. The nightgown billows around my sister, and her hair, the colour of mouse fur when wet, swirls in the current like the willow. I grab onto Jane by the arm and flip her over. She’s like a dead weight. My feet keep sinking deeper into the mud and I’m afraid I’ll get stuck, imagining quicksand in the clay. I shake Jane, shouting, “Open your eyes! Wake up! Wake up!” but she’s motionless, doing the Dead Man’s Float that we learned in swimming lessons, only by now she’s supposed to start her flutter kick. Her eyes are closed and her lips are so dark they’re nearly purple. I try to pull her to the bank, but I fall backwards and my feet sink deeper into the mud. The water is up to my chin sitting down and I start to cry. We are both about to die by drowning and no one will even find us because we’re inside the willow pool.

I try to pull my feet out of the mud, but I’m afraid of letting go of Jane in case she sinks, in case she’s already drowned and dead. I’m whimpering and my breath feels shallow, as if I might suffocate and my forehead prickles. The bad sinking feeling in my gut that I felt earlier today descends upon me again and it feels like I can’t breathe, like that time on the bridge, or when I’m about to throw up. Gripping Jane’s icy wrist, it’s as

if she's not even real – as if I'm looking at my own face, floating and frigid. But of course it is her, and I think about letting myself drown too so that I won't be alone, won't have to live without my sister. There's a rustling when the canopy parts and Gramps looks down at us, white-faced. "Gwyneth?" He says in a horrified whisper, staring at Janey in the billowing nightgown, when she thrashes and sprays a mist of water in my face from her mouth. She's laughing and splashing and I can't move, the mud rising in clouds to the surface around us as Jane cavorts beside me.

"Don't you think it woulda been better if Gilbert rescued Anne like *that?*" She's sitting in the water facing me now, making ripples with her laughter. Realising what she's done, I splash my sister in wordless rage. She splashes me back and then that starts it – we're flopping all over the place in a full-on splash and shove fight, unable to stand for the clay beneath us. We've forgotten that Gramps is here until the low rumble of his voice fills the willow room.

"*Arrêtez ça maintenant!*" Jane and I freeze in the water, staring up at Gramps. He's shouting at us in French and we pretend not to understand, but words jump out at us – *animaux, tabarnac, Gwyneth, Gwyneth, Gwyneth*. I'm shivering and Jane hugs herself in the sopping wet nightgown. Gramps is pointing at her and his face is red. I imagine steam coming out of his ears; the sound of a whistling kettle. When the tirade ends, he motions to us to get up and out of the creek. We wade towards the bank, leaving brown whirlpools in our wake and the water looks like chocolate milk as Gramps extends a hand to help us climb out onto the solid land in turn. He looks over his shoulder towards the house when we're finally out of the creek and we stand mutely in front of him, dripping. A bitter breeze hits us from the west and my wet skin feels frost-bitten. We glance at each other and then back to Gramps, unsure what to do next. Now that he's calmed down a bit, Gramps ushers us to the side towards the brush so that we're obscured from the view of the house. He doesn't want Mum to see us. I curl up my toes inside my shoes and feel the icy water on my skin, socks like sponges.

"Take off dose silly clothes and hide d'em." His command is firm, but also weary. I struggle out of the scratchy, sodden sweater vest that has now grown to twice its original size. Luckily I lost Gramps' hat before I even leapt into the water. Jane has slightly more trouble extricating herself from the giant nightgown. The flannel is heavy

and stiffening in the evening cold. The sun has fallen behind the spruces that surround our house, leaving only a distantly warm, rosy glow in the sky. It's oddly comforting to me, even as I watch my sister disappear inside her sopping flannel tent, and I realise why I like the red sky so much – it looks like the beginning of *The Raccoons*. Gramps leans forwards to help pull the nightgown over Jane's head, but his upper lip curls in what seems like disgust as he pinches the wet fabric between his thumb and forefinger, letting go of it as soon as Jane's head re-appears. I pick up the sweater vest and Jane finds the now-empty milk crate. We ball up the clothes and throw them in, then hide the milk crate next to the willow.

“Come on,” Gramps says. As we follow him up the slope towards the house, I notice the grackles. There are tons of them, twenty or thirty, peering at us from the half-barren, half-budding branches of the trees. The grackles are silent, though their heads move with us, slowly watching our progress, and I'm not so sure if I'm still on their side. Following behind us at a steady, wary trot, is Georgina, her ears pricked up and alert. We start heading towards the back door, but Gramps holds a finger up to his lips and waves us around the side of the house. When we reach the front veranda, he retrieves a key we never knew about from under the porch and opens the front door, which we normally never use. Georgina bolts inside ahead of us and we're met by the warm, salty smell of fried meat and potatoes that makes my stomach twinge. Later, we'll mark down the location of the key in our notebook. Following closely behind Gramps, we creep up the stairs to the dark hall. Our shoes make squelching noises and Gramps turns around to shush them, even though they're only shoes. He leads us into our room, which smells even more like meatballs because it's right above the kitchen, and closes the door behind him once we're inside.

“Trouble makers today,” he says and we both look down at our feet. Our clothes are streaked with mud and our stringy hair is sticking to our cheeks. “You better not let your mother know what you did with Nan's nightgown.”

Jane and I look at each other. She raises an eyebrow, but I look away from her. Just because we're in this together, doesn't mean I've forgiven her. We're waiting for something big to happen, some more of Gramps' wrath. It's his disapproval that we fear the most, even though we're all pretending Mum is the one whose scolding we need to

avoid. But there is no punishment, either now or later. “Now wash up and change, quickly. I went to de creek to tell you, *dîner* is almost ready,” Gramps says, his gruffness waning. He leaves the room and we peel off our heavy, wet clothing in silence, throwing it in a dirty sopping pile on the floor. Jane keeps looking at me, but I’m ignoring her. We get clean clothes out of the dresser and hold them against ourselves as we streak quickly from our room to the bathroom.

Mum yells from downstairs, “Supper’s ready!” but it comes to us faintly and I wonder if we’ve actually heard her. I’m still avoiding my sister, but the large bathroom mirror won’t let me escape her for long. We’re wiping black bits and streaks of dirt off of our skin and out of our hair with damp washcloths. Actually getting in the shower would tip off Mum that something is up, so we do our best like this.

“I thought it was funny,” Jane says finally. She’s rubbing her arm with the washcloth, looking at me sideways.

“I didn’t,” I say back and sit down on the toilet seat lid to put on my socks. She stares at me through the mirror and I stare back, really looking at her now. For the first time I see Jane as someone other than my twin sister. She is not my reflection. She looks nothing like me. At school most people can’t tell us apart, but that makes no sense to me now. As I stare at her and look at her body and the features of her face, I recognise them as familiar, but not identical to my own. They are familiar because they belong to my sister, but they are not mine.

We dress quickly and trundle down the stairs and into the kitchen. Mum, Dad, and Gramps are already at the table eating. The lights are on now and the whole room glows yellow, while outside the dusk creeps up towards the windows, the spruces black silhouettes against a periwinkle sky.

“Your food is probably cold by now,” Mum says.

“Sorry,” we say in unison.

“Well,” she says.

I look at Gramps, but he’s staring straight ahead into the distance. I wonder what he told them we were doing? I give up and turn to my plate.

Dad says, “Did you girls have fun at school today?” We both look up at him and wait. He looks confused.

“It’s Easter Monday,” Jane says. “No school.”

Dad looks perplexed. Everyone at the table is silent.

With a mouthful of potatoes I say, “Where’s the ketchup?” and Mum sighs heavily. Dad puts his hand on her wrist and Jane and I give each other the faintest of eye-rolls, allies again.

“May we be excused?” Jane says, but no one answers, so we pick up our plates and move to the living room to watch *Wheel of Fortune*. Gramps soon follows and as we lie on the floor in front of the T.V., we are each pelted in the head by a cold meatball. Turning around we see Gramps grinning, his grey teeth shiny from the glow of the T.V. set.

“D’ere,” he says, “Your punishment.”

CHAPTER 2

Blue Suede Skates

We're playing Clue at the kitchen table when Dad interrupts us. He hovers in the doorway; clears his throat; taps his fingers against the cream-painted molding before he speaks. "Hey girls, how would you like to come upstairs and see Mum?"

We wouldn't like it at all, actually. We'd much rather stay here drinking ginger ale, figuring out who murdered Mr. Body, but it's not so much a request as it is an obligation. Jane puts down the dice and our chairs scrape loudly on the floor as we stand up. Dad winces. I look over my shoulder at the game board and half-eaten *Jos. Louis* next to my place and sigh. An image I saw once of an abandoned doll on a swing at Chernobyl crosses my mind and we follow Dad quietly, though the creaking stairs announce our approach. He hangs back so that we can enter the dim room ahead of him but apathy, or maybe dread, keeps us loitering in the hall. Grinding our sock feet into the carpet, we study the tiny pink flowers on the wallpaper with great interest.

"Well? In you go..." Dad looks at us with watery, pleading eyes. I sigh and Jane picks at her fingernails. There is an orange fur ball in the corner by the banister. Georgie is so soft. I wonder how much fur it would take to make a wig or a blanket. I bet we could sell it and market it as Angora cat. Dad places light, shaky fingers on our shoulders and gives us both a gentle nudge. As we enter the room, I can hear the low purr of Jane's cords rubbing together as she walks. Mum is in bed facing away from us, not sleeping. She's staring at the half-drawn blind on the window, or maybe the dark tops of the snow-covered spruces outside. I can see her wispy eyelashes blink slowly, once, twice.

"Give Mum a kiss, girls," Dad says, gently urging us again with a light hand on our upper backs, but we don't move, not just yet. I stare out the window too, trying to see what she sees, willing her to turn and face us, yet knowing that she won't. I don't want to know this. It all seemed so different when we were younger – the whole ritual was more delicate, more ominous. But now that we're thirteen, each visit carries a sort of lumbering gloom, not unlike our own adolescence. Everyone in here is taking up too much space.

The room smells stale, but also like Mum's perfume – *Arpège*. You can only get it in France now. The bottle is on the dresser collecting dust and the perfume inside is a peachy pink through the clear glass, the only colour in the room. Everything else, our mother included, exists in a monochrome of white, cream, and grey. It reminds me of those nature documentaries, like when antelopes abandon the lame ones in the herd and leave them to the lions. The thing is, they're not just left behind because they weaken the rest, but also because they don't belong anymore.

These spells happen every nine months, or so, but Mum doesn't notice the pattern. Seeing our mother like this makes me feel sick, or maybe just frightened. I'm not sure if Jane is afraid too, but I do know that she shares my consuming dread. Sometimes when we're falling asleep, I hear my sister's bed creak, so I make space for her and we *cwtch* up and she'll say, "How long now, Lily Marie?" and even though I want to say, " 'Til what?", I just shake my head and say, "Dunno, Jane Marie", and it makes it easier to go to sleep. I don't tell my sister, but I am convinced that our mother is dying.

Jane and I walk around the bed so she can see us. Her eyes are swollen and red. She looks like she has a sunburn on her cheeks, but we know they're just chapped from crying. She reaches out her right arm towards us. I take her hand, which is clammy and warm, but I don't move any closer to her. She holds it tightly. She looks to Jane, but my sister won't go near her. Jane takes a step back so that she's almost pressed against the wall. The room is still; there are two dead moths on the windowsill. Dad watches everyone and I imagine he's about to start wringing his hands.

"I hate you, Mum."

Jane's voice is low and hoarse. Her eyes are flashing. Mum drops my hand and I stand with my mouth open, staring at the carpet. She squeezes her eyes tight, but tears escape them. Jane runs out of the room and I wish I had the guts to do the same. I look at my father and he looks weak and tired, like the wind has been knocked out of him. I think he might cry, which scares me even more than the state of my mother.

I watch my parents, aware that I'm seeing something I don't understand. No one speaks. It's as if this moment has been muted, like when we're watching a show on T.V. that Gramps doesn't like, so he presses the button on the remote to make his opinion

known. I am transfixed, as my father climbs onto the bed in all his clothes and lies down beside my mother. He turns to her and I watch as his body fits into the shape of her back like a missing puzzle piece, before putting an arm over her and pulling her closer. She takes his hand and holds it tight to her chest. They are completely unaware that I'm still here. I leave the room like a phantom.

My sister is sitting cross-legged on the floor behind Gramps' armchair in the living room. She's doing her Balinese meditation – sitting and smiling and concentrating on smiling until you feel happier. I tried it a few times, but it made my cheeks ache and my bum go numb. Janey says I'm just not enlightened yet. I think she's full of shit. I'm not the one who just told our mother I hate her.

Kneeling on the armchair, I peer over the back. "Happier yet?"

She opens one eye and cocks an eyebrow to scowl at me. "Yes, actually. Wanna finish our game?"

"Okay," I say, "even though it was Professor Plum in the Billiard Room with the Candlestick."

Normally she'd be mad at me for giving it away, but she already knew the answer too. Clue isn't a very good game to play with only two people. Jane looks at me seriously now and I rest my chin on the back of the chair. The words we can't speak hang between us and perhaps if we were different people this would be called an awkward silence. As it is, though, neither of us wants to summon up the dread that has permanently settled in the pits of our stomachs because today we might choke on it. Our teachers often joke that we share a brain, and sometimes I think we do. Unspoken conversations are one of the best parts of our twin-hood. But other times, like just now upstairs, her thoughts are as unreadable to me as a stranger's.

"We need new skates," Jane says.

"I know," I say, almost apologetic. How do we ask Mum to take us to Art's Shoe Repair? Again, there's no need to speak aloud.

We've been invited to a skating party tonight. Our whole Grade Eight class is going to be there and afterwards, rumour has it, Michelle Thomas is having a make-out party in her basement. Jane is excited about it, but I'm terrified. I saw one of those on *Full House* once and it looked awkward and gross, like most things on that show: lots of

kids with braces and too much confidence making smacking noises on floral chesterfields. Maybe Jane can impersonate me and tell me how my first kiss goes. Besides, there are decidedly slim pickin's in our class, boy-wise. Thinking about it all makes me cringe more than I did when Dad and I watched that episode of *Degrassi Junior High* together when Wheels almost got molested on his way to Port Hope. Still though, I'm too curious to skip it – I'd hate to miss out on some gossip, at the very least. So, first things first, we need skates. We've grown out of the ones from last winter and we need to go to Art's a.s.a.p. before all the good ones are gone. Normally we'd ask Gramps to drive us, but he's not supposed to until he gets new glasses. It takes five minutes for it to occur to us to ask Dad.

Neither of us wants to go back into the bedroom. We make a list of ways to rouse our parents: banging pans with wooden spoons, slamming two doors at once, or asking Gramps to do it, (though he is conveniently outside trapping rabbits, or whatever it is he does in the bush). Eventually we decide to send in the gentle artillery – the cat. When Mum is bed-ridden like this, Georgina normally hovers outside the bedroom door. I've heard that animals can smell death, and I imagine the cat giving me a signal one day, like a *Bewitched* whisker twitch as if to say, "Today's the day." So far, I haven't seen any signs, so I feel sort of safe. Georgina is sleeping on top of the heat duct outside the bedroom door. She's generally very limber and cooperative, so when I pick her up, she purrs luxuriously before I launch her into the room and onto the bed. She lands on Dad's leg, claws out and with a surprised 'meow', and both parents wake with a start. Mum looks at me briefly but quickly closes her eyes again, which feels like a jab in my ribs. Georgina starts kneading the bed clothes like bread dough, turning in circles to find a comfortable spot to settle. I avoid looking at the cat's whiskers, just in case. If today's the day, I don't want to know. I want to go to the skating party.

Jane stays out of view by the banister, so it's up to me.

"Oh good, you're up," I say brightly. "Dad, we need to go into Dawn to get new skates." I hover by the doorframe, just like the cat. Dad looks at me, blinking groggily, trying to comprehend what I'm saying.

I help his brain along. "So, we need you to drive us to Art's Shoe Repair... so we can trade in our old skates...and you can pay for the rental...please?"

“Can’t you ask your Grandpa?” He says, sitting up. The bed groans, but it seems like it’s Dad’s body creaking, ready to break.

“Gramps can’t, remember?” Jane says sharply from the hall.

Dad sighs. Sometimes it seems like Jane is taunting him, daring him to chastise us, or to talk to us about our mother’s “bad times”. But he just gets up from bed and says, “Okay, get your coats on. I’ll be down in a minute.”

In the car, Dad seems unsure about where he’s going. Jane and I are both sitting next to him in the front seat of the station wagon. It has wood panels on the doors that make me imagine we’re in an actual wagon; or maybe a sleigh since we have a red wool blanket over our knees because the heater’s busted. We roll slowly onto Cedar Street, Dawn’s cache of old Victorian storefronts preserved amidst the strip-malls. Tinsel angels and aluminum stars that are wired to the streetlamps glow against the dusky sky. Dad is having difficulty manoeuvring the wagon into a parallel park next to the snow bank. Jane hops out and climbs up onto the grey snow, motioning for him to stop and go. When the car is finally parked, he sighs with relief.

Jane and I reach the door before Dad does, sliding on the slushy, snow-covered sidewalk. A bell above the wood-framed door pings when we push it open ahead of our father. The dusty glass rattles in it as it slams behind Dad, accentuated by a final ‘ping!’. Inside the shop, we are immersed in a cloud of strong smelling rubber and shoe polish. The wood-panelled walls, never painted, are adorned by a ratty, fake cedar garland hung around the perimeter of the room, periodically punctuated by a string of outdoor lights and coloured glass balls meant for a Christmas tree. At the back of the shop, behind the counter, sparks fly above the loud grinding of the skate sharpening machine, while a row of puffy snowsuit-clad children sit on a low bench against the rough shop wall, yanking at their itchy scarves and swinging their sock feet in anticipation. My sister and I kick off our boots and squeeze onto the bench to wait, while Dad stands awkwardly with the other parents. We pretend not to know him, even though we obviously came in with him. Salty puddles form beneath our suspended sock feet.

Soon Art appears in his leather apron, holding aloft a pair of musty black hockey skates, their newly sharpened blades gleaming in the warm light. “Alright, who’s

next!?”

My sister and I are staring up at the myriad of skates in the square, wooden cubby-holes in front of us. The boxes are painted an oily, dingy cream, rising from floor to ceiling with strips of masking tape declaring size numbers in definitive permanent black marker. Half of the cubbies contain hockey skates, their scuffed, taped toes and knife-like blades looking dangerous and tough next to the rows of white leather figure skating boots. Jane and I both know which ones we want. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Dad shifting on his feet. He looks tired, but two fat ladies have taken up the bench reserved for parents. I feel sorry for him, but also annoyed; I shouldn't have to feel sorry for my father.

When Art finally reaches us, he claps us both hard on the back. Later we'll say that we could feel the sting through our down jackets. Even so, we like Art and we look forward to this ritual every year. He usually gives us a sucker.

“Lily Sled and Jane Sled. Why you wanna go skating when you're both toboggans?” Art laughs at his annual joke and we smile. He looks at Dad, pauses with surprised recognition and nods at him. Dad nods back, a silent and manly exchange. Jane and I will record this in our notebook later. Art turns to me first. “So, what size d'you wear?”

Art is sucking on a butterscotch candy. I can hear it clicking against his teeth and he smells like sugar and cooked onions. Instead of waiting for my answer, he eyeballs my feet and stands up to choose skates for us. I'm on the edge of the bench, watching Art's floating hand carefully. For the past eight winters I have longed to have only one pair of skates – some years they're not here, and I console myself by knowing my feet aren't big enough. But this year, I know they're the right size and I've been wishing every night for the blue suede skates. I've had visions of myself dazzling everyone with an Elvis Presley-themed routine. Kurt Browning would make a guest appearance as my skating partner and over the tinny PA the opening notes of 'Blue Suede Shoes' would silence everyone in the arena while Kurt and I take centre ice under a spotlight. We'd do flawless, synchronized triple axles in matching white sequined suits and by the end, Kurt would bow to me as I finished in a glorious layback spin! There would be raucous applause and faces filled with wistful respect. I'm so lost in it,

that I start when Art turns around. He's holding a pair of white, plastic-encased skates; the kind for children with weak ankles. I can hear Jane snicker and I swallow hard. I look up at my father.

"Well, Lily, what are you waiting for? Don't hold up Mr. Lawrence – try them on!"

I am silent and unyielding as my feet are stuffed roughly into the hideous skates. There aren't even any laces to tie, only clamps to snap around my ankles.

I stand up without even a wobble and Art says, "Perfect, eh?" He smiles up at my father and Dad smiles back, oblivious to my pain.

"As long as they fit!" Dad says with a jovial shrug. I miss Mum; even she would know how awful this is.

"Okay, take 'em off and we'll do your sister." Art unclips the plastic bindings and I yank the skates off my feet.

"I want hockey skates!" Jane pipes up.

I gape at her and plop down on the bench. "Since when?"

Art laughs. "You think you're a little boy, eh? Girls wear figure skates."

"No, I want hockey skates," Jane says again. My mouth feels like it's full of mud. Why can't I speak up like that?

"Janey, don't be rude. We don't have all day." Dad looks down at her admonishingly and Jane whips off her mitten and holds up three fingers to make a 'Whatever' sign at him. He looks perplexed and then shakes his head at Art, playacting the knowing parent.

Art shrugs and selects a pair of hockey skates. Jane extends her foot smugly like one of the evil stepsisters, but the skate won't go on. She frowns. I detect a plan behind her new desire, but I haven't worked out what it is yet.

"They're meant for boys," Art says, pushing himself up with one hand on his knee. He looks at Jane slyly and turns towards the shelves of skates. Without hesitating, he reaches for the Blue Suede Skates. I gasp involuntarily. They hang languorously from Art's pinkie finger by the tied-together laces, taunting me. Jane smiles.

"Try these," he says. Jane reaches out to touch them, her mitten swinging on its string by her wrist. I watch her stroke the suede on the toe of one skate and imagine it

feels both wonderfully soft and scratchy from years of wear in the wet and cold.

“Go on, Janey,” Dad says. Of course, they fit. I’m shooting daggers at Jane, but she ignores me. She knows I wanted those skates.

We’re at the cash and Dad’s paying and making small talk with Art. I can tell he’s starting to enjoy being out of the house, interacting with people other than Mum. He looks more alive than usual, which would be a relief if I weren’t seething with rage at my sister. I look up at the clock on the wall behind the counter – it’s nearly six, which means no time to go home to change our clothes or disguise my skates. I decide not to alert anyone to the time, since the plastic space skates and looming prospect of awkward kissing now seem even worse than being trapped in the house with Mum, watching re-runs in the basement with Georgina.

“Okay, Art, thanks again, eh!”

“No problem, Chuck. You’ve got two beautiful girls there.”

Dad smiles and I guess he’s beaming, but whether it’s with pride or embarrassment, I’m not sure. We head out to the car and when we’re all squashed in the front seat, Jane looks at the clock and says, “Dad, we have to go the rink now.”

He looks confused again. “Why?”

We wait, hoping he’ll remember.

“The skating party,” I say, sighing.

“Oh, right,” he says, trying to hide his uncertainty.

The newly sharpened blades of the Blue Suede Skates glint in Jane’s lap, reflecting the yellow beam of the streetlights outside. They smell like Gramps’ rawhide coat – ‘It’s worth the drive to Acton’, I think, and my scowl deepens. I’m waiting for Jane to show some remorse, but she just looks out the window, cradling the skates like a baby, while I sit cramped in the middle, with the plastic skates digging into what I imagine is my spleen. There’s a full moon rising and Christmas lights come on as we drive past. Dad is in a better mood and seems more competent on the road. I guess he feels useful. By the time we get there it’s completely dark out and the snow looks blue against the stark black silhouettes of the leafless trees.

As we pull up in front of the arena, there are some kids climbing the high-piled snow banks in the parking lot and a few parents smoking cigarettes outside. I decide

these adults must have been the ‘bad kids’ when they were in Grade Eight, which makes me feel both jealous and superior. I’ve never seen my parents smoke. Dad stops in front of the main doors and we get out. It seems like he’s about to just drive off with the door still open, so Jane says loudly, “Dad!”

He breaks and looks startled before turning to us. “Yeah?”

“Can you pick us up at eight-thirty? And then take us to Michelle’s?” We stare at him. He doesn’t understand this multiple parental chore.

“How about you phone me when you’re done?”

“Okay,” we both mumble, resigned.

We watch the wagon drive off slowly before turning to go inside the community centre. So we’re going to Michelle’s, according to my sister. Why isn’t she nervous? I’m acting like I don’t care either way, but still – I’ve always imagined parties being like in *Teen Wolf* when Michael J. Fox turns all wolfy in the closet with that girl and then shreds the back of her blouse. He’s Canadian, so I feel like it must be true. Anyways, I hope I don’t get locked in a closet with anyone – but it would be okay if Jane does because she wouldn’t be scared and then she could give me tips for when it’s my turn.

As we enter the community centre, I hug my skates to my chest, while Jane’s are slung over her shoulder. It looks cooler to have them on your shoulder, but mine don’t have any laces.

“Are you mad at me?” She asks, giving me a sidelong glance. I get the feeling she doesn’t actually care if I’m mad or not.

“No,” I say, staring straight ahead. I want her to feel guilty. “They’re just skates. It’s no big deal.”

“Good. I’m going to kiss Mark Van Dijk tonight.” She smiles to herself, thinking about something I don’t understand.

“Really? Like, French?” I’ve forgotten to be angry.

She rolls her eyes at me, but says, “Maybe, I dunno. I don’t want to get pregnant.” We nod to each other in agreement, even though we know better, thanks to the revolting Family Life classes at school.

“Guys! Over here!” It’s Katie; she’s standing by the snack bar with some of the other kids who are all eating hot dogs and chips and chocolate bars. I look at Jane and

she frowns; Dad didn't give us any money and we haven't had dinner either. How could we forget about the snack bar? As we approach my stomach pangs, desperate for some artificial food.

"You buying anything?" Katie says, her mouth full of potato chips.

"I'm not hungry." I look at Jane.

My sister says, "We just had supper," and Katie shrugs. She holds out her Coffee Crisp to me and I try not to look greedy as I chomp down on the hard, sweet wafers. Beneath the pennants hanging on the grey-blue cinderblock wall, Mark Van Dijk is chugging a can of Mountain Dew while the other boys egg him on. He belches then grins triumphantly, a fluorescent green tongue glowing inside his mouth. Jane actually looks impressed and my head hurts from rolling my eyes so hard. I catch Mark giving my sister a quick glance, which might be cool if the arrow-shaped pennant above his head didn't say *Midget Champs 1973*. The girls and boys stay segregated as we head en masse to the changing rooms down the hall, the boys ducking, pushing, and shoving each other along the way. As the girls stream into the rubberized room, we all hang up our coats on hooks and sit down in a row on the benches that line the perimeter. Apart from Jane and me, every girl has a pair of white leather figure skates, with fluorescent skate guards. They yank on their laces, pulling them tightly around the hooks, chatting and laughing absentmindedly. I try to be discreet as I clamp on my plastic monstrosities, tugging at my jeans in an attempt to hide them, but with no luck – with the skates on, I'm basically wearing flood pants. Jane laces her skates up, looking pleased. Sometimes I really hate my sister.

Most people are already on the ice. It's an evening free-skate, so there are a lot of people at the rink tonight. As my sister and I step gingerly onto the rink and make a wobbly start towards the middle, Michelle Thomas glides gracefully towards us with a breathless smile. Her cheeks are rosy and she's wearing an actual skating dress. It's bright pink with a ruffled skirt and sequins, and she has one of her older brother's university sweatshirts on over it. Her strawberry blonde bangs hang across her face beneath her fleece headband and even her cherry lip gloss is perceptible as she smiles. I don't understand how girls my age have already figured out how to look like that. I have a striped, bobble-topped toque on my head and I'm wearing the same Roots

sweatshirt as the three Jennifers in my class, plus my jeans are already going stiff with the cold. I look at my sister in her ear muffs and rainbow gloves and when she unzips her coat to reveal a sweater that she must have stolen from mum's stash of old, cool '70s clothes, I'm pinched with jealousy. Michelle looks at my skates, then turns to my sister.

"Are you coming to my party later?"

Jane says, "Yeah, we're coming. How late will it be 'til?"

"Oh, I didn't know you were both coming... but I guess that's okay..." Michelle bites her lip.

God, what an asshole thing to say, I think. I link my arm with my sister's and say, "Let's race around the rink. We'll see you after, Michelle."

"Actually, Lil, I don't feel like racing right now." Jane shares a look with Michelle and I feel confused, like I'm being battered from all directions.

"Oh..." I look up and out across the rink and see the portrait of the Queen staring down at me from above the Plexiglass. She seems to have one eyebrow cocked, as if to say, sucks to be you, eh? The vast arena echoes the shouts, clinking and scratching blades, and tapping hockey sticks around us. The boys in our class are staying at the other end of the rink. They're playing shinny and blatantly ignoring us. A few other girls from school appear and Michelle says, "Look at Lily's skates, you guys." I try to stand casually, and consider skating away, but there's no escape from them.

Another girl, one of the two Jessicas says, "No wait, what's up with Jane's?"

Someone says, "Didn't one of the teachers have those last year?"

I look down at my beloved skates, and then at my sister who is suddenly crestfallen. I want to tell those girls to fuck off, but I only have the courage to swear in my head. I don't feel that bad for my sister, though; now she knows how it feels.

"My Mum just bought me these. She says they're the kind the Olympic skaters wear." It's Michelle this time and she's digging the pick on her right toe into the ice to show off her skates to full advantage. The other girls smile with approval, relieved at such a show of normalcy and perceived wealth. We all resume skating, and I'm still smiling at everyone even though now I just want to go home. Michelle and Jessica are doing sit-spins. I imagine them drilling into the ice with their blades like a corkscrew and freezing cold water swallowing them up. I then imagine myself lying on the ice,

throwing out my scarf as a lifeline to save them; a picture of me and the Blue Suede Skates slung over my shoulder on the front of the Banner with *Local Heroine* emblazoned above me. But of course, under the ice there's just a concrete floor.

"Who wants to play 'Crack the Whip'?" Michelle is smiling cruelly, or at least it looks cruel to me. A chorus of "I do's" and "Me's" comes from the other girls and I hang back, even though Jane is right in among them.

"Lily, come on!" It's my sister. I stare at her; she knows I hate this game. What is she up to? "I'll go in the middle and you go on the end because you're the smallest."

"But you're the same size as me!"

"No I'm not, I needed bigger skates than you, didn't I?"

The girls assemble into a line across centre ice. My heart sinks as I link arms with the third smallest girl (my sister, the traitor, being the second) who seems oblivious to our imminent fate. Never have I wished more for a growth spurt than when we all start skating, slowly at first to start the momentum, then circling faster and faster, letting out thrilled and frightened squeals. The cold air rushes past my ears and I'm feeling shakier on my skates the faster we go. There's no give in the plastic casement and my ankles strain to bend as we curve, gaining speed. The click, click, scratch, slice of the blades on the ice becomes more rapid and then, as expected, someone in the middle digs in their picks and those of us on the ends of the pinwheel go flying across the ice. I slip awkwardly and then fall hard on my tailbone, finally coming to rest against the boards where the boys are playing shinny. I lean back into the scuffed, hard surface, treating it like an armchair and laugh for the benefit of the boys nearby and the girls who are all laughing too. I close my eyes briefly, and when I open them I see my sister across the rink. She's kneeling and facing away from us, her hand over her mouth. I start to get up when I spy red spots on the ice in front of her.

"Who wants to get hot chocolate?" Michelle calls out, but my eyes are fixed on my sister. I stand up painfully, clinging to the boards and push off, trying to manoeuvre through the other skaters to get to my sister. When I reach her, she looks up at me and I can see that she's trying not to cry, but when she takes her hand away from her mouth, her chin is covered in blood and two of her teeth sit in a sticky, red pool in the palm of her hand. Her shoulders shake and I put my arm around them, trying to pick her up.

Some of the others notice then and form a crowd around my sister, who is crying now, despite herself. Amid a chorus of “Oh my Gods”, Katie and I help her off the ice and to the change room, where we find some brown paper towels, wetting them in the sink for Jane to hold to her mouth.

“I’m gonna go call Dad, okay?” Jane nods and I totter out to find a pay phone.

In the lobby, balancing on my blades at the phone, I realise I don’t have a quarter, so I try calling home collect. With each ring my sense of dread rises. No answer. I try again twice, but still no answer. I wonder if they’re just not accepting the call from me, since they’re *never* not home.

I go back to the change room, where a semi-circle of kids has formed around my sister. She’s become both popular and fascinatingly repulsive, as some of the girls act deeply sympathetic, while others, like Michelle, squeal and recoil from the sight of blood. The boys seem to be in love with her, though they have no qualms about telling Jane she looks disgusting. Mark Van Dijk asks if she’ll show them her spare teeth and the other boys laugh. I push through them all and, kneeling down, whisper to Jane that there was no answer at home. “Maybe we should wait in the lobby?” I say, hoping Dad will show up at 8:30. She nods and I take the Blue Suede Skates off her feet for her and she yanks on her boots as the crowd parts like the Red Sea in *The Ten Commandments* to release us.

We’ve been sitting outside the community centre for over an hour. I guess we could’ve waited inside in the warmth, but we were afraid of missing Dad – and I was tired of us being a spectacle. I tried calling home five times, but still no answer. The bench is icy beneath us and Jane and I wave at the kids from school as they filter outside towards warm, waiting cars. They wave back at us with sympathetic shrugs. Jane still holds a wad of the brown paper towel against her mouth, even though it’s stopped bleeding. It hurts for her to speak, and without her two front teeth, she’s gained a painful lisp. Soon it seems like everyone has left and I have a horrible fear that we’ll freeze to death, sleeping all night on this bench. I look through the window at the clock inside; it’s nearly 9 p.m. and still no sign of Dad.

The side door of an idling Dodge Caravan slides open and Michelle Thomas pokes her head out. The light inside it reveals her mother motioning to her to go over to

us. She gets out of the van and clomps across the parking lot towards us. “My Mum says you should come with us ‘cause she doesn’t want to leave you guys here by yourselves... You can call home from our house, if you want.” I get the feeling she’d rather leave us on the bench, but her mother smiles at us from the lit oasis of the minivan.

“Should we?” I ask my sister, who nods, and we get up and follow Michelle to the car.

“Hiya, girls. How ya feeling, Jane? Hop in.” Mrs. Thomas smiles kindly. Even though I’ve met her before, I’m always surprised by how nice she seems compared to her daughter. Michelle slams shut the door of the van and we ride to her house mostly in silence, apart from Alanis Morissette wailing about irony from the tape deck.

The Thomas’ house is one of those newly built ones that looks like a regular pink brick subdivision house, but is way bigger, has three garage doors, and is sort of on a hill, so I guess they’re semi-rich people. The front yard is illuminated by red and green floodlights nestled in the snow, instead of normal Christmas lights, and there are fancy twigs shoved in planters by the door. Mrs. Thomas pulls the van into the garage and we head inside the house in single file. We kick off our boots on the mat and the smell of potpourri and clean laundry fills my nose. Everything is decorated in shades of peach, beige, and green.

“C’mon,” Michelle says, more resigned now to our presence. “Let’s go down to the basement.”

Her mother gives us a friendly smile before we descend downstairs, where there are already bowls of chips and cheezies and bottles of pop on a fold-out card table in the corner. Only half of the basement has been finished, with the pink fibreglass insulation showing between the studs in a dark part of the room. Old scraps of carpet cover the concrete floor, while a selection of old couches, each representing a past decade, are arranged around the room. I note that there are two closets with white shuttered doors, one beneath the stairs and the other in a darker corner of the basement, and shift awkwardly on my feet. Jane plops down on a couch miserably, while I eye the snacks. We don’t normally hang out with just Michelle, so this, combined with my sister’s swollen mouth, is totally weird and awkward. Michelle is busy smoothing out the

plastic table cloth and examining her pores in a mirror behind the table, when the doorbell rings and she scrambles upstairs. Jane and I both release our tense shoulders and exhale.

“I’m starving,” Jane moans.

“Me too. You wanna suck on a cheezie?” I hold out the bowl to her. She takes two and puts one on her tongue to let it dissolve.

With lisp and mouthful of cheezie, Jane says, “Where’s Dad?”

“I have no clue.” We look at each other. We know there’s more to say, but neither of us wants to put forth any explanations.

Everyone seems to have arrived at once and a minute later the basement is teeming with thirteen-year-olds. Without our outdoor apparel on, no one looks particularly dorky except, strangely, Michelle who still has her skating dress on, but because this is her house she retains her leader position amongst the girls in our class. Soon everyone is arranged on the selection of couches and on the floor, holding Styrofoam cups of hot chocolate. It’s been made with hot water in a metal coffee canister and I’ve burnt my tongue. There are no marshmallows – sub-par for a family who could surely splash out on milk at the very least. I’m sitting next to Katie on a scratchy brown and orange plaid sofa with a high, wood-trimmed back. This furniture reminds me of scary men with moustaches and too-tight jeans. I think it’s from a memory of when my Uncle Doug was really into Loverboy.

My sister is sharing a floral chintz loveseat with none other than Mark Van Dijk. They are both staring into their steaming cups, with my sister keeping her mouth clamped shut and occasionally pressing a light finger to her swollen upper lip. Someone puts on the ‘Big Shiny Tunes’ CD and Michelle grabs an empty glass pop bottle that had evidently never been returned to the IGA.

“Okay guys, everyone get in a circle.”

I can’t believe this is actually happening. It’s so eerily similar to the millions of games of Duck-Duck-Goose we’ve all played together at school since we were five.

“ ‘kay, now I’ll spin the bottle twice, and the boy and girl that it points at have to go under the stairs for seven minutes in heaven.” Michelle speaks authoritatively, like she’s experienced these seven heavenly minutes many times before. I bet she’s tried

smoking and knows what liquor tastes like too. Logically I want to be disgusted and feel superior, but truthfully I am somewhat in awe of this girl.

One of the boys mumbles, “What if it lands on two guys?” and another boy shouts through cupped hands, “Fag!”. Everyone laughs self-consciously, but all I can concentrate on is my newly acquired fear of small enclosed spaces.

As the bottle spins in slow motion, I scan the room for escape routes. It finally stops in front of Mark Van Dijk, who seems simply perplexed to see it rest in front of him. Momentary relief floods me as the kids all go, “Woooo,” like on *Saved by the Bell* when Slater takes his shirt off. Mark blushes, annoyed and embarrassed. Michelle reaches out to spin the bottle again and it stops in front of my sister.

She looks up, surprised, but then simply frowns. “I can’t,” she says, holding her hand over her mouth. Everyone seems to imagine the scenario, and right before Michelle goes to spin it again, someone says, “Hey, Lily, you go instead!”

Jane and I look at each other, incredulous, and I feel suddenly sick.

“We’re twins, you guys. We’re not, like, the same person,” I say, but before I even realise what’s happening, Mark and I are being pulled up from our seats and ushered into the closet beneath the stairs. We’re trailed by wild laughter before the door slams behind us.

It’s dark and musty in the closet; boxes and someone’s hockey equipment are taking up most of the space. Light filters through the shuttered door and Garbage croons eerily from the stereo across the basement, telling us to *dirty up our minds, get queer, strip off our veneer*, whatever that means. Mark and I try not to look at each other. The others have gone surprisingly silent, waiting, I presume, to hear me become impregnated.

Mark is standing stiffly. His hair – light brown curtains parted in the middle and grown to the tops of his ears – quivers slightly as he starts to speak.

“I... kind of like... yer sister...”

I realise then that he has no intention of settling for an imitation.

“Yeah... that’s cool...” I cross my arms and think of *Teen Wolf* with disappointment.

Seven minutes feels like an eternity. We’re startled after about three minutes

when one of the boys slams against the door. There's a chorus of laughing and taunting from outside. Mark plays with something in his pocket and I lean against the wall. We look at each other fleetingly and exchange a shy smile.

When the door finally bursts open, we squint and blink from the flood of light. Everyone else, apart from my sister, looks thrilled.

I know I'm blushing; I can't help it even though nothing happened. Mark just looks angry and goes to sit down next to my sister. I try to catch her eye, but she turns away from me. Everyone goes silent when the basement door opens suddenly.

"Jane? Lily? Your Grandfather's here to pick you up," Michelle's mother's voice floats down the stairs to us. We both jump up and say 'bye' quickly, then scramble up the stairs. Mrs. Thomas is holding our coats and she puts an arm around Jane's shoulder as we walk to the foyer where Gramps is waiting. His face looks drawn and tired and clouds with worry when he sees Jane's face. She runs up to him and hugs him and he tilts her face up with a finger under her chin. She slowly opens her mouth and he registers the sight, then strokes her head.

"Thank you for taking d'em 'ere, Mrs. Thomas. I only arrive at the arena at nine..."

"Oh, it was no problem. Glad we got a hold of you at last," she smiles again. I'm fixated by her face; her warm gentleness. We put on our coats and boots and say thank you, then head out to the car with Gramps.

As we pick our way down the icy walk, I say to Jane, "We didn't do anything."

"Yeah, right."

"It's not like I went in there with him on purpose!"

"You could've said no." We both know, though, after she's said it, that I couldn't have, not really.

"He told me he likes you."

She looks at me and I look back, imploring. She smiles faintly and we get in the car.

"Where's Dad? We tried phoning..." I say to Gramps, but he's staring straight ahead and hasn't started the engine yet. "What's wrong?"

"Your father is at the hospital. *Ton mère*, she had an accident..."

I can feel the blood drain from my face. ‘Today’s the day’, I think, and reach out to clench Janey’s hand. Our cold fingers entwine tightly.

“...she’s okay... she... will be fine.”

Neither of us is able to ask what happened.

“Do we have to go to the hospital now?” Jane lisps.

Gramps lets out a big breath. “Non, non, we’ll go home. Tomorrow we’ll see. But for now, bed, anh? Bed.” He starts the car and we all look straight ahead through the windshield. It’s started snowing, large fluffy flakes, and they collect on the glass as though they’re on the tips of our noses. I think of Michelle’s mother, of their warm, sweet-smelling house and I wish I could rewind the day, get into bed with Mum, remind her what it could be like if she woke up, stopped crying, took us to get nice skates, loved us more than this. Gramps puts the car into gear, flicks on the radio, and we roll down the snow-covered driveway while Jane holds my hand the whole way home.

CHAPTER 3

Bush X

“So there’s this guy and he’s got this, like, eye patch on,” Jane says, taking a shallow drag of her DuMaurier Light. She’s sitting on the window sill in our bedroom wearing orange, fleecy Mod-Robes and a Japanese anime scratch-and-sniff t-shirt. One of her feet dangles down, revealing a sock stolen from Dad, while the other rests on the lip of the dresser. She looks like she’s going to a rave, not that she’s ever been to one.

“An eye patch?” I squint one eye, sceptical. “Who actually wears eye patches, other than, like, pirates?” I pour a swig of vodka into my orange pop. The glass bottle clinks against the kitchen tumbler and I hold them tightly to my chest, a vain attempt to muffle the sound.

Sitting cross-legged on my bed in my new *Silver* jeans and white fun-fur zip-up hoodie, nervous excitement swirls in my belly, or maybe it’s just gas from the pop and liquor. All the Grade 10s are going to a bush party at Salamander Pond – or, at least, our friends and the boys that we like are going to be there. Jane is playing it cool, but I can tell she’s excited too.

“Uncle Doug wore an eye patch when he got his cataracts done.” Jane blows smoke out into the crisp October night air. It reminds me of cold days when we could see our breath, pretending to smoke invisible cigarettes.

“True,” I concede, sipping my drink, when there’s a soft knock at the door.

“Shit!” We both hiss at each other. Jane flicks her cigarette out the window and jumps down to the floor, kicking the pack under her bed, while I awkwardly tuck the mickey of vodka under my bum and hold the glass behind my back.

Another knock and the door opens. It’s only Mum. We thought it would be Gramps, ready to seize our smokes. Her blonde hair bounces slightly when she speaks. “What’re you girls doing in here? ‘Tee-hee’-ing about boys?”

We put on our best displays of angsty indifference, though Jane is standing awkwardly in the middle of the room. It strikes me that Mum and Jane look surprisingly alike right now; neither knowing where to rest their hands. Mum’s nose twitches and her eyes flit to the glass behind my back. I bring it out of hiding and take a sip, holding

her gaze like a challenge. We wait, and even strangely hope, for her to chastise us, but she just pulls her long grey cardigan around herself, her tired eyes easily giving up the staring contest. “So, what time are you planning on going out tonight?”

“Um, eight?” I look at Jane, who nods. “And can we sleepover at Katie’s after?”

She almost looks surprised that I’ve asked for permission. “Okay... after what?”

“Uh, what would you say if we asked you to drop us off beside a forest?” Jane says, pulling her fists inside her sleeves.

“A forest?”

“The one on Jubilee Road...”

“That conservation area?”

“Yeah.”

“Why on earth do you want to go there in the middle of the night?”

“Mum, it’s only seven-thirty...”

“It’s dark out.”

“There’s a bonfire!” I say, and they both look at me as if they’d forgotten I was here. I look into my glass. “There’s gonna be marshmallows.”

“Well,” she says, exhaling a long sigh, “alright.” She gazes past us at the night sky. “But Gramps will take you – I’ve had a long day.” She looks instantly weary. Then, as an afterthought she says, “Oh, and think of Smokey the Bear; there are a lot of dry leaves out there – safety first.” Jane and I look at each other, trying to decipher this parental advice. “And close that window. It smells like the neighbours are having a bonfire too.” Her nose twitches again, once.

“Sure, Mum.”

“Thanks, Mum.”

Her shoulders appear to droop as she turns, closing the door behind her. We listen to the stairs creak with her slow descent, waiting for her presence to leave us.

“Fuckin’ A, I thought it would be Gramps,” I say self-consciously. I still can’t swear as effortlessly as Jane has since we were twelve.

“Tell me about it,” she says, kneeling down to retrieve the cigarettes.

Her head is under the bed and I stick a foot out to bop her on the bum. The

smokes have laid to rest against a familiar, but long-forgotten shoebox.

“Whatcha lookin’ at?”

Jane emerges holding the pack of cigarettes, with a dust bunny in her hair. “Nothing,” she says, brushing it away, “Just kid stuff.” I shrug and sip my drink, watching Jane as she gets up to examine a tiny zit on her forehead in the mirror. She retraces black eyeliner around her hazel eyes, blinking slowly to reveal two harvest moons. Smoothing on shimmery lip gloss with her middle finger she says, “So, are you gonna make out with Rob Kowalski tonight?”

“Ha! I wish!” My cheeks flush and I gulp back my drink too quickly. Orange fizz tickles my nasal passage and I cough so hard my eyes water.

Jane smirks. “Remember when he used to smell?”

“No! He never smelled!” But I’m laughing amidst my protest and blushing even more now because it’s true; he did smell.

“Would you make out with Leonardo DiCaprio if he was wearing an eye patch?”

“Depends on what movie it is...”

“Fine. *Romeo and Juliet* or *Titanic*.”

“*Titanic*, no, barf. *Romeo and Juliet*, yes. Hot, if not hotter than the original.”

“Same. Your tongue’s orange.”

“Cool, let’s go.” I gulp down the rest of my drink, grimace, and then hop off the bed, landing with a slight sway. I put the vodka in a woolly sock and throw it in my bag, to join Jane’s already stolen-from-Dad beers. Jane tosses me the cigarettes and closes the window. On our way out, we both happen to glance back at the bedroom, eyes resting on Sublime and Spice Girls posters; stacks of tapes, CDs, and paperbacks; matching Cabbage Patch Dolls on our pillows, before Jane flicks off the light and shuts the door.

Gramps is letting the car idle on the side of the road where we’ve asked him to pull over. It seems like he’s about to say something, so we remain in the car, waiting stiffly. The only noise other than the ticking engine is the chomping of our gum. He’s peering out at the dark woods through the passenger window and his eyebrows are knitted so deeply together they almost meet in the middle. *Uni-brow*, I think. I’m wondering if he’ll actually just turn the car around and take us home.

“I would never ’ave let *ton mère* go into a forest at night like d’is...” He grumbles.

“Well, Mum said we could, so...?” Jane has slowly opened the latch on the car door and is inching her bum along the seat. Gramps makes a short, ‘harrumph’ sound.

“You telephone from your friend’s *maison*, anh?” We nod, nearly motionless on the brink of escape. “Oh, *un moment*, Jane Marie,” Gramps says, reaching into his breast pocket. “You forgot something...” He reveals a long cigarette butt, holding it out to us with the filter pinched between finger and thumb. “It was in the *jardin* below your window.”

“That’s not mine.” Jane blurts, averting her eyes from Gramps’ steady gaze. I’ve read that when people lie they always look to the left.

“Oh? *Non*, of course not, of course. See you in the *matin*,” Gramps smiles smugly, his dentures gleaming in the glow of a street lamp as he replaces the half-smoked cigarette in his pocket. Guilt hangs over us like a bad smell. “*A très bientôt, mes chéris!*”

I’m inching along the seat to exit the car, the bottles inside my bag bumping hard against my hip. I pray inwardly that Gramps doesn’t question the thudding weight of it, but he doesn’t seem to notice. Once we’re successfully out of the car, we wave at Gramps and he gives us a dismissive wave back, though he doesn’t drive off until we’ve disappeared into the dim entry to the bush. There is a path strewn with wood chips next to the brown and yellow ‘conservation area’ sign, though once within the dark canopy of trees, the path soon turns into hard-packed earth, nearly frozen and littered with dead leaves that crunch underfoot with a soft rustle, clinging to our cuffs.

We walk with arms linked in the inky dark, laughing and short of breath; tripping on unseen hazards and stumbling over each other’s feet. My sister’s face is a watercolour shade of blue and I consider how my own must look in the cool shadows. Our eyes seek out the glow of the bonfire that we know is hidden somewhere within the forest. Even though I’m eager to get there, somehow I don’t want this bit – just me and Jane – to end. Sort of like how getting ready to go out is sometimes more fun than the actual party. The shadows play tricks on us and we’re terrified we’ll accidentally walk into the pond, get a soaker, and be attacked by northern lizards, even though neither of

us have ever actually seen a salamander before. Jane trips on a rock and we both pitch forwards, laughing into hands cupped over our mouths.

“Careful! We’ll break the beer bottles!”

“They’re fine, they’re wearing socks!”

“Oh my God, I’m gonna pee!” We laugh harder and drag each other further along the path. An owl hoots and we pause, looking up through the rustling canopy of trees at the starry sky. When we hike over the crest of a small hill I can see the tips of flames licking up into the black night, illuminating the trees as the smell of smoke wafts towards us in the crisp air. I feel suddenly woozy, but we press on through the dry and dying ferns towards the light. As we enter the clearing, the trees appear taller than usual in the bouncing firelight; the towering columns are like an arboreal Stonehenge, and I imagine their canopies are looking down at us through the smoky air with both censure and amusement. There are about twenty-five teenagers milling about the clearing. Most of them are sitting on logs around the bonfire, or in groups sharing inside jokes and hard liquor. Someone is strumming an acoustic guitar, and amid its piecemeal soundtrack, a couple of boys are wielding a large, bushy branch above the fire. It’s green wood and won’t burn, so they give up and chase each other with it, glowing ash fluttering to the ground from the papery leaves as the boys squeal with newly broken voices, arching their backs to get away from the flames.

I feel short of breath and I wonder if I’m nervous, which is weird since I see these people every day. But there’s something about being outside of the school building at night that gives things an air of heady, wild abandon, or even danger. Anything might happen. I imagine grown-ups have this same feeling at office Christmas parties, like in the beginning of *Die Hard*.

“Jane! Lil!” Jess and Katie are running over to us.

“Oh my God, I’m soo gone!” Katie says, proud of her inebriation. She leans forward loosely and grins at us, slapping her thigh.

“How much have you drank?” I ask her.

Jess answers, “Just like a beer or four. Oh, and my brother Matt totally scored us some pot.”

“Sweet,” Jane says and I perk up.

“Matt’s here?” My face is illuminated by the fire, so no one notices my red cheeks.

“Yeah, him and his Grade Twelve friends thought it would be funny to come to a Grade Ten party. They’re acting all cool and nostalgic and shit. It’s so lame.”

We all turn to look towards the fire and through the flames. Sitting on a small rise of rock, Jess’ brother and his friends are passing a spliff and looking bored and ever-so-much-cooler than the boys in our grade.

“Matt’s so hot,” Katie says, staring with reverent lust.

Jess smacks her on the arm. “Shut up about my fucking brother! Gawd!” Jess spits when she speaks and we all laugh.

Reaching into my bag, I pull out the sock-clad vodka, as well as the cigarettes and a beer for Jane. We didn’t bring any pop, so I swig straight from the bottle.

“Let’s go talk to Matt,” Katie says, taking my hand and turning to smile mischievously at Jess, who sticks her tongue out at her. We make our way around the fire, awkwardly hugging and waving hi to people that we know, until we saunter up casually to Matt and his friends.

“Hey, Matt, my friends totally wanna bone you, eh?”

Matt looks up at his sister, his eyes sparkling in the firelight under dark eyelashes and the brim of his baseball hat. “Oh yeah? Is that, like, physically possible, Jessica?” He grins at me, and I want to say something witty and flirtatious, but my brain has gone to mush and I can’t even muster a single word. Instead I just suppress a smile and cast down my eyes, inwardly kicking myself.

“Shut up, Matt!” Jess says, playfully kicking some leaves at her brother.

“Um, Matt, can you open this for me?” Jane holds out her beer bottle to him and grins, cocky and helpless. Her harvest moons are glowing and I am both appalled and amazed.

Matt twists the cap off the brown glass bottle of Canadian and hands it back to Jane. While taking a swig, I swear she winks at him, and I actually feel sick to my stomach.

Katie says, “Fuck! Someone has marshmallows!” She grabs me by the wrist and drags me over to the fire. Looking back, I see my sister making a space for herself on

the rock next to Matt, while Jess stands jabbering at them.

Katie runs off to hunt for marshmallows, so I plop down on an empty log by the fire. I nestle the vodka bottle between my Vans and hold my hands out to warm them up, when Rob Kowalski appears and sits down next to me. Normally I'd be freaking out – he's my official 'like' – but I didn't know Matt McMillan was going to be here. I *like* like Matt. Matt! So what the hell is up with my sister? I take two gulps of vodka and shake my head involuntarily. Rob laughs and says, "Yer a bit of a lightweight, eh?"

"What makes you think that?" I shoot him a look, annoyed, but he just looks pleasantly surprised.

"Uh, it just looked a bit strong for ya." He presses his lips together and looks at me, amused. I frown, feeling oddly embarrassed for him. I can see him examining my profile as I stare into the fire and wish I could stop the path of his gaze. I don't want Matt to see.

Picking at the label on the bottle in my hands, I say, "Well it is straight vodka, so..." It occurs to me that I might be acting like a bitch, so I turn to Rob and look at him squarely. He has short brown hair and a rather nice straight nose, with mild acne peppering his forehead. His lips are parted expectantly and 'slack jaw' pops into my mind and I smile. Whatever it is he's expecting I don't know, or at least don't fully believe, so I offer him a sip of my vodka. He accepts, then wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and starts talking about hockey. When he hands the mickey back to me, the lip of the bottle is wet and I consider how to wipe it off without him noticing, but he's sitting right up close to me now, going on and on about how he's on the rep team for the Dawn Panthers and really, I couldn't give a shit, but I keep on nodding, while occasionally turning my head to peer at Matt. At last glance, Jane was taking a toke from the joint that he held for her. Since when does Jane smoke weed, anyways? She said she'd never do it again after tripping out on that pot brownie in Katie's basement last summer. As Rob talks, I sip steadily from my mickey until it's two-thirds empty, but I don't feel drunk. We both look up when Katie appears holding a long, whittled stick in one hand and a gooey marshmallow all over the fingertips of the other.

"Lillllll, you've gotta get one of these, they're amaaaazing!" she says, sticking her fingers in her mouth.

“Okay,” I shrug, moving to stand up, since my bum’s fallen asleep anyways. Rob looks surprised, or maybe disappointed (though I doubt it) that I’m about to leave him. After standing for a minute though, all of the vodka seems to surge through my veins and I sway on my feet. The flames in front of me seem to lick out at my face and I blink slowly, trying to slow down their flickering movement. A log falls and sparks fly up around me like fireflies.

Rob stands up next to me and touches my back. “Lily, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I slur, shrugging off Rob’s hand. Katie has taken off; she’s playing tag around the bonfire and waving her stick in the air, forgetting all about me. “I have to find my sister,” I say to no one in particular, turning towards the rock, but Jane and Matt are gone. I scan the clearing for Jess, but I can’t see her either. Turning back to Rob and placing a hand on his chest, I look at him imploringly and say, “Robert, have you seen my sister?” but he just shrugs and stares at me, lips parted again. I walk away from him heavily, shuffling a path through the dry autumn leaves until I reach the edge of the clearing. Weaving through the underbrush, dry twigs snag on my jeans until I stumble onto a path and head into the dark bush. It takes a few minutes for my eyes to adjust, but I walk further along, tripping from time to time on the uneven forest floor. I think of Jane and me playing ‘rocks and roots’ at the cottage, losing the game if your foot touched ground. Unzipping my hoodie, I feel a wash of relief when the cool air touches my collarbone and I lean against a birch tree, unaware I’ve been out of breath until I stop.

As my breath quietens, I run my fingers across the pale, peeling bark of the birch that glows with the same bluish cast as my sister’s skin in the shadows. I feel my bag for the vodka bottle and pull it out to take a swig. It goes down smooth now like water. Above me, a breeze moves through the canopies of the trees and the whole forest seems to sway. I’d forgotten I was looking for my sister, but now it doesn’t seem to matter; it’s enough just to be alone. It’s so weird how just a few hours ago Rob would’ve made me so nervous if he’d talked to me at school, but just seeing Matt tonight makes me feel almost nothing towards Rob. I shrug at the thought and take a deep breath of the cool air. In daylight, the bush seems bigger, but I like how the night fences it in. Now that my eyes have adjusted to the dark, I look around me, wondering where the birds sleep at

night, when I notice some movement about twenty metres away. The breeze picks up again, rustling the leaves on the path and I squint, trying to make out what's beyond me. I stay very still as the leaves settle with the passing of the wind. I can just make out two figures, one kneeling, one standing, when the sound of a low moan travels to me and I gasp, clapping my hand over my mouth to muffle the laughter that bubbles up. "Holy crap," I whisper to myself, "the youth are being sexually active." I can't stop giggling and I wish Jane or one of the other girls were here right now. As funny as it is, though, I also can't seem to look away...I mean, how does that even happen? How do you get to that point at all? I suddenly feel a bit pervy and I figure I ought to go back to the bonfire, when the standing figure leans his head back, revealing his face to the moonlight and I see them: his beautiful face, her blonde ponytail, a pair of orange pants that probably now have mud-stained knees.

My forehead prickles and I feel suddenly sick. Although instantly sober, my head whirls. I want to look away, but my eyes are fixed on them. Has Jane done this before? Has she hooked up with Matt before? Of all people, it had to be Matt. Another moan echoes to me through the trees and nausea engulfs me as I look around desperately, but there's nothing but dense forest. Even the path looks uncertain. If I move will they hear me? The desire to flee is unbearable, but I'm also rooted to the spot, I don't know where to look but I can't stay here and I think I might crawl out of my skin. Do salamanders do that? Shed their skin? To my surprise, my eyes are welling with tears. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and suddenly it doesn't matter if they hear me, it doesn't matter at all, and I tear clumsily through the brush in the opposite direction.

I didn't realise how far I'd already gone into the forest, because within a few minutes I find myself by the pond. The moonlight shines on it like an inky mirror under a thin mist that reminds me of Swan Lake, when in daylight it's just a muddy home for muskrats. Blackened, waterlogged stumps poke through the surface and I drop down on a fallen pine tree by the bank and stare blankly at the water, once again having to catch my breath. As I adjust myself on the log, my palm gets covered in a sticky residue of tree gum that I try to rub off on my knees. I try to blink away the image of Jane and Matt from my mind's eye, because I don't really have a right to be upset – we all have

crushes on Matt, apart from Jessica, of course. It's not like he belongs to me or to anyone, and yet I feel so betrayed, though I can't really figure out why. As I wipe a tear from my cheek with the back of my gummy hand, I'm startled by a snapping branch and I whip around to see Rob Kowalski walking tentatively down the path.

"Hey... whatcha doin' down here? Did you find your sister?"

"What are *you* doing down here?" I'm vaguely aware that I've done something tonight to make Rob interested in me, but I can't pinpoint what it is. He comes closer and stands in front of me, blocking my view of the pond. I look up at him like an irritated cat, my eyes glassy.

"Are you... crying?"

"No! No, I..." I don't want him to see me cry, so I stand up and wipe my eyes, then look at him squarely. His lips are parted again and I consider his mouth and the closeness of his body to mine. Despite my upset, when he puts a hand on my waist, I step towards him and it's already happening when I realise that I'm kissing Rob Kowalski with what a romance novel might describe as fervency. A car drives by on the road beyond the pond and the headlights illuminate us brightly for just a moment and I pull away, embarrassed.

I expect Rob to go, but he's looking eagerly at my lips and so I put my arms around his neck and I'm about to kiss him again when he says, "Do you wanna go out with me?" He mutters it awkwardly, but leans his body in to hold me tightly. I'm taken aback and now it's my turn to stare at him with a slack jaw because I don't know what to say. I shake my head, trying to rid myself again of the vision of Jane and Matt, when I look up at Rob's swollen bottom lip and nice nose and I say, "Okay".

"Cool," Rob says, smiling like an eager puppy, and I try not to cringe when he kisses me again. He's probing my mouth hard with his tongue, which is strangely cold, but I still reciprocate, waiting for it to get better. I drop my bag on the ground and I can feel something firm digging into my upper thigh. Rob's hands move down my back and he's pressing into me so hard I'm afraid I'll lose my balance. I can barely breathe, he's kissing me so hard, and when he brushes a hand over my breast, I flinch but don't stop him. His hand moves further down while his other arm holds me tightly to him and when he fumbles with the button on my jeans, I'm again taken aback but can't move,

can't speak because he's kissing me hungrily and I like the feeling of being desired. He shoves a hand down into my underwear, fiddling roughly for a second until I pull away from his devouring mouth and push him back, stumbling a bit and gripping onto a tree behind me.

He's panting and leans forward. "What's wrong?"

"You don't just fucking do that, you know." I exhale shakily, staring at him like a caged animal. My hair has come loose and it's hanging in light wisps around my face.

"But you said you'd go out with me." Rob looks honestly confused and I don't know what to say. I never know what to say. "For fuck's sakes," he says under his breath and I turn from him, button up my jeans and pick up my bag. I start up the path and he follows closely behind, each of us embarrassed and angry. When we re-emerge in the clearing, a few of Rob's hockey friends start shouting and howling and he looks sort of proud and bashful, though he looks away when I catch his eye. I'm half-smiling despite myself when Jane runs over to me excitedly, taking my hand. She whispers into my ear, "Oh my God, what happened?" and Jess appears too, half-dragging Katie, whose arm is over her shoulder.

"We've gotta go," Jess says, and we nod in agreement.

As we start to walk away, Rob says to me, "So I'll see ya at school on Monday, eh?" He's acting casual, all of our friends observing the exchange between us, though I can hear a note of fear in his voice.

"I guess," I say and feel like I might cry, so I turn from him and walk quickly towards the dark path that leads out of the bush, holding onto my sister's arm.

Once we reach the road under the orange glow of the street lamps, Jess starts it with, "Lily Sled, did you see a penis tonight?!" and the girls start screaming and hanging off of me, begging me to tell them what happened. We start walking along the shoulder towards town and I smile and shake my head, tight-lipped until we get there. I haven't decided yet what to reveal.

When the red and purple lights of Taco Bell appear, we all run towards it, but the doors are locked. We walk through the Drive-Thru and knock on the window. Jennifer, one of our friends from school, is working there and opens the window.

"Yooo! Can we order some Fries Supreme?" Katie is leaning on the window

sill.

“Well... I’m not supposed to serve you if you don’t have a car but... fuck it, why not?” Jennifer takes our orders while Katie and Jess talk over each other, trying to fill her in on our night. “Man, I miss everything! And all my clothes smell like tacos, like all the time.”

Jen adjusts her visor and Jane shouts out, “Lily’s going out with Rob Kowalski!”

“Shut up!” Jen says gleefully as she passes paper bags full of tacos and fries out the window to us.

“No, Jane, shut up! I’m not...” But again, that weird smile teases the corners of my mouth and I know I’m giving the wrong impression, but I kind of like that they think it too.

When we’ve got all of our food, we head over to the parking lot and sit down on the kerb to eat.

“Oh my God, Lil, did you like totally suck his face off?” Jess says, mauling a soft taco that’s meant to be Rob.

“Kind of...” I slurp my Dr. Pepper as the girls squeal. Their excitement is infectious and I start to consider what it would be like to actually go out with Rob Kowalski, pushing the fact that he annoys me and nearly fingered me after five minutes out of my mind. We could hold hands in the hall between classes, which I’ve always wanted to do, and I’d also have a date for Semi-Formal. Maybe he’d send me a Candygram on Valentine’s.

“Did you give him a bloooow job?” Katie says, falling backwards onto the grass.

I blush, but no one notices. “No, I’ve never done that! Have you?” I look hard at Jane, but my sister just keeps her head down and stuffs fries into her mouth.

Katie sits up. “I have! Twice! But one was to my cousin.”

We all shout at once while Katie just howls with laughter. “Katie!”, “You’re so gross!”, “Isn’t that illegal?!”

“But it’s okay because he’s adopted!”

“Ew! That’s still disgusting!” We’re laughing and gagging with our mouths full.

“Whatever. Jess, your brother is so hot. You kinda look like him though,” Katie

mashes her plastic fork into the hot fries smothered in fake cheese and waves it in front of Jess.

“Oh great, so you think I look like a dude? Thanks, Kate.” Jess throws a limp piece of shredded lettuce at her.

I’m watching Jane, waiting for her to react. “Do you think Matt’s hot, Janey?”

“What? Yeah, of course, everyone does.” I see a flicker in her eye, but she turns away from me. I don’t have the energy to catch her out right now and even if I did I wouldn’t know what to say. I couldn’t say anything in front of Jess, anyway. I want to believe I’m superior to my sister right now, but really I feel slightly regretful about pushing Rob off; I could’ve just let him go on, to see what it was like. Surely Jane would have, and she’d think I was such a loser for crying.

“I don’t feel good,” Katie says, looking green. She leans over to the side and barfs on the front wheel of a Honda Civic. This puts all of us off of our food and we help to pick Katie up, throwing away our greasy, half-eaten trash in the garbage can nearby.

Soon we’re all tucked into sleeping bags on Katie’s bedroom floor and just as I’m about to doze off with the image of Rob’s puppy smile in my mind, Janey reaches out to hold my hand.

“What is it?” I whisper, turning to her.

She’s about to say something, but instead exhales and says simply, “Nothing.” She pauses. “That’s nice you made out with Rob... g’night.” She smiles softly at me but I can see in her eyes a measure of sadness that I’m suddenly sure is reflected in my own.

“Yeah, thanks. ’Night.” I whisper back, and she lets go of my hand.

CHAPTER 4

La Jolie

The insects have been acting strangely this summer. Spiders don't run anymore. Flies just land on you and sit there. It seems like there's no fear of humans in them at all. It might be Global Warming, retaliation for human destruction of their habitats. Or maybe it has to do with the random deaths of bees around the world – those that haven't given up on life are turning on humans as well. There was a news report recently about a swarm of killer bees that are making their way up from Mexico, cutting a path straight through the States and on up to Canada, expected to arrive before the frosts of late September make them drowsy and slow and they lose their vitriolic momentum. Personally though, I blame the deerfly. Not the entire species, necessarily, but rather the ones that keep circling and circling my head, tormenting and irritating me until they land, biting my scalp with that unbelievably painful pinch. I can't help but think that they're up to something, and they've sent the word out to all the other insects too. I've been reading up on them: apparently, only the females feed on blood.

It's been raining for nearly three days and the cottage has become stuffy and close. The air indoors is like a dusty grey mist that we float through, trying to find our way outside again. Gramps has been painting watercolours for hours. I'm watching him from across the wide room as he sits at the pine table, my feet tucked under me in the wicker rocking chair next to the big stone fireplace. When his brush first strokes the paper, the colours are bold, bleeding across it, rendering tall pines, barren rock islands, the choppy lake outside. When those dry and fade, though, he switches to something softer: distant green pastures framed by grey skies, like in the faded photographs of Wales.

In addition to reading about the mating habits of deerflies, I have painted each one of my fingernails a different colour so that they look like a rainbow. Gramps grumbled about the smell, but I ignored him. I kind of like smelling the fumes. The other way I've been passing the time – since Jane only has eyes for Sean nowadays – is by reading selections from the endless stacks of Nancy Drews that live up at the cottage. Half of the faded yellow spines on the bookshelf that flanks the fireplace are from the

1960s – Mum’s books – and the other half, which are brighter and stiffer with glossier covers, are mine and Jane’s from the last century. I like saying ‘last century’ because it gives us a certain credibility and weight that we weren’t afforded in the 1990s, the height of our youth (two years ago). We remember the ‘80s. Kids today can’t do that.

I let out a big sigh and Gramps looks up at me.

“I’m bored,” I say.

“Have a peach,” says Gramps, and he turns back to his painting. This response is so wildly unsatisfactory that I can’t even bear to sit in this room anymore, so I go into the bedroom that Jane and I used to share (since she and Sean have been given the guest room with the double bed), and flop down onto the low, wood-framed child’s bed with a ‘harrumph!’. “This blows...goats,” I say aloud, burying my face in the scratchy Welsh wool blanket. I wish I could watch *Wayne’s World* now, but there’s no T.V. up here; technology is strictly *verboten*. I’m beginning to wonder if you can actually die of boredom. I don’t recall being bored at the cottage in the past, but then I always played cards or Monopoly with Jane, or we’d make up plays and read magazines, or just talk. It seems like we’ve hardly talked at all ever since she got together with Sean at New Year’s. Sean’s a Sagittarius (apparently) and I can’t stand him. I don’t know how Janey can. Sometimes he reminds me of Ned Nickerson, only thinner and with lower moral standards. He’s always looking at my boobs when we go swimming, as if Jane didn’t have nearly the same ones. To be fair, mine are bigger, but still, what a perv. Ned Nickerson, on the other hand, would not perv on anything, because he’s asexual. The way that Sean reminds me of Ned though, is his self-righteous, smug over-protectiveness with Jane that she just eats right up. He’s in Cadets and she thinks this is an attractive, strong quality. He totally milks it too, as though he’s about to save the world by spending Thursday evenings at the barracks by the train tracks, or by selling poppies at the liquor store every November instead of getting high with the rest of us. Jane’s blatant hero worship, and their barely concealed rabid sexual activity, makes me want to yak, to tell you the truth. That and I miss my sister.

Raising my head to peer out the window, I watch the wind outside bending the tall pines. They look as though they’re doing side stretches, or reaching their limbs out for something, or someone to hold. Seen through the wavy glass, they’re like a Group of

Seven painting, blurred and stark and wildly beautiful. Letting out a sigh, I heave myself up and reach for my bathing suit; I might as well go for a swim in the rain.

In my fluorescent pink Hawaiian print bikini I stand poised on the edge of the dock. Despite the strength of the wind, the air and rain are warm and I let them whip my body, which is, in a way, a new possession of mine. How is it that now I have the body I so desperately wanted only a year ago? It seems to have come upon me as a surprise, even though I've undoubtedly grown into it. Jane got hers about two years ago and has used it accordingly. Sometimes it feels as though we're both on the same treasure hunt, like in the movie *Romancing the Stone*, only she's always one step ahead, the gorgeous Kathleen Turner smoking pot and having sexy times and jungle adventures with Michael Douglas, while I'm the sister who's held captive eating steak with bald men and crocodiles, or worse, I am Danny DeVito.

The dock bobs on the choppy water and I use it to launch myself into the lake, my dive a smooth perfect ten. The water hits me like the snap of a wet towel, painful and oddly titillating, rushing in my ears. When I surface, I flip my sopping hair back out of my face and imagine myself a siren, because they're far more interesting than ordinary mermaids. I swim around with absent-minded exuberance, treading water and floating atop the wavy surface, allowing myself to be carried on the current. I kick downwards and my toe touches a soft and slimy algae-covered rock and I flinch, jerking my leg away from whatever lurks beneath the surface. A fish once brushed right against Mum's thigh in this lake and she said it was like the firm caress of a man's hand. I was disgusted then, and still am, although I'm almost impressed by my mother in a way. It's like sometimes she'll say things and she's actually a stranger who I don't know at all.

I dive my head underwater again and open my eyes, looking for fish or old shoes in the murky green depths. All I can hear are the strange echoes of the water as it fills my ears, like listening to the heart of a seashell. I think of when Jane and I used to play Jacques Cousteau, her horrible French accent made funnier by the fact that the cottage is right in the middle of Témiscamingue, Québec. As I surface I'm laughing and rubbing the water from my eyes when I'm startled by the sight of Sean on the dock in front of me. We stare at each other for a moment, each waiting for the other to speak.

“What do you want?” I squint, even though the sun hides behind the dark clouds.

He hesitates. “... You gotta come inside. There was thunder. Your grandfather sent me out to get you.”

Yeah, right, I think. Why wouldn't he send Jane? But a low rumble comes from the East and I have no choice but to hoist myself up onto the dock directly in front of Sean. I do so with ease, but he doesn't move out of my way, so I end up standing directly in front of him, dripping wet in my bikini, the wind making my skin shiver with goosebumps and my nipples hard. He's looking at my body with what I can only describe as appreciation. He drinks me in and though I hate to admit it, I let him. It's like a challenge. We're standing here a moment too long when the thunder rolls again, louder this time, and Sean turns on his heel and takes the worn, rocky path up to the cottage in wide leaps. At the door, he doesn't wait to hold it open for me and I flinch when the screen slams shut behind him.

In my room, I wrap myself tightly in a towel, trying to cover myself up belatedly. I dry the skin on my arms and legs and finally let the towel drop to the floor. Although I've been annoyed that Jane hasn't wanted to share a room with me, I'm beginning to relish the privacy. I peel off my wet suit and it falls heavily to the floor. I cup my breasts, the skin cool and damp and then trace my fingers down my sides, feeling the soft ridges of my body, imagining what it would be like to be touched, or even seen like this, by someone else. Lying down on my bed, naked with my wet hair splayed out on the pillow, I listen to the silence of the cottage. A clock ticks faintly in another room. Everyone else must be in the kitchen, which was built separately like an annex, next to the boathouse. Something is bothering me, like a sense of foreboding, but I'm also aroused. I tell myself it's from the cold swim, from imagining what could have happened had someone else seen me rise from the water, some boy who isn't Sean. I reach down, gingerly, to touch myself. The coolness of my skin contrasts the warmth retained there, in my centre. I try not to think of Sean on the dock. I remind myself that he repulses me, that he is my sister's boyfriend, as my fingers move softly over my clitoris, as my other hand strokes the side of my thigh, my breasts, my neck. Thunder claps beyond the window and rain patters lightly on the glass, like soft, tiny kisses. I'm

breathing deeper, telling myself that I am not thinking of Sean even as I still feel his eyes on my body and my hand moves faster and I think of how I hate him, I really do, and I'm breathing deeper and deeper now and the wind whips the window harder and my back arches as I shudder as lightning flashes across the lake and the thunder booms.

Sometimes it seems as though the only place I ever see my parents is at dinner tables. Invariably, they sit kitty-corner from each other, touching hands or entwining their fingers, which impedes their ability to eat normally. Sitting here now with the waste of devoured hotdogs; crumbs from the squishy white buns, messy ketchup, mustard, and relish bottles, a stray bit of onion on the blue and white plastic table cloth, I feel as though I'm having an out of body experience. I'm sandwiched between the two couples, with Gramps across from me and as Sean stuffs food into his mouth, I imagine him finding a ring in his hotdog bun, followed by a small finger, like Ricardo Montalbon in *The Naked Gun*. Or perhaps the lovebirds at the table (take your pick) are about to fly away from the cottage, high above the evergreens, in a shiny red car like Danny and Sandy at the end of *Grease*. In this fantasy, I'm standing on the ground below, waving goodbye amidst the irony of the soundtrack, "*We'll al-ways be to-gether...*"

"Who wants to play Hearts?" I ask, expecting everyone to decline.

Mum sighs. She doesn't like that game because she always loses. Dad declines in solidarity with Mum, of course.

"We will," Sean answers, and I prickle, instantly annoyed. He didn't even ask Janey.

"Yeah, okay," she says, beaming at him.

"We need a fourth though, so..."

"How 'bout you, Jean?" Not only does Sean use Gramps' first name, he pronounces it 'Gene'.

Gramps looks at him with mild disdain. "*Non,*" he says and I can't help but smile, but then Mum interjects.

"Oh, c'mon Pop, Lily's been so bored on her own in all this rain, haven't you?" And she looks at me as if being alone is the worst fate that could befall anyone, even at the age of nineteen. I'm like Bridget Jones at the turkey curry buffet.

Gramps regards me with a different sort of pity and says, "Alright. One hand."

Even though I actually do want to play cards, it's sullied by the fact that I'm constantly paired with my grandfather these days, as if we're a couple too now that Janey has a boyfriend. It's like at weddings when they make you dance with your cousin because you're the same age and isn't that cute because you're a miniature couple! Only it's not cute, it's awkward and practically incestuous.

I act as dealer and the game carries on in silence, apart from when I give Sean the Queen of Spades in three consecutive tricks. Jane keeps giving me these annoyed looks, like I'm being contrary on purpose, when I'm only playing the game. The third time he gets stuck with it he looks up at me and says, "The Black Bitch." Gramps grumbles; he only likes swear words spoken in French. I wish Sean would stop looking at me so pointedly, though. That's the third time now and it's making me itch; I keep scratching my mosquito bites too much, making them bleed. After throwing down a Three of Hearts, I lift my tanned forearm up to my lips to suck off the blood. Sean watches me and that makes four.

Gramps takes the final trick and declares, "Hearts" in his low voice, throwing down his cards. "Why don't you go to La Jolie and give me some peace?"

Jane and I look at each other. We haven't been to the ghost town in several summers, though we used to spend countless hours there, exploring and panning for gold, making up our own mystery stories and plays amidst the crumbling buildings overgrown with weeds.

"What's La Jolie?" Sean says, gathering up the cards.

"You haven't told him?" I ask Jane, incredulous.

"It hasn't come up, I guess," she says with a shrug.

"It's Lac DuBois' very own ghost town," I say to Sean and he perks up.

"Serious?" He asks Jane, as if I'm lying.

"Yeah...we used to go there all the time when we were kids," she says, as though an interest in it is also, somehow, childish.

"That's awesome!" He says, acting like Jane invented it and she beams proudly back at him.

I look through the screen door at the pinkish sky cast by the setting sun. The rain

has stopped and the sweet smell of damp pine needles and loam floats inwards to us. “Well then?” I say, “Let’s go,” and the three of us rise from the table and head over to the boathouse.

As the paddles smack the water, the canoe surges forwards away from the dock. The shield rock that slopes into the water seems to sink underneath us and soon we’re headed for the middle of the lake. I’m sterning, with Jane in the bow and Sean in the middle to balance the weight. Jane and I agreed to paddle left-handed because Sean said he couldn’t paddle any way but right. The word ‘weakling’ popped into my head, but it makes no difference to me; I can paddle on the left just fine.

La Jolie is only at the other end of the lake, but it’s hidden from view in a small bay and takes about twenty minutes to canoe there. After the afternoon rains, the lake is calm and smooth and a faint mist rises off the surface. None of us speak as our paddles dip into the soft water, the tapping against the gunnels and the call of a distant loon the only repeated sounds. I watch Sean watching Jane. Seeing the way her blonde hair swishes from side to side, rhythmically matching her movements, I wish that I could be so effortlessly beautiful; to be fascinating even when glimpsed, unawares, from behind.

I’m so mesmerised that I nearly steer us straight into *Gros Eddy*, the huge rock just below the surface that all the cottagers know to avoid. Jane sticks her paddle out in front just in time to stop the boat from crashing into it, and the canoe rocks unsteadily. She turns around and says, “Watch it, Lil!” because I should know better and Sean turns back to me too, eyes narrowed. I purse my lips, my cheeks flushing, angry at their anger, but I say nothing. The rock, however, is our landmark. With two bold C-strokes, I turn the canoe towards the bay.

La Jolie rises before us as the bow of the boat parts speckled lily pads to make a path through the marshy bay. A church steeple with a green copper cross looms above the tops of the trees. Some boxy buildings with shattered slider windows are visible further back; the last attempts at holding the town together before the post office officially closed in 1960. Beyond them, through a vague outline in the trees, is the flat-fronted general store, the back of which has crumbled away leaving only its facade, like a movie set.

Sean gazes at the town in amazement as I steer the canoe towards the rocky, trodden path that leads up from the water. As Jane leaps out of the boat, she looks proud, or even smug, as though she really did create this place and is now allowing Sean the privilege of seeing it. She rattles off facts as she holds the canoe steady for us to get out, “They last found gold here in 1958 and it was founded in 1881...”

I have a peculiar urge to speak over her; to be the one to relay the facts and I interrupt her loudly, as my foot splashes in the water. “...and there was a murder here once!”

Jane pauses, mouth corners turning downwards, then carries on talking to Sean, who is putting the paddles under the yoke of the boat. “A man was stabbed outside the general store, but no one was ever caught,” she says, looking intently at Sean.

“Freaky,” he replies, grinning at her.

Since they already seem to have forgotten my presence, I leave them by the shore and start picking my way through the underbrush towards the cluster of buildings. It’s become far more overgrown in the last few years and the appearance of haphazard graffiti on a few walls is jarring to me, so incongruous with a place I’ve always thought of as frozen in time. The sun is low now, its soft golden beams reaching out to us through the gaps in the trees. In places where the sun can’t reach, La Jolie is already awash with the faint blue sheen of dusk. Jane has led Sean in the opposite direction from me, though I can hear her warning him to be careful of shaky foundations and open basements concealed by the scrub maples and summer weeds.

I’m looking for the small cemetery by the church when I nearly trip over one of the headstones, barely visible amongst the overgrown grass and wild flowers. There are a few rose and lilac bushes here, probably planted in memoriam at graves by loved ones, but then forgotten when the town died. I look over my shoulder for Jane and Sean and see them peering into the windows of a boarded up home, trying to see if they could get inside and play house. I walk further into the little graveyard to commune with the townspeople and soon Jane and Sean are out of sight.

The dusk is falling quickly and I guess I ought to be afraid, alone in a ghost town at night; it’s the stuff horror movies are made of, but somehow as long as I’m alone, I’m not scared at all. I slide the elastic from my ponytail and shake my hair free. It occurs

to me that I must be standing on top of someone's coffin and a shiver runs through me: I need to know their name now, so I step closer and crouch down. The headstone is covered over with thistles and vines, and when I push some aside to try and read the engraving, I prick my fingers, quickly pulling my hand back to stick them in my mouth. A memory rises to the surface of my mind and I am a small child in Wales, touching a stalk of stinging nettles and crying out for my mother as the soft skin of my palm breaks out into a pattern of tiny white welts. Pulling the sleeve of my sweatshirt over my fist, I manage to hold the creepers aside long enough to see that I'm dancing on the grave of one Luc Johnson, and I think of that Canadian Heritage Minute about the Irish potato kids and say to the stone, "Johnson, Molly Johnson, Sir", with a laugh. This makes me feel like a big jerk though so I stand up and thrust my hands into my front pocket, when I hear a loud snap in the woods beyond. "Hello?" I call out, but everything has gone silent again. I scan the shadowy trees, now cloaked in darkness, for a minute before picking my way out of the tangled vines.

There is a particular headstone that I'm looking for, actually. I've only seen it once, but I always seek it out. It's low to the ground, a weathered white carving of a lamb; the grave of a child. We were seven the first time I found it and when I called Mum over to see, she touched the dates on it and just shook her head, unspeaking. That child had been seven, too. Before we found that headstone, the reality of this place hadn't really registered with me. Before that, death seemed vague, something that might not happen, or didn't really stick, like what happened with Jesus (I didn't pay much attention in church). There were flowers and stones and skeletons buried beneath, but no people, no souls. I've never been able to find that gravestone again though. Maybe it was stolen, or has just simply grown into the ground itself.

"Sorry, Luc," I say to the stone when the snapping sound happens again, but softer and closer this time. "Janey?" I say, the forest is creaking like an old house in the cold as the dusk descends. Distantly, I hear Jane's laugh and feel inexplicably resentful. A rustling noise shivers softly from behind the church and I freeze again, waiting for the sound to repeat itself, but it's still just silent. It's probably a squirrel or a racoon at most. Bears don't tend to walk delicately, sneaking up on girls in graveyards. My ankles get more and more tangled in the undergrowth the farther I move into the coven of graves

and I'm pretty well stuck now, so I re-trace my steps back out again, my eyes nearly adjusted to the soft blue darkness.

I wonder if the organ is still in the church, so I pick my way to the side of the rotting clapboard building and stand on my toes next to the window, trying to glimpse inside. It's too dark to see anything, but as I strain my eyes, the sound of another soft snap tickles my ears and I turn towards the forest. I wonder if I'm paranoid or just spooked. It would scare Jane to death if I managed to play the organ though, so I shake my shoulders and try to push up the sash of the window. Paint flakes onto my hands and I flinch, expecting splinters. I grunt as I push my weight against the building, when suddenly I'm grabbed around my waist. I jump, gasping, and whip myself around, my hair half-obscuring my face, when Sean says, "There you are," and he leans in to kiss me. I dodge his lips but I'm speechless and he's still pressed against me.

I search the dark for Jane when Sean speaks again. "Forget Lily," he whispers, hot breath on my mouth, "She's just jealous," and he leans in to kiss me again, moving my hair softly aside so our lips meet. I can't even comprehend that he thinks I'm my sister and he's pressing me so hard against the wall of the church that I can barely breathe. I want to be disgusted or hit him or scream, but I'm curious too, to know what Jane feels when Sean touches her; to be kissed with affection.

So, I'm kissing him back even as it half-disgusts me and my mind races. My eyes are open, but his are closed and I wonder, am I really so indistinguishable from my sister? Do we kiss the same? Smell the same? Taste the same?

Everything about Sean's body is hard and I can see now the source of Jane's attraction to him. He's too smug for me, but he is hard and smooth and strong. The thought crosses my mind that he is less Ned Nickerson, and more a military Zach Morris, which makes me want to laugh, but I can't because I'm kissing Sean so hard that we can barely catch our breath and I've never kissed like this, or been kissed with such passion or intent and I almost give in to it when he moves his lips to my neck, and I close my eyes and breathe out with what feels like relief until I remember that all of this is meant for my sister. As his rough chin grazes my skin, I grip the hair on the back of his head and I can't tell whether I'm pulling him away, or pressing him to me 'til he bites me with sharp teeth and a soft tongue, then drops to his knees and opens the

buttons of my jeans. He pulls them down below my hips, then yanks on my cotton undies, hooking his fingers under the elastic, and I press my hands against the rough boards at my back when his tongue meets my clitoris, sliding slow, then fast, and it's unbearable and disgusting and yet I can't help but want it. No one has done this to me before now and I think of *Cruel Intentions*, and then it's as if Sean is writing the alphabet with his tongue and I let out a moan and nearly pitch forwards.

He stops now and I bite my lip and wait. He runs his hand over his head, looking at my feet, and neither of us speaks as our chests rise and fall quickly with heated breaths. I slide my back down the flaking clapboards of the church wall and lay myself on the trampled green brush next to him, kicking my jeans down to my ankles. Without looking at me, he quickly unbuckles his belt and shrugs down his own pants before lowering his weight down onto me. There's no moon and we are cloaked in darkness, pretending not to see.

This is where it should stop; I know this. The rise and fall of my own breath seems to say, go back, this isn't where you're supposed to be. But I let him enter me with a low moan that seems to come from the very pit of him. It doesn't happen easily, even though I am shockingly wet below. I imagine I am tight, or unconsciously resistant, and it takes two or three thrusts from him to make it all the way in.

There is no more kissing; no more façade of affection, just grunting and heaving and I wonder if it is too wet, if that soreness is my own tearing flesh, and the faster he thrusts the more I am split apart, but I want it too, so badly, and so I don't stop him, but instead give in more, pull him into me, breathe the night air into my very depths. I want to look him in the eye but he thrusts with his chin turned to his shoulder, avoiding my gaze, so I look up at the night sky instead, seeking out constellations as my hips rise to meet his, and it's almost like my chest is splitting apart too as sounds emanate from me until there's another snap from the woods and the beam of Jane's flashlight hits us. Sean's back is arched like a cobra and when he looks into my sister's eyes with cold lust, thrusts once more before his rigid body goes slack, I know that he knows, that he has known all along. Jane lets out a cry, and the sound is so vulnerable, so full of hurt, so unlike Jane, that it rents me apart completely, and when she turns and flees, Sean pulls apart from me in one quick movement, yanks up his pants and leaps over me to

chase after her without a second glance behind him. And I just lie here, unmoving, feeling the wetness expand beneath me, wondering how early the dew falls.

I don't know how long I lie in the grass for, but I feel rigid and frozen to the spot, unable to move or even cover myself, simply letting the night breeze flutter over my exposed belly, my quivering thighs. I am alone with the ghosts at La Jolie, because, of course, they will have left without me.

A cicada sings somewhere nearby and I'm getting cold, so I achingly manage to sit up. I pull up my underwear and my jeans and readjust my top and old camp sweatshirt, when the word 'deflowered' pops into my head. That is a ridiculous word, unless by deflowering they mean crushing Queen Anne's Lace and daisies by humping and bleeding on top of them. Am I bleeding? I suspect I am. Katie told me she bled tons the first time she did it. Jane never told me what her first time was like. She just whispered to me the night before in the dark, like that scene in *Dirty Dancing* when Lisa tells Baby that "tonight's the night with Robbie". Jane said that she was going to do it with Sean when his parents went away on the weekend. When I asked her about it, she just said that she drank too many Mike's Hard Lemonades and that it was fine. I can't imagine ever describing my own experience as 'fine'. What do you have to do to make it not wonderful, not horrific, but just fine?

I stand up, my aching back feeling like a thousand eyes are boring into it and I squint to find the path to the water. My breath and my hands shake as I step unseeingly, tripping over rocks and roots. I could easily fall into one of those hidden basements that Jane warned Sean about, but it doesn't seem to matter. Would anyone come looking for me? Would it matter if I died here, once the underbrush has grown and swallowed me up? A cloud has slowly drifted and at last the moon is revealed, pale light washing over La Jolie and I find I'm almost at the lake edge. I don't know what I expected to find here; Jane waiting for me with open arms, saying she knows it was Sean's fault (was it Sean's fault?) and that she's dumped him and we can spend the rest of the summer together? Such a sad and selfish desire for a sad and selfish girl – or woman, I suppose. I stand on the shore where the lake water laps softly in the marshy grass and the cast of moonlight reveals a bold streak of red paint on a rock where the canoe must have been

hastily dragged across it.

There is a sickening, sinking feeling travelling all the way from my throat to my gut. My forehead tingles and I know that I'm on the verge of realizing something; of knowing that it is too late, that a chain of events has already been set into motion and I'm in it now, I'm just in it, and so I start running. Thrashing through the long grasses, leaping over jagged foundations and rotting boards, my hair flows out behind me and I'm sure that if I just keep running, if I find my way out of La Jolie to the logging road that I will be safe, that the ghosts won't catch me, that all of this will go away. As I reach the line of trees that marks the forest, my sandal flies off my right foot and I fall forwards, landing in a heap where the grass turns into a bed of orange pine needles and moss. The weight of everything sinking in is unbearable and I want to keep running and running, but I'm so sore and my thighs still won't stop shaking and it takes me a minute to realise that I'm sobbing, and that I'm really, really scared as I look at La Jolie before me, all whispering, gossiping spirits and suspicious shadows, with the looming, dark forest behind. I feel like I'm dying. Tomorrow I will be dead to Jane and so, in effect, she will be dead to me.

Sobbing on the forest floor, my hands covered in dirt and gummy pine needles, I finally understand what 'wretched' really means. Guilt doesn't even come into it yet; that will come later, I'm sure. But for now, I just want to turn back time, to push Sean off of me, to tell Jane what he did so that she can see what kind of person he is. At least I won't be a virgin when I start university in September, I think, and that quiets my sobs to a rueful cry. When Mum almost died, someone said to me, I don't know who, that there is good and bad in everything. Nothing is wholly one or the other. This seemed laughable then and laughable now, but I suppose it's true. What they neglected to tell me was that the two things rarely balance out.

Having caught my breath, I pick myself up again and look at the moon. Brushing pine needles from my clothes, I notice the nearly overgrown tract that leads to the logging road, and I set off down it, pausing to take one last look at La Jolie. I implore the ghosts to keep this secret here, to let it be abandoned, like this strange town. A breeze shivers through the grasses and the tree tops nod their agreement, and I set off down the path to find my way home.

I walk quickly, ignoring the shadows and sounds of the bush and it doesn't take too long to find the main road. La Jolie is popular amongst hikers and tourists and the way is well-worn. With the straight, paved road to the cottage before me, bordered on either side by tall evergreens and aluminum mail boxes, their flags down waiting for the morning paper, I walk at a steady gait. The road feels endless, but I when I see "SLED" painted in white on the galvanized mailbox and realise I've made it, I tear up again not from relief, but from fear: what will happen when I see Jane in the morning? Will she be waiting for me now? Will Mum and Dad, or worse, Gramps notice that something has happened? I walk down the gravel driveway tentatively, but the cottage is dark; everyone is seemingly asleep. After tip-toeing onto the porch, and carefully closing the screen door behind me to silence the creak of the springs, I stop in the big living room and look around. The fireplace, which has always reminded me of *The Friendly Giant's* castle – a rocking chair for someone who likes to rock, a big chair for two to curl up in (for me and Jane) – all seem to recoil from me in disappointment.

In my room, I take off my clothes and reach down to touch my underwear. It's dry, but stiff, as the blood and Sean have leaked from me and pooled there. For the first time it occurs to me that I could be pregnant and I am horrified. Shaking all over, I clap my hands over my mouth to muffle my uncontrollable sobs and I kick off my underwear, pulling my old tattered Hello Kitty nightgown over me. My whole body aches unbearably as hot tears sear my cheeks and I jump into bed, burrowing down in a foetal position and pulling the covers up to my chin, as I shake and sob until I don't even know when, but eventually I am so exhausted by my fear and pain that I sleep.

Although I'm awake by seven, I don't even consider moving for another three hours. I am too gripped by fear to even get up and go to the outhouse, which I desperately need to do. I wait until eleven o'clock to emerge, having listened sharply all morning for Jane and Sean's voices, but finding them ominously absent. Mum and Dad and Gramps are all at the table drinking coffee when I appear in the doorway.

"Janey and Sean have gone home," Mum says, looking baffled.

"What? When?" I look surprised, but I think it's actually just relief.

"Early this morning. Said they were just sick of doing nothing and drove Gramps' truck home."

“Oh.” I can’t look any of them in the eye, but no one seems to notice. Gramps looks at me quizzically, as though he can sense that I know something, but he turns back to his newspaper without prying. It’s only on Sunday, when we all go home that they turn to me for answers, because instead of finding Janey there, we find a note on the kitchen table:

Sean and I have decided to go to Banff. I’m not ready for university and we want to work and save up some money so we can get married. I’ll phone soon.

Love, Jane.

CHAPTER 5

Postcards

Holding the mascara wand aloft, I consider myself in the mirror. Leaning forwards, elbow on dresser and chin in hand, my skin looks soft, peachy even, and my hair, dyed a perfect Anne-of-Green-Gables-Red, is piled artfully atop my head. I add another layer of mascara to each side and flutter my eyelashes a few times, feeling the sticky black liquid dry and tighten, forming a dark fringe that makes my hazel-green eyes pop. Putting the wand back, I screw the cap tight so it won't dry out, but I don't move away from the mirror. I think of Julie Christie in *Fahrenheit 451* and imagine that my eyes are like hers. I've always wanted blue eyes. They're more striking, I think, like that part in the movie when Clarisse asks Montag, right out of the blue, "Are you happy?" and her eyes just glow. I've always wanted to ask a man that, to appear both alluringly weird and philosophically beautiful. Instead though, my reflection in the mirror says, "Are you happy, Lily?", and right now I can honestly answer, "Yes."

Smiling to myself, I turn and survey my room. There are stacks of videos and DVDs on top of the small T.V. in the corner, on my desk, and in piles on the floor. The winter sunlight is surprisingly warm, filtering through the big old window next to my bed, where the rumpled purple duvet (goose down, because I always wanted one) looks incredibly soft and inviting. Movie posters of *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *The Breakfast Club*, and *Weekend at Bernie's* hide the dingy white walls, while the old oak floor and red Ikea rug are barely visible beneath the strewn clothes and books. There's a sort of energetic chaos in the disarray that's comforting, perhaps because I was never allowed it at home. Leaping over the mess, I fling myself onto the bed and gaze out the window at the snowy street below. Through the bare branches of the big maple, the sky is clear and cornflower blue, while the road is densely packed with parked cars barely fitting beside the tall snow banks. The sidewalk resembles a bobsledding chute, an icy path sparkling in the sun through gritty, strewn sand. Rolling onto my back like a cat in the sunlight, I wonder what Jane would think if she saw me now. I am, or rather, we are 21-years-old. I spend my nights drinking wine and vodka in cool, grimy bars and I have weekly intellectual debates over pad thai and milkshakes at the Red Room, while

studying Cinema at U of T (la-dee-da). I live in a big old house downtown with three of my awesome friends and I don't own any white underwear at all. Apart from being student-poor (which has a certain charm, anyways), I am remarkably, wonderfully content. There are only two lies that I tell on a regular basis: One, that my favourite movie is *Viridiana*, when it's actually *Encino Man*; and Two, that I do not have a twin. My friends know I have a sister who's older than me (2 minutes, but who's counting?) and that she's travelling somewhere, but apart from that I don't elaborate. The longer it goes on, the happier I seem to be, and after two and a half years in Toronto without seeing her once, it almost doesn't feel like a lie.

My cheeks are flushed from the heat of the sun and I have to leave for class soon, so I pull myself up and scan the room for my bag, eventually spotting it under the desk where I threw it last night. Kneeling down on the floor, I grab it and dump the contents onto the rug: four pens; three lip glosses in varying colours; a battered notebook filled with lecture notes, random thoughts and grocery lists; a textbook: *Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*; several Band-Aids and elastic bands; a novelty pencil sharpener in the shape of the CN Tower; crumpled receipts, and thirty-seven cents worth of loose change. This means my wallet is hidden somewhere else in the house at large. I shove the contents back into the bag and right myself with a groan; my short denim skirt and tights make standing up surprisingly difficult, since I seem to have inexplicably pulled several muscles last night. Straightening out my skirt, I sling the bag onto my shoulder and open the heavy wooden door, stepping out into the hall where the thin-strip oak floor creaks beneath me. I swing myself onto the stairs, my hand on the green painted newel post like Gene Kelly in *Singin' in the Rain*. There are spindles missing from the banister that runs along the hallway to Jillian's room, and they are sporadic at best on the steps leading downstairs. Two balusters act as permanent doorstops that also come in handy for impromptu sword fights. Boots and shoes are piled in a salt-stained mass next to the front door, with a precarious-looking collection of coats hung from two rusty old hooks on the wall. Atop the dirty doormat – a cutting of old green broadloom – today's mail is strewn artfully beneath the metal letter slot, imprinted on the outside with "Post", so nicely old-fashioned and English-sounding. I bend down to pick up the pile and glance through it as I walk to the kitchen at the back of the house: Hydro bill,

Canadian Tire flyer, things that aren't for me, and a postcard. I drop the rest of the mail onto the sticky enamel kitchen table and take a look at the postcard. On the front 'Vancouver' declares itself in bright yellow false handwriting, with a jaunty diagonal underline cutting through the sky. The city – tall buildings, a harbour with a bridge in the middle, and mountains beyond – is displayed to full advantage on what must have been a rare sunny day. I flip the card over, but apart from the address and my name, it's blank. My name. It takes me a minute to register that this was actually sent to me. This fact is more shocking than the lack of text, because the handwriting is unmistakably, undeniably, Jane's.

My hand is shaking as I hold the postcard between my fingers, staring at the address, flipping it back to front. Vancouver. Jane must be in Vancouver. Again, this needn't be a shock, and presumably the rest of the family knows exactly where she is, but I don't ask, *I don't know*. Life is better this way, not knowing. I look over my shoulder to make sure no one else is in the room, even though I know my housemates aren't home. Why did she send me this? What am I supposed to do with it? Still holding it, I open the fridge door that's covered with ridiculous magnets and lewd drawings made with a permanent marker on some alcohol-fuelled evening, and grab the carton of chocolate milk, pop open the spout and chug it back, never taking my eyes from the card in my hand. Some milk dribbles down my chin and I pitch forwards, trying to avoid it going down my sweater as brown droplets hit the dirty floor by my toes. I put the carton back in the fridge and that's when I spot my wallet on top of some eggs. Unquestioningly, I pick up the heavy blue leather bulk, strangely cold and hard now, and drop it into my bag before turning my gaze back to the postcard. My breath feels shaky and the room has turned darker; a cloud must have passed over the sun. A pot hanging from a nail on the wall shows me my reflection; garbled and faint, just a watery face with a mess of fake red hair.

I take the textbook out of my bag and shove the postcard between its pages, before roughly dropping the book back in and stomping out of the kitchen. At the front door, I pull on my Uggs, shrug on my pea coat, followed by mitts, scarf, and toque and turn the latch. A blast of cold air hits me in the face and I breathe in deeply. Pausing on the porch for a minute, I fight the urge to run, the snow drifts and old boards creaking

and crunching beneath my shifting feet. I settle on a brisk pace as I set off down the trampled, but un-shovelled, snowy path and walk towards Harbord Street on my way to Innis College. The tall brick houses lining the street with their painted verandas, some taken care of by doting homeowners and the rest perverted by 1970s iron railings, slider windows, and chesterfields on the porch, seem to glitter in the too-bright winter light. As my bag bumps against my side, all I can feel is the postcard digging into me, glowing in the depths of the patchwork pouch. When I reach Ojji's Variety, I spy through the stickers and signs in the window advertising ice cream, pizza, and Pepsi, a metal rack filled with postcards. Turning on my heel, I push open the door of the shop. It's warm and quiet within and the shopkeeper is reading a book. He barely looks up at me, engrossed by his paperback. I feel oddly desperate to read this book too, to talk to this man, to ask, "Why did she send it? What does she want?" But instead, I turn the squeaky rack of postcards with mittened hands in silence. *Toronto!* they proclaim, with a few cheats declaring *Niagara Falls!*, while at the bottom of the rack, a couple of dusty, forgotten cards wait with curled corners: one says simply *CANADA* with a picture of a bored-looking wolf, and another says *MOSCOW* across a pink sky, the sun setting behind three grim, grey Communist apartment blocks. A short laugh escapes me and the shopkeeper puts down his book. I place the Russian postcard on the counter with a roll of Bubble Tape – because why not? – and before I've left the store, the man is already re-engrossed in his book. He flicks a page loudly, shooing me out of the shop and back into the cold.

Pausing on the sidewalk, I wrestle with the plastic case of the bubble gum and pull out a long strip, ripping it off and shoving it all into my mouth. The dusty pink mass fills my cheeks before I slowly chew it into a respectable, juicy wad. Sugary spit trickles down my throat and I look at the new postcard in my hand. I'm happy, I tell myself; this morning I was happy. I blow a large bubble that goes stiff in the cold, popping in cracks on my chin. As I gather the gum back into my mouth, I decide not to go to class after all and step off the kerb, heading anywhere but home.

Sitting now with my housemates watching a re-run of *The Simpsons*, with the wind howling outside and a potential blizzard brewing, I am very aware of how I totally

wasted my day. I wandered around the city for five hours this afternoon, going in and out of Robarts Library, through Chinatown and Kensington Market, battered by the bitter wind and coughing from clouds of exhaust, and finally stopping in a Starbucks to drink a sickeningly sweet caramel mocha with whipped cream that nearly turned my stomach, while I sat staring at the two blank postcards. I was all set to mail one to Jane, having written her name on it and composed a message: “*What?*” – when I realised I didn’t have her address. And since I didn’t want to go home and I didn’t want to call Mum and Dad or Gramps, I just sat there, watching the cream separate atop the hot coffee, poking it with a wooden stir stick that left a sliver in my thumb. So now, curled up on the beaten old couch with my unread textbooks between Jillian and me, and the boys – Steve and Ryan – sprawled on the other sofa with their feet nestled into the pile of dirty dishes, magazines, and old take-out containers on the cluttered coffee table, part of me wonders why I was so unnerved today, and yet I have one eye on the postcard poking out of the textbook by my toes.

Although we’ve all been sitting here in comfortable silence, perfectly on cue with Mr. Burns, Jillian and I say in unison, “We’ll take the Spruce Moose! Hop in!”, when Smithers replies from the television set, “But Sir...” and the boys say, cocking finger guns at us, “I said, hop...in.” We’re all laughing, and my heart swells; I am content and at home. Sometimes I think I never felt at home before I lived here, and I almost believe it. It’s easier than remembering things like endless Saturdays spent concocting elaborate stories in our fort, or Gramps showing us how to build a fire out in the bush, or Mum baking us cookies, or even Dad absentmindedly playing the piano as we’d listen, unseen, from the other room. I can’t seem to find one memory that isn’t about *us*, that’s just mine. It’s infuriating, as though Jane has taken ownership of my memory and now my consciousness too. In the summer and most of Christmastime, when my friends all go back to their respective homes, I stay in Toronto alone because it’s better than being in Dawn, remembering. And ever since Gramps moved out to Queensville, Mum and Dad’s house is just unbearable. I can hear every clock tick; see dust floating through the air. Elderly Georgina is now the only sign of life, sleeping on my bed all day with her tail flicking towards Jane’s side of the room. It’s like that Edgar Allan Poe diorama on *The Simpsons*, slowly driving me towards foolish madness. I

don't want this ridiculous, cryptic postcard; I just want to be left alone.

I pull the hood of my navy U of T sweatshirt up onto my head and cross my arms, burrowing further into the couch. I'm resentful that Jane has commandeered my thoughts today, ruining this T.V. time, invading my space. The frayed corner of the postcard seems to point right at me like she's sitting between Jillian and me with an accusing finger. I stick my tongue out at it, but Jillian catches me and I blush when she asks, eyebrow lifted, "You alright?"

"Fine," I say, forcing a bright tone of voice, "just hungry." Jillian nods and the boys perk up.

Steve says, "Wanna order a pizza?" and we all stir. I can't think of a time when the answer has ever been 'no'.

Ryan says, "I only eat pepperoni."

"But dude, isn't that pork? I thought you didn't eat pork?"

"Why? Why would you say that to me?"

"I want a garlic dipping sauce," Jillian says.

"It comes with it," Steve replies, looking at a flyer he unearthed from the mess on the table.

"No, but I want one just for myself. My own personal tub of garlic."

"That's gross, yo."

"It's delicious."

"And pepperoni's not pork."

"Whatever you say, dude."

"Hey Lil, what do you want?" They all look at me and I realise I haven't said anything. I've never been so passive in a take-out situation.

"Hawaiian?" I'm surprised by my own voice. That's Jane's favourite.

"Now that's gross," Jillian says.

"It's classic," I reply, and we all decide to get two pizzas with four different halves. A democratic decision.

As we wait for the food to arrive, the wind picks up and heavy white snowflakes whirl outside the old window that lets in a frigid draught despite its plastic wrap curtain and masking tape seal. I swear I can hear a faint moaning somewhere in the distance,

but it's probably just the wind. Another episode of *The Simpsons* has come on and I can't believe it's the one with the dioramas.

"Guys... I was just thinking of this episode."

"Why?"

"I dunno, just was."

"Spooky! You're psychic."

I wish, I think, as if that would somehow cure me from being plagued by a postcard. I know I could just move it, or throw it away, but at once I want it close to me, to remind me it's real. The sound of mournful *meowing* reaches us from outside and we all look at each other.

"Okay, seriously, did you hear that?" My voice betrays a note of impatience, as though I'd already called attention to it several times before.

The others nod. Ryan says, "I thought I heard a cat before, but wasn't sure if it was just my stomach making noises." We all look briefly in the direction of Ryan's belly and he rubs it through his sweater.

Another long, woeful *mew* comes to us through the wind outside. I stand and shuffle in my slippers to the back door, opening it with a tug. A blast of cold air and blustering snow hits me, travelling straight through to the living room and the others rail, begging me to close the door.

"It's fucking freezing, Lil!"

"It's just some cat!"

"Close it!"

Slamming the door shut, I turn to them. "Guys, how can you be so heartless?" And head to the front door where I kick off my slippers and pull on my boots and coat and then march back through the room, winding my scarf around my neck as I go. The sound comes again, low and doleful. "Anyone gonna help me?"

They look at each other and Steve and Jillian reluctantly pull themselves up, the sofa springs creaking beneath them.

Ryan says, "I'll wait for the pizza – it's a very important job." Even though we know he's just avoiding going outside, someone has to do it, so the others bundle up too and, armed with flashlights, we head out into the cold.

The snow rests in soft drifts against the house and flakes swirl around us with each gust of wind. There is little moonlight on account of the storm, but light from the living room window casts a dim glow on the snowy yard, lighting our way before we flick on the flashlights. The back of the house, a tall sheer height of red bricks and bedroom windows, plus the aluminum-sided extension that is the kitchen, betrays no sign of where the sound is coming from. There's an old black walnut tree that rises high above the eaves, its branches touching the shingles and tapping Jillian's window on nights like these. In the late summer it drops fat green nuts on the ground, mostly ravaged by the squirrels, though occasionally pelting Steve's dead Chrysler LeBaron or one of us in the head. The wind whips our upturned faces as we stand in the snow, waiting for the sound to come again. "Miaooooow..." travels loudly down to us on the wind and we all look first to the tree, then up to the roof.

"We have to get up there!" I shout.

An icicle falls from the eaves and lands like a javelin in the drift by our feet.

"Score one for the 'deathcicle'," Steve says, impressed.

"Are you sure the sound came from the roof?" Jillian asks, looking at the icy spear before us. But the cat cries again, louder now, so we all start kicking and brushing snow off the rickety old ladder lying against the kitchen wall. No one considers calling the fire department, like a sensible cartoon cat rescue. The three of us struggle to hoist the frozen old ladder up against the wall. Once we've got it relatively steady, we all look at each other, waiting for someone to actually climb it.

Jillian says, "You go, it was your idea," and she steps backwards, as if we're going to force her onto the ladder.

"Me? But I'm afraid of heights!" This is actually a blatant lie. However, I am genuinely afraid of the old ladder and the rusty gutter it's leaning on. We look to Steve.

"Wimps," he says, gripping the sides with his gloves and stepping onto the first rung. Jillian holds the bottom, while I aim my flashlight up towards the roof. When Steve is half-way up, he stops and shouts down, "Did you see that?"

"See what?" I shout up, getting a mouthful of flurries.

"That!" He shouts back and there's a flash near the gutter – two bright green eyes reflected into the night. Steve climbs higher and the wind picks up. Jillian tries to

anchor the ladder into the ground as it crunches ominously on the snow. When Steve reaches the top, I pan the flashlight's beam across the roof and onto the neighbours' rooftops as well. Turning to look down at us he says, "There's nothing up here. Just snow." The meowing comes again and he quickly turns back to the roof, but still no sign.

"Are there paw prints?"

"I dunno. It's too windy. The snow's all blown around." He's about to climb down when he says, "Holy shit!" It looks like he's holding onto the eaves trough, only his arm has disappeared up to his elbow. "Guys! There's a fucking hole in the roof!"

"A what?" Jillian says.

"A hole!"

"Then fix it, dear Henry, dear Henry," I sing up to him and they both ignore me indulgently.

"I think it's in the attic," Steve says, already climbing down the ladder. When he reaches the bottom, he jumps down into the snow and the last rung snaps. "Shit, guy," he says and Jillian and I carefully lay the ladder back down in the snow against the house. When we re-enter the warm kitchen, kicking off our snowy boots and throwing our coats and hats on the radiator, Ryan is still sitting on the couch where we left him, but eating a slice of pizza.

"You owe me six bucks each," he says, cracking open a can of pop that hisses for effect.

"Ryan, you 'tard, why didn't you tell us it was here?"

Steve and Jillian sit down, ready to eat, and Ryan shrugs, but I'm still jumpy.

"What about the cat?" I say, and they look at me wearily.

"Pizza now, cat later," Steve says, folding a slice in half and stuffing it in his mouth. The pizza box is balanced precariously on the coffee tables' garbage pile. I sit down with them and take a piece of my Hawaiian half, nibbling absentmindedly.

"Can you look a little less worried, Lil? You're making it hard to enjoy this disgusting delicacy," Ryan says, gulping back his Coke.

Jillian says with a mouthful of food and garlic sauce on her cheek, "Yeah Lil, 'chillax'. We'll carry on the mission in a minute."

The Simpsons is just ending on the T.V. and Ralph Wiggum says to all of us, “My cat’s breath smells like cat food.”

“Come on, as if that isn’t a sign?” I say, and they all sigh, rise from their seats and, with half-eaten slices in hand, we make our way upstairs. Ryan also carries his can of pop and the pizza box under one arm.

“What? It’ll get cold,” he says, reaching the top of the stairs and dropping the box on the floor of the corridor. We all gaze up at the attic hatch at once. None of us have ever explored up there before, finding it vaguely sinister and also boring, since we’re pretty sure it’s just a repository for dead mice and dust. Still though, this whole expedition has the air of a Nancy Drew mystery and, being the unofficial leader, I feel like I am the designated girl sleuth.

Taking another Hawaiian slice from the box, I pick off a piece of pineapple and pop it in my mouth before addressing the others. “So, who wants to go up there?”

Jillian looks at the floor, and Steve says, “I climbed the ladder...”

A sorrowful “Miaowww” floats down to us through the floor, louder now that we’re upstairs.

None of us even look at Ryan, so I say, “Okay, I guess that means me.”

“I believe in you, Lily,” Ryan says with a tomato sauce grin.

Steve rolls a desk chair out from Ryan’s bedroom and, holding my pizza in my mouth for safe-keeping, I climb up on the swivelling, rocking seat. I give the thin old rope above a yank and the wooden flap falls with a cloudburst of dust and I cough my now-cobwebbed pizza onto the floor. Ryan, sitting cross-legged next to the pizza box says, “Awesome,” while Steve reaches up to help me pull down the ladder. I rub my hands together and tentatively climb up, balancing precariously on each rung in my fuzzy leopard print slippers until my head is inside the dark attic.

“What if it’s actually a raccoon or something?” Jillian says.

“What’s it look like up there?” Ryan calls up to me, but I can’t see a thing apart from a spot of light where I assume the mysterious hole is.

“I dunno, pass me a flashlight.” I hold my hand out towards them and a flashlight is placed in my grasp. Switching it on, I pan it around the inside of the attic. There’s no floor, only beams filled with very old insulation that looks like giant rolls of

grey dust bunnies. Old newspapers are pasted onto the sloped ceiling where the plaster and lathe has dropped away, a patchwork of shoddy repairs. The air up here is cold and stale, and dust, or maybe asbestos, tickles the inside of my nose. I poke my head back into the hall and say to the eager, upturned faces of my friends, “You should all look at it, even though there’s nothing up here.” I’m half disappointed not to find a secondary mystery, like an old chest or a bundle of letters tied in faded red ribbon. That would be ideal. This reminds me briefly again of the postcard, but I push the image out of my mind. Shining the flashlight towards the back wall, two glowing green eyes appear again, followed by another mournful “meow”.

“Right guys, I’m going in!” Carefully, I hoist myself up and balance shakily on the beams. I’m almost certain that if I step on the old insulation, I might just fall straight through the floor into one of our bedrooms, but I press forward, stepping lightly and holding onto the ceiling joists for support. “Here, *mew-mew-mew...*” I say softly into the darkness, while the wind and snow batter the roof above me, seemingly threatening to take the shingles right off. When I’m about a metre from the wall, two pointed ears appear within a pile of ripped up fibreglass. Do cats make nests? I squat down as best I can and set the flashlight by my feet, trying to coax the cat out with soft calls and outstretched fingers. Slowly, a head appears; black and white and surprisingly gentle, but it won’t come any closer. The ladder creaks and Steve pops his head inside the attic.

“Woah, it’s so creepy up here!” The noise startles the cat and it ducks down.

“Shh...” I say, “pass me a piece of pizza – one with meat on it.”

“Okay.” Steve disappears and repeats the request to the others. I can hear Ryan moan and Jillian tease him, and shortly Steve reappears. He tosses the pizza towards me and I actually manage to catch it. “Sweet,” he says.

“Thanks.” I hold out the pizza towards the kitty-nest and call softly again. The cat reappears and hesitates for a moment, but is evidently so hungry it forgets to be afraid and steps deftly across the beams to sniff the food. When it takes a lick, I extend a hand and stroke the cat’s head between its ears. To my surprise, it doesn’t run, flinch, or recoil, but calmly nibbles a piece of pineapple.

Steve’s head appears again and I hear him whisper excitedly down to Ryan and Jillian, having spotted the cat. “Hold your light for me,” I say, as I reach down and

actually pick up this surprisingly large feline. Its limbs hang straight out before me like a mummy and although stiff, it doesn't struggle. Holding my breath as I step from beam to beam in my stupid slippers, I hand the cat down to a surprised Steve who takes it like he's holding a baby, then passes it down to Jillian, who walks it straight into my room. After Steve has made it off the ladder, I climb down too and muss my hair to rid myself of invisible cobwebs before we all hurry into my room and shut the door. The cat has run into a corner and while we don't want to startle it, we don't really know what else to do, so we sit down in a circle on the carpet amid my mess. Ryan has managed to transport the pizza yet again, and he opens the box and offers it to us.

"I left that piece of pizza in the attic," I say, looking towards the door as if I'm going to go back and get it.

"A feast for the mice," Jillian says, shrugging.

We cast glances at the cat hoping ignoring it will coax it closer. It's washing its face with one eye on us. We stay like this for a moment, giving each other helpless looks, when Steve says, "What're we gonna do with it?"

"Name it?" Ryan surprises us all and we don't even notice that the cat has tiptoed slowly towards us. Ryan jerks his chin at the space behind me and I turn to see the cat by my elbow, eyeing up the pizza by our feet. Thick fur, streaked with dirt, and claws getting caught in the weave of the carpet are its only visible signs of distress. I gently stroke its head again and this time it responds by leaning into my hand. This sign of affection is so unexpected, so strangely beautiful, that suddenly I'm choked up, only I don't want my friends to see. Carefully, I pick the cat up and place it in the middle of our little pow-wow. It looks at us gamely, walking around the circle and giving everyone a sniff, before actually climbing into my lap. I barely move, for fear it'll bolt, so instead we're all very still, and also enraptured. A transformation is visible in everyone's faces; softened and amazed by this gentle soul who has unexpectedly moved into our silly student house.

"It's an attic cat," Jillian says, holding out her hand to its pink nose.

"It's a man cat," says Steve, cocking his head to the side to get a look.

"Atticat," Ryan says, "No, Atticus!" and we laugh, gazing at the cat like it's a newborn baby. Atticus. That's his name.

“So, I guess we’re keeping him, eh?” I grin at everyone and they grin back. Joy radiates through the room, and Atticus echoes it with his loud purring. I’m happy, I think to myself. I’m still happy.

In bed now, with Atticus bathed and fed, and curled up by my feet, I look again at Jane’s postcard. All day I’ve been imagining a million motivations for her sudden contact and most of them have been malicious. And yet, when I first got under the covers and Atticus was kneading the blanket on my lap, he paused to paw at the postcard tucked in the book next to me. Of course, he was only playing, but I’ve been sort of struck by coincidences today. ‘Synchronicity’ always makes me think of that album by The Police and how they hated each other in the end, but *Serendipity* was a pretty good movie, so maybe that’s what this is instead.

I run my thumb over the glossy view of Vancouver, and then again across her carefully defined writing; always in neat block letters, no matter how many times our teachers complained. Maybe I’ll write to her tomorrow... or if not tomorrow, then next week... I place the postcard on my nightstand, leaning it against the lamp so that it’s the last thing I will see tonight, and the first thing tomorrow. I’ll write her soon though, really soon, I think, burrowing down into the covers and with one last look at the snowy night outside, I switch off the light.

CHAPTER 6

Nuit Blanche

The Indian summer is showing signs of waning. Dry brown leaves line the sidewalks, but people walk past them pretending not to see, or to hear the crunching underfoot. When they squint into the sun in their thin t-shirts and sandals, making comments about how gorgeous the weather is, I can't help but feel smug when they're suddenly made foolish after nightfall, rubbing the goose bumps off their arms. It's getting darker too, and yet everyone's still surprised. "Can you believe it?" they say, "dark by seven o'clock already?" and I nod and smile, as if I too am amazed. This extended summer is making me weary, though. I feel so drowsy in the heat; it's as if my eyes can't focus and I'm barely awake all day. I can't wait for Fall – I want to be wearing wool and leather boots and to feel the nip of cold on my cheek. Tonight I keep taking my hoodie on and off, which is both necessary and annoying, as we shift in and out of doors, through hot throngs and night breezes. The 'Comedians', who presumably read weather reports or are simply more committed to their 'look', have dressed much more astutely than me.

This is the second annual *Nuit Blanche* in Toronto. Spaces that are normally silent, dark, or even sinister, are aglow with people, activity and art – or, at least, that's how this night is supposed to be. So far the crowds have been so thick that the art has remained an elusive prize that may or may not exist. We've been walking for hours already – Jessica, her brother Matt, Jess's friends, and me – but it's only just past midnight. They're all comedians, except for Matt, which is not a fault in itself. I've met some of them before at parties and shows, but the more time I spend with them, the more convinced I am that they aren't real people. They don't speak to me, but rather joke at me, and they're never interested in my response. If I say something funny, they don't laugh, but instead look at me with narrowed eyes and pursed lips, as if they're filing away my quips to use later in their acts. For the most part as we walk, I hang back and get lost in the crowds, though the others rarely notice. Tonight, Jessica is one of the Comedians and I am largely ignored.

Before I left Dawn tonight, I already knew this was a mistake. I shouldn't have

come; I'm not in the mood to socialize and I would've been better off on the sofa eating cookies and reading celebrity gossip on the internet with Georgina and Atticus beside me. I spent four years living in Toronto, but tonight, after a year back in Dawn, I feel like an apathetic tourist in the city. On my way downtown, I sullenly leant my head on the bus window and searched the dense brush beyond the highway for hobos' huts, while listening to the entirety of Radiohead's *OK Computer*. Sometimes I'm afraid that living with my parents this long has caused me to revert to a state of adolescent angst, but at least a bit of retro-music distracted me from my general, seemingly permanent, state of boredom.

By the time I got to Jessica's house and walked into a room of awkward hipster Comedians while wearing a U of T hoodie, old jeans, wool socks and Birkenstocks, I was about ready to turn around and go home. But instead, I'd been met by Matt who stood up, handed me a beer and said, lip twitching and blue eyes twinkling, "Hey... when was the last time I saw you?" So I smiled back, twisting my mouth into an amused pout, and all I could think was, 'You must think I'm Jane'.

"Long time."

"No kidding," he smiled wryly. "Well, I'm driving back up to Dawn tomorrow, you know, if you want a ride. We can catch up and stuff," he said, digging a hand into his pocket.

I thought of how nervous I used to be around him, how he never seemed ruffled, or even young. In my mind, 17-year-old Matt is older and more intimidating than the 26-year-old man here tonight.

"Okay, great," I said, sitting down on the carpet and sipping my beer.

"Great." He grinned and I had to look away.

We stayed at Jess' for about an hour drinking beers to save money later and eating a particularly pungent bowl of guacamole that made me nervous too, since avocados tend to make me fart, and once I'd calmed down enough to enjoy myself, it was time to set off. The path we've taken to get to where we are now is hazy in my mind. I just followed the others blindly, not really paying attention to where streets or subway cars led. We were outside Casa Loma around 10:30 when, seeing the line-up snaking down the winding drive, Jess lit up a joint. After taking a long toke, she passed

it round our little circle of six, starting with Gerhard to her right. When Larissa, who has yet to address me once so far, passed it to me, I raised a hand and said, “No thanks,” my heart fluttering in my chest because I already couldn’t stomach the alcohol we’d drunk. Sometimes it’s as though I’m impervious to the effects. I don’t get drunk, I get nauseous; I don’t get high, I get dizzy; my body skips over the fun part, so there just isn’t any point. But then Jess said, “Why not? Lame!” and the others laughed as if it was the funniest joke they’d ever heard. That’s another thing I’ve noticed about the Comedians: they’re rarely very funny.

“Just don’t feel like it,” I said, and Amber, a Comedian with dyed black hair, dark-rimmed glasses, and ironically bedazzled jeans exhaled and said with a scoff, “What, they don’t get high in the ‘burbs?”

“What?”

“Don’t you live in Dawn?”

“Yeah... so?”

She smiled with pursed lips, sweet and evil like Brenda on *90210*. “Nothing, just joking.”

I stare at her, my eyebrows knitted, knowing I’ve been insulted but also unclear as to how or why. In the past I would’ve felt desperate to tell them that I lived in Toronto for four years; that I know the city too, that Dawn isn’t all that bad or that far from here, but I couldn’t be bothered. They finished smoking their joint and we moved on without even stepping inside the castle. We went from subway to streetcar down to Chinatown to stop for noodles, then back up to Church and Wellesley to cavort with the drag queens and I kept on waiting to enjoy myself, but instead just ended up with aching feet. Jess invited me out tonight with the promise that it would be the time of my life, but so far it feels reminiscent of a death march.

Right now we’re sitting on the grass in a parkette off Church Street watching some erotic circus performers. The grass itself is sparse and my hands rest on patches of cool, packed earth that is slightly damp from an early dew. Maybe it’ll leave wet muddy patches on the pockets of my jeans – or maybe not, it doesn’t really matter. There’s a woman in lacy lingerie coiling slowly down a long bolt of blue silken cloth, suspended between two not-so-sturdy-looking poles while Nine Inch Nails plays tinnily in the

background. The Emcee is dressed like Joel Grey in *Cabaret*, while the circus girls – acrobats, I guess – have artfully applied their best Courtney Love make-up. The crowd is variously rapt, bored, and drunk. Someone from our group stands and it's understood that we're moving on to the next installation, so I pick myself up, patting potential dirt off my bum, and follow the others.

As we push through the crowd on the street, I look up at the open space above and consider that perhaps it's called *Nuit Blanche* because all of the lights left on around the city have bleached the stars out of the night sky. I wish Jane was here. That's a strange thought, since I don't think of her much, but I imagine us together – giddy and drunk, meeting strangers and running wild, alternatively mocking and praising the art, or giving up the trek to eat street meat and or hit up some random bar where we'd stay out 'til dawn because we'd lose track of time and then drag ourselves home on a morning bus in happy, shared silence. But that's silly – it's been so long since I've seen her, I don't really know her now at all.

Porn flickers on tavern televisions as we walk down Church, dodging balloon and doughnut sellers as we go, and it's like we're at some sort of homosexual fairground until we reach Queen Street and hop on a packed and smelly streetcar towards Parkdale. Amber snags the only free seats, plopping down on the dirty red upholstery and pulling Matt down beside her. I'm sandwiched between Matt and a woman whose bag digs sharply into my side and with each lurch of the streetcar, everyone standing sways in unison on a collective sea of nausea. I'm counting the stops with each ding of the bell as though this is the longest ride of my life and Matt smiles sympathetically up at me and I half-shrug, half-wince as I open my mouth to speak, but I'm cut short when Amber takes Matt's chin in her hands and turns his face to her. "I can't believe Jessica never told me what a babe she has for a brother," she says pushing out her lips and grinning at him. I don't even realise I've rolled my eyes until she casts me a sharp look through her thick glasses, which only makes me roll my eyes again. We finally reach CAMH and as soon as we hop off, I breathe in the fresh air to get the smell of feet out of my nose before taking in that every gallery we see is packed with people. Some we don't even bother trying and others we force our way into, with me always following last on our snaking route through the crowds. As I watch Amber entwine her fingers with Matt's, the art

exists in my periphery and I'm jostled and jabbed as we go. When everyone else grows tired of this too, we follow a train of people to Trinity Bellwoods Park in search of the star art attraction of the evening: a life-size stag made entirely of chocolate, which the artist encourages all spectators to break a piece off and eat.

On our search for the stag, we walk down a slope towards a lit white tent. Matt is rubbing Amber's back as we enter through a tied open flap. She lies down on a bed that's supposed to be a work of art and Matt pretends to give her CPR, while they both pretend he's not just copping a feel of her boobs. Jess says loudly, "Don't be such a perv with my friends, Matt! Gawd!" and everyone else laughs. Someone takes a picture. It's a moment of fun; something to smile at and remember tomorrow. I recognize this, but feel nothing. Matt and Amber move closely together after springing from the bed and now they follow last as we exit the tent and walk up the path towards the tennis courts.

When we eventually find the infamous stag, it's sheltered beneath a giant marquee that looks like an outdoor branch of the Bank of Nova Scotia, surrounded by a dense and buzzing crowd. Those with an entrepreneurial spirit are selling glow sticks and key chains and we deflect them by pushing past other art enthusiasts and probable pick-pockets as we try to infiltrate the crowd. No one gets very far though, and only Matt manages to get a piece of chocolate. I'm too short to see the confectionary carcass and the crushing crowd makes my heart pound in my chest. I'm taking deeper and deeper breaths, my eyes darting across the crowd searching for the others until before I know it, I'm pushing my way out towards the safety of the darkened path.

My chest feels tight. There are tingling pins and needles on my forehead and I'm dizzy. Just breathe, I think, these feelings aren't real, but I'm having trouble convincing myself. I feel better outside, at least. The tight indoor spaces with throngs of people and no toilets in sight made me feel like I might faint-shit-vomit. The fluorescent city night feels safe, as long as we don't have to wait in anymore endless line-ups. But this is only true tonight. When winter comes and it's been snowing for days and the sky is white against the grey trees and grey houses and even the roads are covered in grey-white old snow, it sometimes feels like the sky is falling in on me, trapping me in the lonely, silent season. Then I feel safe in an armchair by the fireplace; curtains drawn and television

off, hidden from weather reports and reminders of the groundhog's inaccurate prediction of an early spring.

Matt appears beside me and asks me if I'm okay. I look at him, surprised, and then realise I'd nearly been hyperventilating. "I'm fine," I say, smiling through a shaky breath. He takes a small vial from his pocket and holds it out to me.

"You want some Valerian oil?" The unknown substance raises the panic into my oesophagus again, even more than that time when he offered me Ketamine at a party.

I know this is illogical, so I breathe out again and say, "No, thanks".

"You sure? You can just sniff it, or like, rub it on your head and shit? It's awesome."

"I'm fine. Really."

"Okay..." Matt shrugs and takes a whiff himself before putting the vial back in his pocket. Amber sidles up next to him and slips an arm around his waist before they walk off and, I assume, talk about how many times they're going to fuck later tonight.

Larissa gets a text from a friend who lives nearby. Apparently, there's a party and we're all welcome, though I can't help but wonder if they know that I'm here too. We start to cross the park again and I exhale amidst the yellow glow of the lamplight, feeling the tension and numbness drain steadily out of me. At least now, for a little while, we're leaving the *Nuit Blanche* behind.

The apartment is one of four in a squat, square building situated on the edge of the park. The building looks weary; its 1950s architecture hasn't aged well. The yellow brick and picture windows that let in too much cold in the winter and too much sun in the summer are dingy and greyed, while the open downstairs door welcomes us like a gaping mouth, ready to swallow us up. Gerhard leads the way into the hall where the scuffed white walls appear greenish in the harsh light. As we ascend the stairs, blistered paint peels off the banister, flaking onto the palm of my hand. I rub it on my thigh and it rains down onto the carpet like dandruff. When we reach the second floor, we're met by a remarkably pretty blonde woman whose white-toothed smile and diamond solitaire ring make me squint as though I'm staring straight at the sun.

"Come in!" she says, gesturing with her wide hand. She's wearing a black-sequined, backless top, and black satin pants that swish when she walks. She is

extraordinarily tall. The word ‘lady’ pops into my head, as in she’s a grown-up one and I am most definitely not. I tug at the strings on my sweatshirt and look down at how my bell-bottoms fall over my feet. My ponytail has become loose and wispy. The Comedians, on the other hand, are all dressed in cool, hipster-uniform: vintage tees, scarves from India, skinny jeans, and shoes carefully chosen to suggest individuality.

“Okay, basically, you look really hot,” Gerhard says to the woman, whose name is Lana, and Jess and Larissa nod emphatically in agreement.

“You guys!” she titters, though without pretension. Amber’s eyes flit between Lana and Matt, who is staring at this glowing woman with slightly parted lips. “Come and have a drink!” she says, and we follow her inside. The interior of the apartment glows with fresh white paint that makes me squint after the dingy hallway. I peer into the rooms as we pass, trying to suss out who these people are: the kitchen, preserved in 1950s glory, appliances and all, an emerald green countertop luminous above the checkerboard floor. In the monochrome washroom, I glimpse a framed diorama hung above the toilet of the CN Tower in silhouette. It reminds me of a straw mushroom, or maybe a penis. The next door, which I assume is the bedroom, is closed, though I run my fingers along the wood panels, shiny with decades of old oil paint.

When we reach the living room at the end of the corridor, a single, armless red upholstered chair sits at an anti-social angle in one corner. Two black futons with stainless steel legs face each other with a glass-topped, steel-based coffee table between them. Art and sculpture hang from the walls and stand in the corners and I think, this is the closest I’ve come to art all night. I’m afraid to lean or look too carefully at things for fear of breaking something, until I notice a price tag from Ikea only half peeled off a decorative lamp. There are no photographs of people anywhere, save for a black and white baby picture on the white enamel sideboard. I wonder if it came with the frame.

We’re not the first to arrive at the party, though. Six very well-dressed people are sitting on the futons. As far as I can tell, they’re only drinking clear types of liquor – vodka, gin and tonic (with lemon, not lime), and they’re all holding turquoise cocktail napkins on their knees, having sampled the hors d’oeuvres: platters of rolled up cold-cuts on toothpicks, black olives in a white bowl and those red candied peanuts you normally get at carnivals and fairs.

Jess and I lean against either side of the doorframe, looking in, while the other Comedians range themselves around the room. Only Matt gets a seat. I watch him sit in the red chair, which was apparently vacant for a reason. He plops down and leans back, finding himself almost fully reclined. The other guests pretend not to notice his awkward, grunting efforts to sit back up again. Next to the other guests, it seems as if the Comedians feel awkward and under-dressed too. They quickly churn out ironic jokes to impress the company, instead of just making conversation like normal people.

We soon find out that the well-dressed people, including our hostess, are all Actors. The Comedians suddenly consider themselves actors as well, and begin making dense jokes about The Business. I'm standing here smiling faintly at the conversation when Matt speaks loudly to me from across the room:

"Hey, Lily, did you try any of this good meat?" and he pops a roll of prosciutto into his mouth. I shake my head and shrug, but everyone turns to look at me, so I feel obliged to eat something. I step carefully over to the table, knocking one of the Actors' arms with my bag, and take a roll of Black Forest ham on a cocktail napkin. I smile at the assembled guests and make eye contact with another, paler, blonde actress, pausing with a look of recognition. Once I've retreated back to the doorway, everyone waits for me to take a bite of the ham. I bring it to my mouth and take a bite, chewing and humming "Mmm!" to satisfy their watchful eyes, and the group conversation resumes. Jessica is staring at the space I've just left and leans in close to me whispering, "Oh my God, is that...?"

"Yeah," I say as I swallow, "It's totally Sarah Stanley from *Road to Avonlea*."

The party happens around me. New guests keep arriving and upon entering the living room, each new person makes a beeline for the rolled meats before mouthing smugly bemused hellos to their acquaintances across the room. Having been abandoned by Jess, I snag a coveted vacant space on one of the futons. I drop down with relief, then realise everyone's bodies are turned away from me, engaged in conversation. I pull my hood onto my head and lean back exhaustedly, hugging my bag in my lap. I wonder if anyone would notice if I fell asleep? I don't dare close my eyes though, for fear I actually will. I decide to people-watch instead. Jess is talking closely with an Actor, touching his chest and laughing, while Gerhard watches her, scowling. Larissa is

nodding earnestly at a man in a tuxedo, holding her glass close to her shoulder where the condensation has left a wet patch on her shirt.

Sarah Stanley is sitting next to me. She turns to pick up an olive and smiles faintly at me. I smile back. Tired of my own silence, I attempt to make conversation. “Hey, did you ever live in Dawn?” I already know the answer is yes. She lived on Maple Street and had a white poodle.

“Yeah, how did you know?” says Sarah Stanley, surprised and somewhat friendly. I can’t say she just looked familiar; that’s a weak ruse. I decide to tell the truth.

“Well, I’m from there. When I was a kid there were rumours you lived in town and once I thought I saw you walking your dog.” I blush involuntarily and push my hood off of my head, casting down my eyelashes with a half-smile. As least I left out the other parts of the story; that Sarah Stanley was wearing bicycle shorts and was very skinny; that everyone at school thought she lived in the grey brick house with the three garages because we thought anyone who was on *CBC Sunday Night Family Hour* every week must have been really rich.

Sarah Stanley says, “Oh,” and that’s all. She eats her olive and turns back to her previous conversation partner. I lean back again and stretch my legs out, pointing and flexing my feet beneath the glass-topped coffee table. Jane’s feet have always been a full size bigger than mine.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Matt and Amber sitting cosily together on the red chair. He’s trying to make her laugh; an unwise move if he wants to bang a Comedian. She either smiles or cringes at him before scanning the room for someone ‘cooler’, or with better connections, to talk to. Matt puts his hand on her knee just as she spots a target and stands up. “Gerry! Hey!” She raises a hand and walks across the room without looking back. Matt looks briefly dejected, which strikes me as something I never expected to see; then he reaches over to the table for more meat and spots me.

“Hey, Lil!”

“Hi, Matt.”

He’s holding some mortadella that wiggles when he speaks. “So how long you been back in Dawn for?”

“Uhh, about a year?” That sounds too long.

“Oh yeah? Jess said you’d been there a while.”

“Did she?” This makes me feel strangely sad.

“So, ah, whaddya do for fun up there?”

“I dunno, drink at the Legion with the old men?”

“Serious?” He frowns and looks genuinely worried and I laugh, which feels wonderful.

“Ha, no, joking. Is there anything fun to do in Dawn?”

Matt chews as he speaks. “We could go bowling. You know, if you wanted to. I haven’t been to the Dawn Bowl in, like, years.”

Is he asking me out? I think of Jane asking him to open her beer all those years ago. “You’d come all the way to Dawn to go bowling?”

“Didn’t you know? I’m staying at my Mum’s right now.”

“No way!”

“Yeah, just ’til tree-planting season starts up again.”

“Oh, right. Well, yeah, we could go bowling.”

“Yeah, we could,” he says and flashes that old beautiful grin at me. We both laugh and reach for the candied peanuts at the same time. Matt winks and throws a peanut at me and I ignore the glance he casts to Amber across the room.

I feel better now that Matt is my ally. Amber has continued to flirt heavily with one of the well-dressed actors, so he’s stuck by me. In an effort to join the party, Matt and I vacate our seats and move through the crowd, so now we’re pressed against the bedroom door in the hallway. The apartment is fully packed with hip people whose bodies and egos swell in the hot, confined white space.

“These people all look like assholes,” I say to Matt over the din, “Except you,” and I give him a smile. He smiles back and we keep on people-watching. Someone in an award-ceremony suit, complete with bolero necktie, pushes past us, pressing me against Matt, oblivious. I look up apologetically and Matt looks back at me, observing my face. “You’re cute, eh?” He says, the corner of his mouth curling upwards.

“You’re like, the cutest girl ever...”

Matt moves closer and I think he’s leaning in to kiss me, when actually he’s

turned the knob on the bedroom door and it swings open. He pulls me by the wrist into the dark room, quickly closing the door behind us and the party is suddenly hushed; now just a din of sound and a crack of light across the threshold. The *Nuit Blanche* filters faintly through white, gossamer-like curtains and I drop my bag on the floor. Matt pulls me to him and kisses me. I lift my chin, kissing him back; insistent and warm as his hands grope under my sweatshirt. He pulls it over my head and lets it fall to the floor, revealing my tight white tank-top that glows softly in the dark. He clutches me tightly around the waist and with his free hand squeezes my breasts overtop my bra. His technique is obviously well-practised, but it's also comical; I always imagined he'd be so much better than this. I kiss him again and Matt shuffles us towards the bed. The white down duvet puffs with the impact of our bodies and he takes his t-shirt off. When he tugs at the waistband of my jeans, though, something changes. He opens the top button and my breath feels tight; my chest heaves. He unzips my fly and then hot tears sting my eyes and run down my flushed cheeks. I gasp and push Matt off me and when I sit up I start crying uncontrollably.

“What is it?” Matt asks, frightened. He places a hand on my back. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” I say breathlessly, “I’m sorry, I don’t know.” Quickly, I fasten my jeans and find my sweatshirt, wiping my eyes on the sleeves.

“Did I do something wrong? Are you okay?”

“No, I mean, I’m fine, just forget it...”

“Did somebody hurt you?”

“What? No.” I sniff and wipe my dripping nose with the back of my hand.

“Sorry ’bout this...”

“What? No, it’s cool... I just wanna know what’s wrong...”

“Honestly, it’s nothing. I’m just, not really up for it, I guess...” We sit in silence for a moment as I try not to cry. Matt lies back on the bed, baffled, I suppose, and soon I stand up and start moving towards the door. “I’m just gonna...”

“Okay, well, let me know about bowling...”

“Um, okay.”

Groping in the dark, I find my bag and slip out the door to the bright, hot corridor

where no one notices I'm crying.

Lana, the blonde actress-hostess is mixing lemon drops in the kitchen. Holding a black enamel cocktail shaker, she returns a frosty bottle of Grey Goose to the freezer. I've dried my eyes and put my hoodie around me like a shawl and Lana turns to me with a smile, pretending not to notice my red eyes and blotchy cheeks.

"I'm using fresh squeezed lemon juice!" She says gaily. I force a smile and raise an eyebrow to suggest that I'm impressed. Lana hands me a frosted juice glass with a sugared rim and pours in the cloudy yellow mixture. I lick some sugar from the rim and sip, trying not to screw up my face when the strong, tart liquid hits my tongue.

"It's not too sour for you, is it? I'm on a no-carb diet so I didn't add any sugar, except on the glass," she says.

"No," I say hoarsely, placing the glass on the countertop and wiping my hand, wet from the cold condensation, on my jeans, "It's just right." I press my lips into a smile again and raise the glass to take another sip. The cold acidic liquid burns my throat and I choke it down with a cough.

"So, do you have any brothers or sisters?" Her eyes are wide and kind.

"No," I say, "just me." I shrug.

Matt's voice floats in from the hall and my stomach twists. "Hey, is that Sarah Stanley? Isn't she famous or something?"

"Shut up, Matt!" It's Jess. A cloud of embarrassment follows her as she marches past the kitchen. The Comedians all panic like lemmings, following in her wake on their way out of the party.

"Thank you for the lemonade," I say to Lana and she smiles brightly as I leave the glass on the counter, trailing behind the others down the stairs and onto the street.

We're at a bar in Parkdale and I'm waiting for the dawn. Matt is talking to one of the bouncers at the door, while simultaneously moving his hand under the back of Amber's sweater. "Hey, do you guys like working this late? Did you see any cool fights or anything? It's a pretty cool night though, eh?" He's drunk, but the bouncers don't seem to care. They say something about not being able to beat some extra money and Matt agrees wholeheartedly. We lost Gerhard and Larissa after the party and Jess

doesn't know anyone else here, so she's latched onto me at last. We go inside and order gin and tonics that the bartender slides across to us on the wet bar. I suck mine through the straw in two gulps, even though it's pointless to try to get drunk now.

"So tonight was fun, eh?" Jess says, bopping her head to 'Hey Ya', by Outkast.
"I guess."

Jess gives me a brief look, but decides not to ask why I've been so miserable all night. I'm not even sure I know, now – maybe tonight could have been fun if I'd only tried harder. I just don't have much motivation for anything these days. When I think about it, which I try not to, my friends have all scattered, I don't even know what a job 'in my field' is, let alone how to get one, and my sister is just someone I used to know. I got a raise at Shopper's Drug Mart though, and I beat my own high score on *Dance Dance Revolution*, so there's that. Moving to the dance floor, we sway lazily to 'The Sign' by Ace of Base, swinging our arms and turning around each other as the bar crowd thins with the approaching dawn. Matt and Amber appear nearby and Amber watches me suspiciously, but I just stare blankly back at her before closing my eyes, continuing to move and sway to the music. I know that Matt is watching me now, watching me because I've ceased to care, but there's little satisfaction in it for that very reason. The bartender rings the bell for last call and when I open my eyes I see streaks of hazy purple and pink sweeping across the sky through the open door. We order more drinks, I don't know why, and the four of us sit at a table looking out at the room with bleary eyes.

"I wish I could blink and find myself in my bed," I say.

Matt places his hand on Amber's knee and she says, "Me too." Jess and I catch each other's eye and raise an eyebrow faintly at each other until she spies Matt watching me and shifts in her seat.

"You really look like Matt, Jess." I'm regarding her with my head cocked and my eyelids heavy, as though I'm just thinking aloud. It's true, but I also know it'll piss her off.

"Well...you look like your sister," she says, meaning it as an insult, but laughing when she realises what she's said.

Matt and I are laughing now too, and Amber says, irritated at being left out, "Most people do look like their siblings. I don't get what the big deal is."

Matt squeezes her knee and says, “It’s just, Lily’s an identical twin.”

I look at him directly now, and he casts down his eyes to stare at his hands, unable to hold my gaze.

Ice melts in our glasses, having already finished our drinks, and we all stand up slowly to start walking back to Jess’s house. It’s not far from here, but we shuffle our aching feet on the pavement beneath the quickly lightening sky. Matt and Amber hang back to kiss and giggle and Jess and I pretend not to notice. When we reach the front porch, Matt says, “I think I’d better walk Amber home...” even though she only lives around the corner. He glances quickly at me, but I just stare at him flatly, pausing by the screen door.

“Whatever, Matt. You guys are totally just gonna go bone,” Jess says, unbothered now, and Matt and Amber giggle again and skip off down the street. Jessica and I make weak jokes about saying good morning instead of goodnight and she goes into her room and closes the door. I wriggle out of my clothes and pull on my nightgown before collapsing on the couch. Too tired to sleep, I watch the sky through the window turn from pale grey to yellow, and yellow to blue before I eventually drift off as sunlight starts to fill the room.

It’s just after noon and I’m getting dressed in Jess’s living room. The breeze wafting through the open window carries a faint bitterness as it rustles the leaves on the maples outside. The season has turned. Sunlight dapples the carpet by my feet and I can’t seem to remember why I was so nervous last night, almost as if it wasn’t real. I pull on my tank top and tie my hair up into a loose ponytail, catching sight of myself in the mirror above the mantle. I look sort of pretty, if a little weary, and I wonder why I felt so shitty about myself last night, too. Just as I’m doing up my jeans, the front door opens and Matt appears.

“Hey, Lil!” he says brightly, with a faint twitch of the eyebrow. “I’m still driving to Dawn if you want a ride, but we’re gonna go to the zoo first. Do you wanna come to the zoo?”

I assume ‘we’ means he and Amber. “No, Matt, I don’t want to go to the zoo.” Then, lighter, “I already called my Grandpa. He’s gonna pick me up from Finch.”

Matt looks disappointed, or relieved. “Sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Okay, see ya around Dawn then... bowling! Remember?”

“Oh, right, yep.”

“Okay!” He turns and leaves, bounding down the porch steps to his waiting car.

I pull on my sweatshirt, sling my bag on my shoulder and once I’m sure Matt has gone, I don’t bother saying goodbye to Jess before walking to the subway, shoulders back and facing the day.

CHAPTER 7

Rescue

“There’s been a real problem with the foxes and coyotes this year.”

“Mmm,” I furrow my brow and purse my lips in concern at Phyllis, the large woman standing before me in pink and green plaid pants and a pilled sweatshirt adorned with a painted Persian cat in shades of cream and brown. Reaching into her fanny pack, she pulls out a pack of Players Light King Size, shaking one loose and pointing it at me.

“No, thanks. Don’t smoke.” I shrug, glancing at Gramps and he crosses his arms, grumbling.

She turns it around and puts the cigarette to her lips, struggling to light it in the blustery wind. We’re sitting on folding chairs in the middle of a field somewhere near Queensville, manning the silent auction for the Evans County Cat Rescue Network. Gramps might be miserable, but I’m glad he’s here. As much as I like helping out the kitties of the world, all of these cat ladies assembled in one place sort of freak me out. I’m afraid that this is a glimpse into my future.

Earlier today my second-oldest friend Katie called to tell me amid joyous laughter that she’s pregnant. I was sitting on the bed in our old room, mine and Jane’s, and when she broke the news, I dropped the cup of yogurt I was eating and spilled it all over the bedspread. I tried to be really normal on the phone so that Katie wouldn’t know my real reaction, but she heard me whisper, “Shit, shit, shit,” and asked if I was alright. “I’m fine!” I said too loudly, “Just spilled something!” as I scraped the blueberry-Astro-fruit-bottom off the cotton and back into the cup with my spoon. “I guess, yeah, sorry, congratulations! That’s amazing. I’m just, uh, my slippers are making my feet sweat.”

“What?”

“Nothing. That’s just, wow.”

“I know! I’m so happy! I can’t believe it. Do you have Janey’s UK phone number? She’s gonna freak the fuck out when I tell her. Oh, and Stewart and I are thinking of buying a house! Isn’t that crazy?” and she laughed again.

Placing the re-filled cup of fuzzy yogurt on the nightstand I said, wincing, “Totally crazy. Uh, you know, I don’t know her number off hand... Sorry, I just don’t

know what to say... congratulations, of course! Oh, you know what, my Mum's calling me, I'm so sorry, I should really go..." I lied.

"Oh, right, okay, well then, talk to you soon? We have to get together – I'm even starting to show!"

"Are you? Oh my God. Wow. Okay, yeah, we'll do that soon... Right, sorry, bye!" and I hung up on her because I'm a huge jerk. I sat there with my sticky hands in my lap, looking around at our old room: once housing toys and posters, two twin beds and a dresser in between, it's now totally transformed. The double bed in the centre of the room is like an island and although the view outside is largely the same, minus the willow which was struck by lightning years ago, when I close the blind it's like being in a stranger's house. I gazed at the nondescript prints of shells on the beige walls, and at the beige rug, and beige bedside lamps for ages, trying to understand what I was feeling. When it was first redecorated, I told mum it looked like a hotel room, so she bought a blue chenille bedspread and now it reminds me of the sea.

I was tapping my spoon absentmindedly on my knee and staring at a dust bunny under the new white lacquer dresser (what happened to our old one, anyways?) when I spotted it – the shoebox. I slid off the bed and got down on my knees, wiping my hands on my jeans before reaching under to pull it out. I don't know why Mum would have put it there – it crossed my mind that Jane did it the last time she came home. I wasn't around – because she chooses to come the rare times when I'm away visiting friends in London or Montreal, which says a lot more than a few sporadic postcards ever will.

The lid was dusty and warped. Perhaps it got wet once or it's simply old, showing the passage of time. I lifted it off and placed it on the floor next to me before surveying the contents. It was a bit of a letdown, to be honest. What was once so mysterious, magical even, was now just a wilted box of old junk: photographs, some newspaper clippings (mostly obituaries and birth notices of people I've maybe heard of, but never met), a bouncy ball, some elastic bands, a cracked plastic protractor, and in the bottom, our notebook. When I unearthed it, my heart seemed to slow for a second, a lurching beat in my chest. I don't know where we got the book from – blank, with a picture of a deer on the cover, like some sort of Christmas card Bambi without the charm. When I opened the cover it creaked, dried out from years of neglect, and on the

first page in Jane's neat block-lettering it said, "This Book Belongs to Lily Marie and Jane Marie and is TOP SECRET. Read at your own PERIL!!!" I think we were really into that old Disney movie *Blackbeard's Ghost* at the time and we genuinely believed that any nosy readers would be stopped dead in their tracks by this ominous introduction. I remember we fought over whose name came first and I won as a concession to the fact that I was unfortunately born 'last'. Flipping through the patchwork pages, I skimmed over entries like, "secret key under third board of front porch", and "suspected diafram [sic] found in Mum's sock drawer – No babies! Barf!", trying not to linger too long on any page for fear of feeling that old pain again: the sinking in the pit of my stomach, the tingling in my chin, remorse and rejection digging at my ribs from the inside out. Finally though, I couldn't help but pause when I found a photograph of Jane and me tucked in near the back. We were about fifteen and facing each other nose to nose, a close-up of our profiles. Jane's hair was streaked pink, I had blue glitter on my eyelids, and we were laughing with identical, almost maniacal grins; I couldn't stop the rushing, overwhelming feeling, so I slotted the photograph back in the book, slammed it shut and shoved it back to the bottom of the box, spilling a handful of photographs onto the carpet. There was one of Dad, young and surprisingly handsome with a *Magnum P.I.* moustache, leaning against a brown car and looking proud. Then another of Mum posing with Gramps next to a freshly cut Christmas tree, holding it upright together like hunters displaying a kill. I picked up the photograph of Nan just as I was thinking she must have been the one who took the last picture. And there she was, riding the carousel, grinning and alive in the sunshine, and as it bubbled up from the depths of my memory like a spring from the earth, I knew exactly what it would say on the back: *Gwyneth, Ynys Barri, Gorffennaf 1985*. Why didn't we ever just ask what happened? It all seems so simple now, and yet, somehow, I know that we couldn't have, not really.

I held the photograph, frowning and looking again at the room. How many nights of our lives did Jane and I spend here together? At first when she left, when I'd stare across at the empty twin bed, cold nights seemed colder, dark seemed darker, and I welcomed the dawn because the room seemed smaller in daylight. But it doesn't matter now. The room is unrecognizable. I returned the spilled objects to the box, replaced the

lid and slid it back under the dresser. The picture of Nan, though, I kept and tucked into the pocket of my jeans. Jane is somewhere in the United Kingdom, apparently, and Katie is pregnant. The thoughts rattled in my head. I stood up and got ready to drive to the fundraiser, but I couldn't shake this nagging feeling, as though everything were changing with a rapidity that I can't quite grasp, and yet at the same time I feel stuck, hamstrung and stagnant, as if nothing will change at all, at least not for me.

“Well, help yourself to the coffee. It's an awful cold one out today, but I guess that's what you get in March, eh?” Phyllis shakes her head and zips up her fanny pack, then wanders off to the tables, trying to weigh down the auction sheets with mugs and field stones. Our chairs seem to be slowly sinking into the soft earth, still squidgy and half yellow from the recently melted snow. Gramps and I are both hugging our chests, trying to keep warm with a blanket over our knees. Arlene, one of the other cat ladies lent it to us, which we accepted gratefully until it started making our knees itch: it's covered in cat hair. Ours is the only 'cat' booth here – this is mostly a Dog People fundraiser, apart from the small Ferret Rescue booth over in the corner by the fence. They're selling ceramic mugs and key chains with tiny painted ferrets on them, but don't seem to be having much business so far. The various booths around the perimeter of the field are all selling practical, yet slightly nutty things for pets: rugs made of recycled plastic, from which dog piss may be easily hosed down; doggie snowshoes, for winter walks in the woods; coats for dogs re-imagined as costumes, including hats. My favourite is the Scottish Highlander one – it comes complete with kilt and doggie sporran, which they suggest owners use to carry poop baggies. Our cat tent seems unfortunately low-rent compared to those of the Dog People. In an attempt to save the auction items from blowing away or being rained on, we've hung up shower curtains around the small garden marquee, fixing them with masking tape and bungee cords. The clear plastic fish motif billowing next to me is odd, but also strangely mesmerizing. The best part though, barring the chip truck parked by the entrance, is the 30-foot long swimming pool set up in the centre of the field. Apparently this is a popular and growing competitive sport for dogs and their owners, wherein the dog is riled up so much it jumps into the pool and their distance is then measured. I'm not sure what the

point is, though I gather it's something similar to long jump, my least favourite sport in school.

Gramps picks up a steaming paper cup of coffee from the table and slurps at it, holding it between two hands. Without looking at me, he says, "This is not how I plan to spend my Saturday afternoon, anh?" I look at him with my eyebrows knit in apology, but his face softens when he turns to me. "You okay, Lily Marie?"

"What? Yeah, sure." The unconvincing tone of my voice surprises me. "Just checkin' things out," I say, nodding at a husband and wife in matching red NorthFace jackets, both carrying small dogs in baby carriers strapped to their chests. Gramps follows my gaze and frowns.

"*Vraiment malade,*" he says.

"*Sans blague,*" I reply and sink further into my chair.

Lately I've been measuring time by yogurt expiry dates. Right before Katie called today, I'd been staring at the date on the foil lid I'd just peeled back – April 24th – and felt an almost certain doom that I'd end up working at Shopper's Drug Mart for the rest of my life, chained to the till like some golf shirt-wearing Prometheus. This snowballed into the fear that I would never move out of my parents' house again, or that I'd build a hermit's shack in the bush and become a cat lady giving out stale liquorice from a battered tin to overly curious youths.

"*Ici,*" Gramps says, jerking his chin towards a Great Dane humping its owner, while the man tries his best to ignore the dog and carry on his conversation with the bone and jerky sales rep.

"I don't get Dog People," I say, as a woman approaches me and asks,

"Are you auctioning any of those 'Cat Sitter' DVDs?"

"Um, yeah, actually. Just over there, it's called '*Cat Sitter Volume Three: Gone Fishin'*'. See it?" She turns to look at where my finger is pointing.

"Oh, fantastic. My cats just love the one with the birds."

"Mine too. This one's really good though – they love the 'digital catnip'."

"Great! Is there a minimum bid?"

"Five dollars."

"Thanks!" She writes down her name and bid and wanders off in the direction of

the ferret booth.

Gramps raises an eyebrow at me. “*Oui*, Lily Marie, Dog People are strange.”

I laugh, but fear of my future makes my chest feel tight. “Well, why are you here?” I honestly don’t know how I convinced him to come today.

“*Pour vous*, of course.” He says it plainly, without sentimentality, but I feel guilty and grateful all the same.

“Hey, you remember my friend Katie?” Gramps frowns, searching his mind, then nods. “...Well, she’s pregnant! Isn’t that crazy?” Again, my voice surprises me. I’ve wavered and sound overly bright. Gramps looks suspicious, and I’m concentrating very hard on smoothing out the auction sign-up sheet before me, reading the words over and over: *Two nights at the Mississauga Holiday Inn, worth \$200.*

“Crazy? *Non*, not crazy, I don’t think. She is old enough.”

“Hmm? Oh, yeah, I guess so, but you know... we’re the same age and grew up together and stuff... it’s just weird, you know?”

Gramps slurps his coffee again and a wiener dog trots past us, swiftly pursued by a woman holding a tiny pink tulle skirt. The wind whips the shower curtains around us, while next to the pee-proof mats three dogs move in a sort of ring-around-the-rosy, smelling each other’s butts. More people saunter into our makeshift tent, perusing the auction items and occasionally writing down bids. The most popular items are things for dogs, grudgingly included by the more money-savvy cat ladies.

“I suppose,” Gramps says, pondering. “But this is life, Lily. Women have babies, people move away, *la vie* carry on.”

“Yeah, I know.” I feel sheepish, but I also don’t really know. None of it seems real or possible for me. But if Katie is pregnant and in love and everything else, that means it could happen to me too. The thought makes me dizzy. I fold back the scratchy blanket and stand up, stretching my arms above my head and arching my back. “I’m gonna get a *poutine*. You want anything?”

“*Oui*, ice cream, if they ‘ave. If not, *poutine*, too.”

“Ice cream?! Are you crazy? On a day like this!” I say, playing along, and he chuckles, his broad chest and belly rumbling under folded arms. He hands me a ten-dollar bill, then dismisses me with a wave of the hand and sips again from his hot coffee.

Before heading to the chip truck, I decide to have a wander around the field. It's gotten busy now, despite the chill wind and overcast sky. People with dogs on leashes stand in groups or walk around in pairs, all talking animatedly about dog things, or to the dogs themselves. One of the more trustworthy, or perhaps mischievous, dogs runs free and comes to jump up on me and sniff my crotch. I bend forwards, patting its head while looking around eagerly for its owner, hoping that it'll just go away. I consider trying to be a Dog Person, and attempt to enjoy this attention, but the muddy paw prints on my jeans and the smell of feet from its wet fur puts me right off. I cajole the dog a bit longer until a shrill whistle calls it away and I wander on, wondering if ferrets actually aren't so bad. A local radio DJ from Barrie is set up in a black tent near the pool. He's wearing wrap-around sunglasses with iridescent shades and a puffy windbreaker, with his hair gelled into short stiff peaks. I don't plan on stopping, but he calls out to me and I'm bored enough to go over for a chat.

"Hey there," he says, grinning. He has white, strangely square teeth. He pushes his sunglasses up on his head, revealing his face, and it occurs to me that he could be handsome if he didn't look like such a tool. "So, what's your favourite breed?"

I muffle a scoff and say, "Umm, I don't know. I'm not really into dogs."

He raises an eyebrow and gives me an incredulous smile, as though I'm being coy. "Then what're ya doing here then?"

"I'm with the Cat Rescue Network."

He raises both eyebrows now and I consider barfing when he says, "Ooh, felines, eh? Sexy."

"Oh, yeah." I look over my shoulder, wishing he had an owner with a whistle too. "So, when does this pool thing start?"

"'Bout ten minutes from now. You wanna help me judge? Maybe we could go for a dip ourselves later."

I can't even believe my life right now. "Um, I dunno, I think I've gotta stick with the cat ladies. See ya around."

"Okay then," he says, winking before replacing his shades. I hurry on to the chip truck, trying to shake his slimy gaze from my back and the wind catches my ponytail, flicking it in strands against my cheek. I order two *poutines* and a Coke and although

I'm cold and sort of irritated, there's something comforting about this place. Maybe it's the hand-painted sign and friendly, red-faced woman in the blue apron, or maybe it's the sense of timelessness; roadsides for eternity, from before I was born and after I die, will have bustling chip trucks in seemingly desolate places. And even though everyone says 'fries' nowadays, they'll always be 'chip' trucks and no one will question it, because that's just what they are. After paying, I shove the change in my pocket and tuck the cold can under my arm as I watch the woman ladling steaming, brown gravy over the cheese curds and hot fries. She hands them out to me one by one and I thank her before heading back to the Cat Rescue booth.

As I hand Gramps his *poutine* and flop down into my folding chair, I say, "Sorry, sold out of ice cream already," and Gramps feigns deep disappointment before digging in.

"Someone bid fifty dollar for d'at automatic food dispenser," he says, nodding towards the hulking big box on the table nearby. "It's getting exciting over 'ere." He pokes at a fry with the small, two-pronged wooden fork and I laugh.

"I can't believe I missed it." Hot, salty gravy drips on my lip as I gather up a long string of cheese and three heavy fries into my mouth. "Oh, I forgot," I say with my mouth full, setting down the *poutine* and reaching into the tight pocket of my jeans for Gramps' change. As I pull out the coins, the picture of Nan falls out, landing softly on the grass at my feet. Gramps and I both look down at it, unspeaking.

After a moment, Gramps says in a small, almost astonished voice, "Where did d'at come from?"

I drop the change on the table and lean forwards to pick it up, then sit down and hold it in my lap. "I found it in my room today."

He reaches his hand out and I place it lightly on his wide, flat palm. He regards it quietly and I keep on stuffing the hot, gooey *poutine* into my mouth with the tiny fork, watching his face. Finally, when I've swallowed, I just say it in a soft and steady voice. "Gramps, what happened to Nan?"

He runs his thumb over the glossy surface of the photograph and sighs. He looks at me, resigned. "She went back to Wales and then, she died."

It feels like I still haven't swallowed. "But, when? How?"

Gramps sighs again and shifts in his chair, readying himself to tell the story. It feels like I ought to know this story already, like all the others I've heard again and again about Nan, as if, when he tells it, I'll be able to correct him on small details and say, 'Wait! You missed the part when....,' knowing the retelling better than he knows the original. But of course, I do not. And neither, I suppose, does Jane.

"You remember, when you and Jane Marie were two-year old, we went to Wales?"

I nod. I remember the sand between my toes at Swansea Bay. Or maybe I just remember the photograph of us on the beach.

"Your *Grandmère*, she went to Wales six month before this. She was unhappy – she was an unhappy woman, all her life." He looks at the photograph with a curling lip, surprisingly bitter. "She was tire of me, said I was always working, never pay attention to her. But she was tire of everything. I didn't understand, she said. She wanted to go home. She had a word for it, *hiraeth*, but it was only an excuse for 'er to leave."

"What does that mean? *Heer*...? How do you say it?"

"*Hiraeth*. It's a sort of... Welsh-brand of homesickness. The Welsh, they are always reminding people when they do something they t'ink they invented first." He gives a short laugh. "But then, I suppose, so do *Les Canadiens*." He does his dismissive wave again and looks at the photograph before continuing on. "So by this time she and I are not very happy. Maybe, we should have had a divorce. I don't know. But she decide to go away, to go 'home', she always said. Now, your *maman*, she took it all so personally, anh? She thought, a grown woman, she still need her mother, and with you and Jane Marie so little and the way she was, I suppose perhaps she did." He shrugs and pauses, reaches out for the *poutine* on the table and pokes it with the fork, but doesn't take a bite before putting it back. He takes a deep breath and waits before exhaling and speaking again. "Your *maman*, you know, she is not strong like you."

I almost laugh. "Hmph. Me, strong?"

He nods gravely. "*Oui*. But, we talk about that later. So, your *grandmère*. She went to Swansea, tried to live on the beach. Had a hut on one of the bays, Caswell or Langland, I can't remember. She tried to be a... one of d'ose, hippies, *la bohème*, you know? But, she was a bit late to de party in 1985." He laughs ruefully and I return it

with a pained smile. “Anyway, your *maman*, she wanted us all to go d’ere. To fix it, she said. So, we go on this big trip to Wales. I hadn’t been there since the war. Such an awful place then; no colour, just rubble and death, Gwyneth couldn’t wait to leave.

But...

Your mother, she had a lovely time. Or, tried to, you know. She thought, Gwyneth – your *grandmère* – was so happy, she would come home to Canada and everything go back to normal. But she didn’t know, Gwyneth and I, we had some argument. She was not going to leave. She was not happy.” He picks up the picture and holds it out before us. “This is only half the truth. She is happy on the *carrousel*, but not in here.” He pats his chest twice.

“But, why?” I sound pleading, but can’t help it. I just don’t understand. “What made her so unhappy?”

Gramps shrugs. “What makes your own mother unhappy? Who can say?” He taps his head. “Maybe it’s genetic, I don’t know.” He turns and looks at me with a stern stare. “But, Lily Marie, you must stop this too.”

I blink, feeling a thump in my chest. “What do you mean?”

“You know,” he says, gesturing at me with the photograph in his hand.

A woman walks up to us and says, “Excuse me? What’s the minimum bid on these cat-print hair bands?”

“Two bucks,” I say, and she smiles and writes down her name before moving on.

“You know,” Gramps says again and I’m staring at my hands in my lap, clutching the cold, unopened can of pop between them. “What are you doing with your life, Lily Marie?”

“What happened to Nan?” I mumble, placing the can on the table.

“I answer you, then you answer me,” he says. Taking another deep breath, he says in a flat voice, “Gwyneth slit her wrist after drinking four bottles of red wine on a Tuesday night. Her niece, Bethan, found her in the kitchenette of the caravan. That is what happens, Lily, when you do not see that you are loved.”

My breath is short and my eyes are ready to well over when a loud voice booms out over the field on a microphone. “Alright, Dog Lovers! The first heat of the Evans County Flying Water Pooch competition begins now!” Nondescript techno music drifts

over to us in a wave. I pick up my *poutine* again and stick my fork in it, pulling up a gelatinous mass of fries and half-cooled cheese. I try to eat some, but I can't fit it into my mouth, so I let it fall off the fork and back into the box, putting it on the table and letting my hands drop again in my lap.

"I'm not gonna kill myself, Grandpa." I can feel my chin quiver and I swallow hard, willing it to stop.

He speaks softly and puts a hand on my wrist. "I know that, *chérie*," he says. "But you also must live, and you have not been living like a young woman."

It's my turn for a deep breath and it comes in and out roughly. I shake my head. "I don't know what else to do."

There is a chorus of barking followed by a loud splash. A sheep dog paddles briskly in the pool with a chew toy in its mouth, looking for a way out. Its owner beckons it towards a shallow ladder and helps it out of the water and onto the grass, where the dog shakes vigorously, releasing a gallon's worth of water from its fur. There is a long ramp with metal steps leading up to it, where dogs and their owners wait patiently for their turn. We watch the next two contestants in silence. The first, an overweight yellow Labrador stares depressingly at the cold water in the wind. Despite its owner's frenzied coaxing with a multi-coloured clown toy, it never does jump into the pool. The next, a poodle with a recent haircut led by a lesbian couple working in tandem to rile the dog up with two different toys, gets so excited, or maybe frightened by the women's insistent and gruff requests to "Come on!" that it leaps nearly twenty feet into the pool.

"I feel sorry for d'ose dogs," Gramps says, and we both smile with pity. The grey clouds have begun to thin in the sky, hinting at an appearance by the sun. March is always the ugliest month, I think, but it sort of feels like a lie. Even March has its moments.

"Did you know Jane is in the U.K.?" I say, feeling even more lost at the thought. How does she do it? How has she always just done things, without ever being afraid?

Gramps nods. "I know. She's in Wales."

"She is?" I'm incredulous, but I don't know why. "What's she doing there?"

"Visiting castles, drinking tea, taking advantage of dual citizenship... She is in

the north, working at one of d'ese taverns, or pubs, you know.”

“How long has she been there?”

“Six month, or so. No, maybe more. Eight? But that is not important, Lily. I will say this now, and then I will not say it again, anh? Whatever hurt you and your sister, fix it. Whatever keeps you 'ere, not living in Dawn, forget it. And don't waste any more time. You shouldn't be a ghost at twenty-four.” He sets his jaw and nods his head, crossing his arms over his chest again.

The sound of another splash comes from across the field. We turn to watch again and since I don't know what to say, I think of Mum, living in her continual haze, and of Dad, always trailing behind her, waiting too patiently for her to wake up. I think of Nan, trying to be happy and failing without reason, leaving one home to go back to another that just couldn't have existed anymore, after all that time. I think of Katie, for whom everything is exciting and growing and alive. And then, of course, I think of Jane, travelling out West, to Mexico, Australia, or God knows where else, and now Wales, fearless and happy. And now I know what that nagging feeling is, that I try to shut out every time it creeps in when I think of my sister—it's not the regret and loss caused by that night five years ago, it's *envy*. I am so jealous of the life I imagine she has. I am jealous of her fearlessness, her daring, her steadfast refusal to forgive me without an apology. Even at my happiest, I felt it: that somehow, Jane must be happier than me. It's like she's always known something I don't, ever since we were kids, and if only I knew it too, I'd be free of this fearfulness and inertia and I'd finally be as happy as she is.

One of the cat ladies, Arlene, comes over to us tugging at her long white cardigan. “You folks have been a real help to us today.”

“Oh, it's nothing,” I say and Gramps nods.

“You've done more than your time. Why don't you go on and enjoy yourselves. Those dogs are really something!” I turn to Gramps and we stand up, thanking Arlene for the blanket. “Oh, well, we couldn't have ya freezing to death! We need all the hands we can get to help out these poor cats, eh?” She laughs heartily, even though I'm not sure it was a joke.

“Well, happy to help. See you soon, Arlene.”

“Okay!” She holds up a hand in a wave and turns back to the auction tables.

As we walk across the field, I chuck our half-empty food cartons into a garbage can. The clouds have turned greyer again and it starts to spit as we pass by the announcer’s tent, where the DJ tips an invisible hat at me that I pretend not to see.

The car is parked on the side of the road, leaning into the ditch. The pavement is still sandy from the winter’s salt trucks and a seasonal stream of run-off moves in rivulets over the flattened grass in the ditch. I look up and down the long straight road, at old farms in one direction and distant, lonely stop lights in the other and I know I can’t stay here any longer.

As we get into the car, I say to Gramps, “Do we still have family in Swansea?”

“Of course. Your mother writes to d’em quite a lot.” Gramps looks at me sideways. “You must ’ave a lot of money saved, all this working and nothing else.”

I nod. “Mmm. A fair bit.”

“Well,” he says.

“So,” I say, and that’s that.



CHAPTER 8

Wedding

“Oh, love, you goin’ to a wedding?”

“Yes?”

“Right then, we’ll wait wi’ you.”

Jane takes two quick pulls from the last of her rollie before extinguishing it on the stone wall behind us in three broad swipes. I examine my cuticles and look up the road towards our approaching company. Neither of us speaks. Today is our twenty-fifth birthday and we’re at a bus stop in Swansea city centre by St. Mary’s Church, waiting for a complimentary coach to the wedding reception of Rhian, our second cousin once removed. The bus is late, but so are Aunty Bethan and Uncle Frank, as well as Jane’s friends, Daniel and Paulette. They travelled with her from Abersoch for nine hours on three trains and two buses just for the wedding which, it turns out, for us, is only a reception. There’s a hierarchy of invitation in the UK, apparently, which means no roast beef dinner for distant Canadian relatives and their friends. Aunty Bethan and Uncle Frank were invited to the church, though, and we all get cake, so I figure it’s fair do’s, as I’ve learned to say.

Jane and I squint into the sun as we wait, our silence neither comfortable nor strained. Across the roundabout teenagers crowd outside the McDonald’s in skulls-and-rainbows emo-angst gear, playing tag in a ruse to touch each other, while rambunctious children are rounded up by their parents around the fountain in Castle Square, ready to go home for supper. Buses come and go, and sometimes one of us will lean forwards to check if it’s ours, knowing it couldn’t possibly be. This is the first actually hot summer day, and soon to be night, I’ve experienced since coming to Wales a month ago. Since I arrived, people have been assuring me that summer does actually exist here, despite the frenetic rains and cool temperatures. As welcome as the sun is, I’m not convinced that today’s display counts yet as proof.

The man approaching us strides confidently in a light grey suit with a slightly pearlescent sheen. He is incredibly tanned, glowing even, yet his short hair, shaved into swirling patterns on the sides of his head, reveals a pale scalp. Another shorter,

similarly-styled man walks next to him, his large biceps threatening to split the seams of his jacket while just behind them a woman, also tanned, walks with a purpose in a zebra-print mini-dress and orange stilettos. Her stiffly straight black hair is unmoved by the breeze while she purses her pale pink lips in amusement, or maybe concentration, as she walks. Both men hold cans of Stella Artois as though brandishing swords, while the woman has a bottle of Lucozade dangling languorously between two fingers. The orange plastic bottle matches her shoes perfectly and I suddenly wonder if Jane (in black jeans and navy corset top) and I (in a sundress and sandals) have missed the dress code.

“Alright?” They all say jovially.

“Yes,” I reply, and their smiles waver. I haven’t given the correct response. People have been asking me if I’m alright for weeks now and it’s only just dawned on me that they don’t think there’s something wrong with me. Jane just nods, which seems to be a safe reply. “So, how do you know Rick and Rhian?” I wince at the sound of my own voice, my accent glaringly loud and twanging. I’ve felt almost mute since I arrived, terrified of being outed as a foreigner, or worse, mistaken for an American. My brain feels constantly scrambled as I try to blend in with my surroundings and I keep thinking, ‘I’m supposed to be Welsh’, but I know now it’s a lie. A flicker passes over their faces and their eyebrows twitch lightly.

“Work with Rick, we do,” the woman says. “Where you from, then?”

“Canada,” Jane says, and relief washes over me. Let her explain it. “We’re Rhian’s cousins.”

“Oh, right! Nice one.” She squints at us; notes Jane’s purple hair and goes on, “Twins are you? Fancy a bit of vodka?” The woman holds out the Lucozade bottle to us, and I shake my head and put my hand out to politely decline, but Jane takes it from her.

“Yeah, cheers!”

Cheers? Who does Jane think she is? We’d say ‘thanks’ in Canada. Jane swigs and I mouth to her, “What are you doing?”

When she swallows, she mouths back, “Fuck off,” but she finishes with a smile.

A taxi pulls up swiftly in front of the bus stop and Aunty Bethan and Uncle Frank wave excitedly to us through the window. The feathers on Aunty Bethan’s

turquoise ‘fascinator’ flutter as she struggles to open the door. Uncle Frank reaches across to open the latch and helps her out of the cab. “...ank God, you’re still y’ere!” She says breathlessly, “We thought for sure we’d have missed the bloody bus!”

“Nah, fuckin’ late, it is. Alright? I’m Gav.” Our new friend extends his hand with a smile to Uncle Frank and offers his can of lager to him.

“Ah, cheers, butt. Frank, I am, and this is Bethan, Lily, Jane.”

“Carl, Gemma.”

There is a chorus of ‘alrights’ and as cans are passed around, I think of Mum, I don’t know why. I just wonder what she’d make of the Swansea I’ve seen so far – I can’t seem to reconcile all her pastoral stories with, say, the ten men dressed as babies in capes exiting a taxi across the road by the Cross Keys. Surely the other Wales, the *real* Wales, must lie outside the city limits. Jane’s body stiffens next to me and I look up to see what must be Paulette, floating towards us in a flowery, almost sheer dress, bowler hat, and Doc Marten’s boots, and Daniel, in a crisp white shirt with the sleeves rolled up, grey trousers, and a fedora slightly obscuring his face. He’s holding two Mini-Milk baby ice cream bars and hands one to Jane. “They only had strawberry, babes.”

The sound of his voice makes me start, as though I’ve heard it before. Jane says, “That’s cool,” and begins to open the wrapper.

I let out a short laugh to myself at the irony of Jane’s response, but Daniel hears me and tips back his hat, leaning over to catch my gaze. With a soft smile he says, “Alright? I’ve heard a lot about you, Lil.”

I stare at him a moment too long, taking in the features of his face before I reply, “Have you?” My voice betrays surprise and I return his smile until it dawns on me – he must be Jane’s boyfriend. Feeling suddenly sick, I avert my eyes and sit down on the wall, so that Jane’s body obscures me from view.

“Well, it’s interesting to have a twin, isn’t it?” Jane says and I look up at her sharply, but she’s not looking at me, or anyone for that matter. She carries on eating her ice cream, seemingly oblivious to the lull in everyone’s conversation as they pause to watch our exchange.

“Definitely. I’ve always wanted a twin,” Daniel says, and he moves into my eye line again and grins. “It’d be well lush.”

Well lush. I love the way they talk here. It's not at all like how I thought it would be – there aren't any forced family hymn-sings and we don't have to eat laverbread with every meal. And, unlike our mother, people here are funny; I wonder if Nan was? I regard Daniel, trying to imagine him as a Canadian dude to see if he'd still be attractive. Accents can be deceiving. "Would it?"

"Yeah, you could pull classic pranks, like trading places and that."

"*Trading Places* had Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd in it. I don't think Janey and I could pull that one off."

"No, but if we did, I'd so be Eddie," Jane says, and I look at her in astonishment, searching for a more deeply veiled insult apart from me being a pretentious shit in an 80s movie. But she carries on licking her ice cream and it seems to be solely good-natured teasing. Ever since she arrived, I can't stop staring at her. She's as engrossing as our first television set, or a newborn baby. Except, like the cacophony of Welsh voices around me, she also makes me feel mute.

"No you wouldn't. You'd be bloody Jamie Lee Curtis," Paulette says unexpectedly and Jane stares hard at her, unsmiling.

Their strange tension clings in the air around us and it's only broken when Daniel says, "You slag!" and we share a laugh, though Paulette only smiles faintly. I catch Daniel's eye and I find his gaze so searching, so bright, it's unnerving and I have to look away again. Turning towards the others, I'm met by Aunty Bethan who is swigging vodka from Gemma's Lucozade bottle. She spots me and smiles, dabbing the corners of her mouth with her fingers.

"You alright, chick? Hope you girls weren't waiting too long." Aunty Bethan burps and her exposed cleavage ripples as she lets out an exuberantly jolly giggle.

I shake my head, 'no', and she winks kindly at me. Paulette is standing next to me, so I decide to be friendly and say, "How's it goin'?", but she jumps when I do, because apparently she'd been staring at me too.

She shrugs and looks at me with flared nostrils before turning to stare very hard at the public toilet entrance across the street. Suddenly chilly, I think, 'I want to go home,' but I don't really know what that means. Looking up the road, Uncle Frank says, "Ah, that'll be the bus," and we all lean over to see the white coach approaching. When

it stops, the door opens with a rattle and he says, "All aboard!" as we shuffle into a loose line. Gav helps Gemma up the steps by pushing on her butt and I follow Paulette, whose serpentine spine curves as each vertebrae works to carry her thin frame onto the bus.

The coach is hot and smells of dusty, old upholstery, perfume, and sweat. I think of the million bus trips I used to make in Toronto, packed onto the red and rattling TTC and it seems very far away in my mind. Nearly all of the guests are holding cans of lager or cider, with many of them leaning over the backs of the seats talking loudly to each other or bleating welcomes to us as we move down the aisle.

"Drive forgot about you lot!" Someone shouts, and the driver returns, "Better I'd forgotten you, mun!" followed by a few loud whoops from the crowd.

Jane grabs a window seat and Paulette moves quickly to sit next to her, as though this is a game of musical chairs she's intent on beating me at. I sit down across the aisle from them and Daniel, following behind me says, "Mind if I sit with you?"

"Course not," I say and smile up at him, only to find that my stomach flips again. I wonder if perhaps that chicken tikka pasty I had for lunch was off and I put a hand on my belly, but no, I'm fine. Perhaps I'm imagining it.

The bus lurches forwards and curves past the roundabout. We pass the castle and the sunny square and head slowly up the crumbling High Street, where spindly trees grow out of the cracks in buildings and drunks drink cans of Special Brew outside the Job Centre like it's a social club. As we pass the busy train station, men loitering outside darkened pubs smoke their fags and turn their heads, expressionless, before we barrel through the Dyfatty lights towards Brynhyfryd. I try to pronounce the place names on the signs in my head, but they're just jumbles of consonants to me, more foreign than if we were in France or Brazil.

"First time here, is it?" Daniel says, and I turn to him in surprise.

"What? Oh, no, well, yes, sort of."

"You just seem really interested in what's out the window."

"Do I?" I feel embarrassed, like it shouldn't be novel to me. "I guess I'm a tourist after all."

"Ah, never mind. Your sister didn't know fuck all when she got here. I've taught her how to be Welsh though," he says with a wry smile. The skin of his forearms

is smooth and tanned against the whiteness of his shirt.

“Well... maybe you can teach me too! I’m a real fish outta water here, I think.”

My eyebrows twist with worry, but Daniel only laughs.

“Forget it, in a couple of months you’ll forget where Canadia even is.”

“*Canadia?* Tsk, tsk.”

“Just testing you.”

“Sure you were.” I turn back to the window and try to stop smiling while the bus bumps along hills making stops in Bon-y-maen, Winch Wen, and round to Morriston – places that so far have just been names on buses to me, but I now see are pebble-dashed terraces, green valleys, bare hills, and broken down pavements, all washed in pale, lemony sunlight. I steal glances at my sister, but try not to because Daniel seems to catch me every time. The atmosphere on the bus is like that of a school trip – everyone heady with anticipation, the driver our dotting person of authority. A teenage girl shouts from the back, “Oh, Drive, can you pull over? We need a wee!”

“Hold on, Darlin’, next stop’s a pub!” Again, everyone laughs, and I catch Janey’s eye across the aisle, our smiles hanging suspended in the air between us. When we were younger, we thought we could communicate telepathically and I try now, hard as I can, to read her thoughts, but the look in her eyes, though not unkind, is impenetrable. It’s almost as if she’s just my reflection in the window opposite; present, but not really real. Breaking our gaze, Jane leans her head on Paulette’s shoulder who, it would now seem, refuses to look at me. There’s something strange about the way they are together beyond their weird hostility, but I can’t pinpoint what it is.

Daniel notices me staring and says into my ear, “Tragic, innit?”

“What’s tragic?” I’m sure my eyes are watery from staring and I turn quickly, blink twice, and look into his green ones. This time I don’t turn away.

His forehead wrinkles and he looks at me as though I ought to know. “The cancer, of course.”

The bus hits a pot hole then and bounces everyone around in their seats. One man falls in the aisle, pretending he can’t get up until his wife hits him in the stomach with the heel of her hot pink shoe. The gears grind beneath us and people exchange looks, questioning the bus’s ability to climb the hill at all.

Did Daniel just say ‘cancer’? Or was it, ‘dancer’? Maybe Paulette is a dancer, though she slouches an awful lot. Either way, I’m sure I’ve misheard him, so I simply nod and turn to look out the window again while the stone terraces of Neath pass by.

The road narrows through a leafy wood before we pull up outside a small country pub-hotel. As if awakened from a nap, everyone stands stretching and peering out the tinted windows. An old woman says, “My bum is numb! Get me off this bus!” and the wedding guests are released onto the warm pavement of the parking lot.

As we emerge from the bus we’re greeted by Rhian, a veritable vision of meringue, leaning against a Vauxhaul Corsa smoking a cigarette.

“Alright?” she says, and brushes her platinum bangs away from her sweaty forehead with claw-like acrylic nails. I give her a salute and a smile and happen to see Jane doing the same thing about five metres away – she notices too, and looks equally unnerved. This is the first time today I’ve actually felt like we were twins, and I’m not sure I like it.

“The bellydancers are starting soon. Get you’self a drink inside.”

“The what?” Daniel whispers to me over my shoulder and I shrug and raise an eyebrow.

Jane and Paulette have walked on ahead of us, so I turn to Daniel and say, “Come on, let’s get ourselves that drink.” This time when I speak, I feel like a cowgirl from the Wild West, ready to buck a bronco or, failing that, have a whiskey with this fella in the wedding saloon.

We pass through the beer garden, where wedding guests are seated at picnic tables drinking pints in the low sun, while beyond the garden wall sheep dot the hillside of a neighbouring farm. They bleat and baa at us like a commenting chorus until we move inside. Passing through propped open French doors, we’re immediately accosted by flashing lights from a spinning disco ball that spews rainbows across an empty dance floor. Once our eyes have adjusted, we move through the large room in a daze, taking in the spectacle. On each table a globe-like centrepiece of fluorescent pink silk roses, white feathers, and plastic butterflies sits atop a two-foot high white wrought iron stand. The rose topiaries glitter with rhinestones that catch the light from the moving disco ball, while each globe emits periodic flashes of tiny red lights. Amid the rose tinted glow of

the room, guests sit at tables talking and drinking, while others mill about the bar and evening buffet, which is nestled atop swathes of pink and white tulle, making the long fold-out tables appear like cotton candy pillows. When Daniel and I finally reach the bar, Jane and Paulette are already there waiting to order drinks.

Daniel puts an arm around both me and Jane and says, “Right, birthday girls, what you drinkin’?”

My sister and I are standing face to face, with Daniel beaming between us. I say to Jane, looking her in the eye, “Umm... I don’t really know what to order...”

Jane regards me, then says to Daniel. “Two cider ’n blacks and two blue Aftershocks.”

“Turning eighteen, is it?” Daniel looks amused and Paulette rolls her eyes.

“Why, are those shitty drinks?”

“No,” Jane says pointedly to Daniel, before turning back to me. “You’ll like them. Trust me.” Her gaze doesn’t waver, so I know she means it. Telepathic trust.

“Okay! You know best.” Daniel releases us and moves to the bar to order our drinks, leaving only a foot of air between my sister and me. Janey took me to a psychic at Centre Island once who said that I was very intuitive and sensitive. She also said Janey had a methodical mind (questionable) and that she might one day live in Florida (possible), so I still like to think I might have some intense powers of perception. I can feel Paulette watching us, but I don’t really get what her deal is, and frankly, it doesn’t matter. I take a deep breath and smile at my sister because at least, for now, Jane is interested in getting us drunk on artificially coloured alcohol for our birthday, just like old times.

“Bottoms up!” Daniel says, holding out two plastic shot glasses quivering with cool blue rocket fuel. We each take one and tap them together lightly before throwing them back like pros. The cups are like those ones for children’s cough syrup we used to take together, since Mum never trusted just one of us to have a cold, symptoms or not, insisting we both be medicated. Daniel passes us our pints and we sit down at a nearby vacant table while he and Paulette get their drinks. If I weren’t so wary of my sister’s thoughts, I’d actually feel very happy at the moment, and I wish I could say something to express it. My voice feels caught in my throat, like when I was a kid and I wanted to

tell Gramps I loved him, but I just couldn't say it out loud, hard as I tried. I gulp some air, opening and shutting my mouth twice with false starts before I say, "Remember when we used to drink vodka and *C*Plus* in our bedroom?"

Jane sips her cider and looks into her glass. "Vaguely."

I feel bitten, but try not to take it personally. "Hey look," I nod my head towards a guy at the bar wearing sunglasses while he chats to the barmaid. "Check out Corey Hart over there." Jane looks up and a faint smile passes over her lips. "Remember on *Ready or Not* when Busy's brother called the radio phone-in 'cause his girlfriend had some fetish for him wearing expensive sunglasses when they boned?"

Jane looks back at me and her mouth twists. She's smirking and then she actually grins. "Yeah... And I remember that you totally liked Busy's brother, too. 'Dom'. You loved Dom."

"I did not! You did."

"Na-uh. My heart belonged to Monkey Ears." We laugh with scrunched up noses, as identical throaty giggles float out and mingle in the air, while our suspended pints reverberate it all in shivering pink froth. It's amazing, and also, terribly sad. Like hearing my own accent, I wish this feeling weren't an anomaly.

Daniel and Paulette plop down on either side of us with drinks and plates piled high with buffet food and my sister and I stifle our laughter, as if we've been caught doing something we shouldn't.

"Alright, love?" Daniel says. I assume he's talking to Jane, but he nudges my arm with his elbow and pushes a plate of food towards me. "Help yourself."

"Thanks," I say gratefully, and pick up a mini quiche.

"Looks like we're in for a crackin' party. Have you seen the grab'em's?"

"The what?" Jane, Paulette and I all look around us, where we see one of those coin-operated boxes filled with stuffed animals and a claw. I don't know how we missed it.

"This is so frickin' weird," I say and Daniel lifts his eyebrows in amusement.

"*Croeso i Gymru!*" he says.

"No kidding."

We tuck into the plates of food, eating and drinking and watching the wedding

guests filter into the room from outside. We all spy the wedding singer at once, or rather, the slickly styled, husband and wife wedding-singer duo. The woman and her microphone look somehow oversized for the tiny stage while her husband, set slightly behind her and partially hidden by his keyboard, looks very distant, like a boy perching on a stool. A mesmerizing display of fans blowing strips of red and yellow chiffon over light bulbs mimics open flames and seems to be the signal that the show is about to begin.

“She’s on fire,” I say to no one in particular.

“That remains to be seen,” says Daniel. Sharp chords emit from the keyboard and she begins to sing. “Jesus, she’s starting with ‘Low’ by Flo Rida.”

“This is intense,” Jane says, and the wedding singer begins moving in what can only be described as a slow grind.

“Bets on the set list?” I say, and we all set to work naming potential numbers until feedback squeals from the microphone and a few people shout, while most everyone else cringes and covers their ears.

The song ends and the singer shouts into the microphone, “Hello, Glyn Neath!” and then, in a mock American twang, “How we doin’ tonight?!” No one responds, but she doesn’t seem to mind. The bar is busy with people stocking up for the entertainment portion of the evening, while others load up plates of finger sandwiches and miniature spring rolls from the buffet, before settling in their seats.

“We got an immense night for you all to celebrate the wedding of... Rick and Rhiannon!” Her husband leans over his keyboard to whisper to her, growing and then shrinking in size as he retreats. She blinks twice and says, “...Rhian!!!” The wedding guests clap and cheer, turning to the head table where the bride and groom are seated like King and Queen. Rhian fans her face with a serviette. “...We’re gonna get going with a new favourite of mine before the rest of the fun starts. You ready? 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 4...” A drum machine inside the keyboard ticks and after a couple of heartfelt hits on the keys by Mr. Backup the singer launches into a spirited rendition of ‘I Kissed a Girl’ by Katy Perry.

“I thought for sure she’d sing the new Take That” Daniel said, “That shit’s massive lately.” He moves one of his mini-quiches onto my plate for winning the bet.

“Do you like this one?” Paulette says pointedly to Jane.

“I don’t know, Pauly, it’s kind of annoying,” she replies and gulps back the last of her pint.

I look at Daniel as if to say, ‘What the fuck?’, but he just shakes his head.

“I bet you one mini-pizza the next one is Leona Lewis,” he says.

“Deal. But only because I have two mini-pizzas.”

Scanning the room, I spy Aunty Bethan and Uncle Frank at a table across the dance floor, laughing and clinking glasses with some friends, or maybe relatives; I’m never sure. Behind them there’s some sort of white sculpture suspended above a red-lit fountain on a rectangular table. Squinting my eyes though, I realise that it’s not a sculpture at all; it’s the wedding cake – adorned with a miniature Disney castle on top and six extra tiers coming out from the sides like tentacles. Each layer displays a different image of love: twin bells; a glass carriage; a lone shoe. I look up to see if I’ve missed anything else and am met with inflatable cherubs hanging from the rafters aiming their plastic arrows at the unsuspecting guests. I nudge Daniel with my elbow and point at one, “Hey, look out. You’re next.”

He looks up. “Flippin’ ’eck. He’s aimed right at us.”

When he smiles at me this time, and I mean really smiles, I feel warm all over. I glance over at Jane though, watching her frowning and digging through Paulette’s purse, and I’m instantly cold. Finishing the last of my pint and wiping pink froth from the corners of my mouth I say, “You’re right, Janey. I do like it.”

“See?” she says, and downs the last of her own. Paulette is glaring at both of us now and I’m about to ask her what her problem is when the wedding singer launches into ‘Shine’ by Take That.

“Look, we both win!” Daniel says and we cheers with chicken drumsticks, which peculiarly makes me blush.

The song winds down into a “Woo! Thanks everyone!” and a couple of people briefly clap for the musical duo until everyone’s attention is drawn to a shimmering, jingling sound that announces the entrance of the bellydancers emerging from scuffed double doors marked ‘fire exit’. Ten women dressed in brightly coloured sequined bras, chiffon skirts, and scarf belts covered over with gold and silver coins move amid

the tables to the dance floor. The wedding singer reads from a crumpled piece of paper in her hand. “And now, please say a big *Croeso* to Joanne, who works with Rhian’s mother Bev at Tesco’s, and her bellydancing troupe from the Swansea YMCA. They’re here to dance some traditional dances for us. This is done at weddings in Egypt for luck and fertility!”

At the word fertility, a few of Rick’s buddies stand up making sounds like, “Wah, hey!” while thrusting their hips at the bride and groom. The bellydancers move into a formation and Arabian music fills the room. They proceed to shimmy and sway while the stunned wedding guests watch. The women dancing appear to be between the ages of twenty and seventy, with some looking deeply satisfied and others just deeply confused.

Daniel says, “The Pink One’s fit.” The ‘Pink One’ is young, dark-haired, and undoubtedly ‘fit’.

“Well, I like the Green One.” I hear a faint sting of jealousy in my voice that makes me cringe, but Daniel only laughs – the Green One has wild white hair and a considerably larger left breast.

Some of the wedding guests, like Aunty Bethan, are happily clapping along with the music, while others look either lecherous or deeply offended as these women shake their goodies in such close proximity to their dining tables. One of the dancers shimmies her way up to where the bride is sitting and arches her back, shaking her breasts at Rhian. It’s hard to see what’s going on since we’re seated at the other end of the room, but it looks like the dancer is trying to convince Rhian to touch her.

“This is getting weird,” I say and Paulette whips her head around to give me a dirty look. “What?”

Paulette speaks to me at last. “It’s an Egyptian fertility ritual for the bride to touch the dancer’s stomach.”

“Okay. I still think it’s weird though, considering everyone here is Welsh.”

Paulette scoffs. “You’re not Welsh.”

“... Yeah, but, you know what I mean...” I say, defensive and bewildered as Paulette shakes her head, dismissive. I glance at Jane to see her reaction, but she stands up quickly, causing other guests to turn and stare at us since the dance is still going on.

“I need another beverage.” Jane enunciates each syllable sharply. “Anyone else?”

Paulette crosses her arms, stony-faced. I shake my empty glass at her with a smile and a look to ask if she’s okay, and she nods, but possibly just about the pint. Daniel hesitates, but then holds up his empty glass too, and she turns on her heel and goes swiftly to the bar. Paulette gets up then, but marches off towards the exit to the ‘loos’, her bowler hat bobbing up and down as she goes. The coins on the dancers’ costumes chime louder and louder as their hips move mesmerizingly fast, and Rhian tilts her head back, letting out a wild cackle as she places her hand on the woman’s vibrating belly. I look at Daniel tentatively and he looks back at me, his face soft and plaintive. One of the dancers emits a loud, throaty yodelling whistle before the music stops and their hips hit the air, stopping all at once in one dynamic movement.

“So,” I say.

“Wow,” he says.

The wedding songstress’s loud, velvety voice brings us back to consciousness as she purrs into the microphone, “If you all want to get yourselves a drink or a fag, the gambling will be starting at half nine.”

“The what?” I say, laughing and look to the bar, but Jane is nowhere to be seen. “Uhh, should we maybe get our own drinks?”

“Guess so,” he says, “she and Paulette’ll be a while. They’re awful when they’re rowing.”

“They are?” We make our way to the bar and my spine tingles, expecting a light touch on my back to lead me across the room, but Daniel’s hands stay in his pockets. At the bar, he pulls out a £20 pound note and orders us a bottle of wine.

“Well, yeah. You know how some couples are.” He asks for two glasses and the barmaid hands him two tiny plastic goblets.

“Some what?”

“Couples. Lover’s tiffs, that sorta thing.” Daniel is holding the wine bottle by the neck with the cups in his other hand.

“But you’re not Jane’s boyfriend...”

He laughs. “Am I fuck!”

“Then... Paulette is...”

“Jane’s girlfriend.”

“And Jane is...”

“...A lesbian. You do know your sister is a lesbian, right?”

“My sister is a lesbian. My sister is *gay*?” I must’ve raised my voice because Daniel looks about us and presses me to walk towards the fire doors.

“Oh fuck. What’ve I done now? Come on, you. Let’s go outside a second.”

Daniel ushers me through the double doors, past a linen cupboard and through two more doors where we’re spat outside by the rubbish bins. The light is unexpectedly bright and I squint like I’ve just come out of a movie theatre on a summer afternoon. Three bellydancers are leaning against the wall smoking cigarettes. They say ‘alright’ to us and we say the same back; the first time I’ve said it right, albeit unconsciously. A slight breeze hits us and the coins on the dancers’ skirts shimmer like a ripple in a pool, the sound of a distant wind chime. Across the pavement, the forest rises up a hill surrounding the pub while past the dumpster there’s a trodden footpath. Daniel nudges me towards it with the butt of the wine bottle and we step up onto the path and into the woods.

“Ooh, look at them two!” one of the bellydancers says and they laugh, low and guttural.

Daniel is leading and looks back at me, letting out a soft laugh, but I barely notice. I’m in a daze; I can’t seem to wrap my head around it. Jane is dating Paulette. Jane once liked men, but now she likes women. Jane once liked *penises* but now eschews them for *vaginas*.

Daniel pauses on the path, slightly out of breath. I’ve only just noticed we’re on a steep incline. “You alright?”

“Alright? Yes. I think so. Can we sit down somewhere?”

“Course we can.” We walk further up the hill and I keep focusing on my feet, watching the thin white leather straps on my sandals stretch and strain with each step. Looking up, I consider the canopy. Pale green and delicate; this is not a Canadian forest. I feel like I remember it somehow though, and then I realise - it looks like Sherwood Forest in movies about Robin Hood.

“Did you know that *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* has not held up well with age?”

We've reached a small clearing with a couple of logs arranged around a fire pit. There are crushed Carling and Strongbow cans in the ashy centre of the stone circle left by vagrants, or maybe teenagers.

"What you thinking of that for?"

"I don't know."

We sit down on one of the logs and he opens the wine. "Screw cap don't mean it's shit nowadays, but considering it's from a wedding, probably is." He fills our tiny plastic goblets and hands me one. "Cheers!" We both down it in one and I stifle a cough before he refills our cups. "So... how did you *not* know?"

"She never told me. But... well, I don't know if you know... Jane and I, we're not that close anymore. We don't really... talk."

Daniel is silent for a moment. "I know all about that."

"You do?" Somehow I don't think he does.

He looks at me seriously, or maybe just knowingly. "I do. So does Paulette."

"Ah."

"She's just protective of your sister."

"She doesn't even know me. She doesn't know anything about us."

"She knows Jane..."

We sip our wine and my throat feels thick as I swallow. "Well that's a kick in the teeth."

"Ah, fuck, I didn't mean..."

"It's fine."

"Look. So, your sister's a lesbian and she didn't tell you. So what? She only came out when she got together with Paulette. And as for the past... as far as Jane's concerned, it's in the past."

"Ha. Yeah, right."

"Serious. I've heard her say it. And she's always on about you."

"What? Like how much she hates me?"

"No, how much she misses you."

Everything he says is both completely logical and completely impossible to believe. I've downed my cup again and Daniel takes it from my hand and throws it in

the pit with his own, then holds out the bottle to me.

“Far more efficient,” he says and I take a swig.

“I like your style.”

“Anyway, it’s not been easy for your sister, with the cancer and that.” Daniel rubs his forehead self-consciously.

The cancer? So he did say cancer before? Does my lesbian sister also have *cancer*? I feel dizzy, but then notice a cyst the size of a small pickled onion just above Daniel’s right eyebrow.

“Did you bump your head?” He looks at me quizzically and rubs the small lump uncertainly.

“No...”

Oh my God, Daniel is the one with the cancer. My chest aches as if something has just wrenched my arteries.

“Can I touch it?” I ask him quietly. He can see where my glassy eyes rest, while my right hand hovers with weightless expectancy, so he nods ‘alright’. I press the bump, gently touching his warm smooth skin and slowly move it back and forth with my finger. The cyst slides easily beneath the skin, as though it weren’t attached to his body, making it even more unreal. I look at him tenderly but he just shrugs and says, “It’s only a bit of fat and gristle. I’m hoping it’ll make for a hard-looking scar when they remove it at surgery next month.”

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper.

“For what?”

“I didn’t know...”

“Know what? Jane’s brilliant, aye. She’s such a carer.”

“Is she? Oh good...but how are you? How do you feel?”

“Me? Fine, I s’pose...”

“You’re so... robust. You’d never guess it.”

“Er, Lily, you sure you’re alright?”

My chin is quivering and I’m trying with all my might not to cry, so I shrug and shake my head, mumbling how sorry I am. Daniel puts his arm around me and goose bumps prick up all over me, but all I can do is shake my head. I choke a bit as I

swallow, but manage to speak. “It’s just – I know I don’t know you – but I don’t really know anyone here – and now you’re, you know...”

“What you on about?”

I tentatively reach my hand out to touch the side of his face. “The cancer...”

“Paulette’s the one with the cancer, you daft cow!” Daniel laughs so hard he can barely speak. Between guffaws he manages to blurt out, “Melanoma on her arm... they just cut it off, no problem... Jane was worried though... made Pauly wear loads of sun cream...” and he wipes tears from his eyes and grips his stomach. “Fuckin’ ‘ell, Jane was right. You are hilarious,” he says before squeezing me tight and looking at me like I’m a kitten he just found on the road and decided to keep. “You muppet,” he says, as his laughter begins to wane, “We’ll be missing the ABBA medley.”

When he’s stopped laughing he releases me and we both stand up. I take a long swig of the wine and now I can’t help but laugh too. We take turns with the bottle as we pick our way down the smooth hardened earth of the forest floor. My footing is fine, but from time to time I take hold of Daniel’s outstretched hand, worse than those teenagers playing tag. As we emerge from the dim forest, a pink sky surrounds us and we pause by the bins to find the crescent moon.

“Don’t tell her I told you?” he says, offering me the last of the wine.

“Don’t worry. I bet she’s just loving it; waiting for me to figure it out.”

“No doubt,” Daniel says, hesitating before touching the small of my back to lead me inside. I take a deep breath and push open the double doors.

CHAPTER 9

Kittens

My eyes are shut tight and I'm curled up in a ball with the thin blankets pulled close to my chin as Gareth kisses me goodbye on the forehead. I let out a sigh to make it seem like I'm still dead asleep or only just stirring, but really I've been wide awake for an hour, albeit with my eyes shut. I listen to Gareth putting on his shoes, the jingle of his keys as he picks them up, the space of silence when he pauses on the threshold waiting, perhaps, for me to wake up, and then he leaves and locks the door. The outer door slams and when I feel the gust of air that rattles our dishes by the sink ten times a day, I finally open my eyes. I can hear the dripping again and I lie very still, tuning my ear to the source. I like imagining there's a natural spring hidden in our tiny flat and not a massive leak, but I trace the sound to the heavy curtains drawn over the window by my head. Sitting up, I kneel on the creaky mattress and brush the curtains aside in one fell swoop, as though revealing someone hidden behind it. The room floods with light reflected off the dry brick wall beyond, but I appear to be in the midst of a sun shower, as rain falls from inside the window frame, heavy droplets hitting the sill and splashing onto the carpet like the runoff from Swansea's overflowing gutters. Baffled, I stand up on the pull-out, the metal frame threatening more than ever to break, and look up at the ceiling where a steady stream of water seems to spring from the crown moulding, pouring down the wall before reaching the window, the rivulets breaking into tears.

I leap off the bed across the room to the kitchen to grab tea towels or toilet paper – anything to stop the flow – when I trip on the table leg, stub my toe and, muttering “shit, shit, shit”, fall very ungracefully onto the floor. I think of *The Three Stooges* and how comic this scene could be if I was on television, but as I grip my throbbing toe and catch sight of my reflection in the mirror on the wardrobe, all bedhead and frowning face, I think I'm not such a natural physical comedienne after all. The dripping from the window seems to be slowing, so I lie down on the floor to watch it, imagining I'm a sort of nymph next to a babbling brook instead of an unemployed twenty-something in a dirty flat. With my cheek pressed to the cold tile, I consider spending the day here, and that's when I spot it: the vine. A thin, pale green, foot-long snake of vegetation reaches

out to me from the dark gap between the wall and the cabinet. I think – have I dropped a rogue potato? – but it couldn't be that, so I drag myself up off the floor, gripping my sore breasts and arching my aching back before I approach it. I lean in, trying to see into the murky recess before reaching down to touch it. It seems strong, alive even, and when I give it a little tug I can't help but jump back, recoiling, because it *resists*; it has *roots*.

With one eye on the vine, I mix myself a glass of strawberry and barley squash and consider the water source that's enabling it to grow. I can't seem to figure out how it might have travelled from the ceiling above the "lounge" across the room to this spot in the kitchen, but nor do I want to. Crossing the room, I slip on my rubber boots, sorry, *wellies*, before stepping out the side door to the little shared yard, breathing in the fresh air. I don't know why they call these patches of pavement and twitch grass 'gardens' here. Sipping on my juice and turning my face up to the warm sun burning in a clear sky, I'm surprised that it's still September. The grass is now arid and yellow and interspersed with wispy weeds; blackberries on their spiked spines poking through the fence are starting to shrivel in the sun. The heat here is so strange – yesterday it could have been March, it was so cool, dark, and damp, but today the sun feels hot and almost unbearable. A wind chime that I bought at the Oxfam shop tinkles faintly in the kitchen window as a breeze blows up from the bay. It should be beautiful, but instead the noise is weak and irritating. I finish the last of my squash and turn on my heel to go back inside where the blue paint of the flat appears chalky in the daylight. As I kick off my wellies, my eyes rest on the pull-out that we've stopped folding up in the evenings and how it seems to sag beneath the rumpled sheets. Across from it on the wall, the Matisse poster of a Tahitian woman has gradually and imperceptibly wrestled free from the blue-tac and is now just hanging by a tenterhook of suspension from the one last fixed corner. The blue silk sari on the kitchen curtain rod has also slipped, too low now, hiding the tinkling wind chime and obscuring the view of the garden and the sunlight beyond. I can't spend another day cooped up in here, I think, so I pull on some leggings and a loose grey dress that has a pattern of tiny red and green apples on it, slip on a cardigan and the wellies again, grab my keys and slam the door behind me as I hurry down the path through the garden to the alleyway.

The flat is at the back of a big old Edwardian house on Sketty Road. The heavy wooden front door is painted the same powdery blue as the walls of our flat and leads to a hall that is dark and impossible to navigate without the light, even in daytime. A red carpet with a moth-like pattern in orange, brown, and black leads up to our door on the ground floor and crawls up the stairs to the apartments above. When Uncle Frank helped me inside with my suitcase and boxes he took one look at the room and said, “Well, love, we’re only up the road,” which might have annoyed me had I not been so excited. My very own apartment. *Our flat*. I scoured the charity shops for peculiar knick-knacks and colourful, mismatched dishes, and bought two blue saris on St. Helen’s Road, one periwinkle for kitchen curtains, the other navy for a wall-hanging that rises up behind the sofa bed, enveloping us in a cool warmth. The tiny beads and sequins sewn onto the fabric reflect the light from the ticking gas fire when I make dinner and Gareth and I talk about our usually dull days at work – his at the arcade dealing with the daytime gamblers, and me in the windowless frenzy of discount clothing. We drink cans of Carling or cheap bottles of wine all evening, playing house, and afterwards have sex on the pull-out by the light of the muted television set, lying naked and content until it gets too cold or we fall asleep in each other’s arms. Or at least that’s what we used to do, two months ago.

I’m thinking of the last time we spent an evening like that together as I stroll down the meandering lane that snakes behind and between the houses of the Uplands and Brynmill. Since I quit my job at Primark, I’ve mostly spent my days walking through the city centre, and if it’s not raining, down to the marina and onto the beach by the observatory, lying on my back in the sand eating ice cream bars. Sometimes I’ll wander down to where the surf meets the shore, letting my feet become coated with slick, grey mud and the feathers of gulls. It’s never occurred to me to go to Caswell or Langland, or to take the green bus to Rhossili. One day I’ll take you, Gareth says. So I keep waiting for one day, more than content with the wide sweeping view and soft sands of Swansea Bay, so long as I don’t dig too deep, unearthing unwelcome treasures deposited by the tides. I can’t be bothered to go all the way to town today though, so I follow our lane until it spits me out on Gwydr Crescent, then carry on into the next one across the road. It’s sort of dirty, but I like looking at the backs of peoples’ houses

beyond the old stone walls – washing on lines, haphazard extensions, and odd things in windows like a lone shoe strung up by its lace or a bird in a cage. There's a sort of tributary into another, narrower alleyway and I turn down it to see where it might take me. The pavement is slanted slightly on each side forming a gully for rainwater to collect and stream down eventually, I suppose, to the sea. On either side of me, the motley stone and crumbling brick walls are patterned with moss and ivy, occasionally punctuated by low wooden doors that remind me of *The Secret Garden*. It's barely wide enough for a car to fit through here and the sight of discarded take-away containers, broken glass, and crushed Tennen's Super cans imply a different sort of use for this lane. I pause when I come upon a deep space in the wall filled with brambles, an old mattress, some dirty liquor bottles, and scraps of rags. The sun illuminates a half-empty, dirty pink plastic cat food dish on the pavement. Looking around me, I crouch down and pick it up by its rim, shaking the dish and calling softly, "*Mew, mew.*" I stay as still as possible, waiting a long minute and nearly standing up when the brambles shiver. I call out again, a little louder and two soft black points appear behind the mattress, then two wary yellow eyes. I smile and it feels as though the muscles in my cheek are shaking from misuse. The cat lifts itself onto the damp mattress by its two front paws and as she reveals her face, I'm startled to see a tiny black kitten in her mouth.

The mother lets out a muffled, woeful mew. Remaining very still, I whisper to the cat again and there comes the faint sound of mewling from more than one voice. I whisper softly to the cat and she crouches back down again, then re-appears without the kitten. She approaches me slowly, her fur long and matted, though clean enough. Although obviously feral, she appears gentle and doesn't hiss at me or seem too afraid as she picks her way daintily through the knotted barbed branches, deftly avoiding the broken glass before hopping down onto the pavement and, to my surprise, rubbing herself luxuriously against my knee. She circles me once and I tentatively put a hand out to her. She sniffs my fingers with a dry nose – a sign of ill health, Gramps always said – and I lightly stroke the top of her head between her ears. She's startled by this, though, and flinches before bounding dexterously back into the grotto behind the mattress, though her ears are still visible.

My knees are aching now from squatting, so I rise up stiffly onto my tippy-toes, trying to see into the space where the cat and her kittens are hidden. The mother reappears, this time holding a different kitten in her mouth, smaller and with snowy white fur, again meowing sorrowfully.

“What can I do?” I ask her and the cat stares at me. Her eyes shine glassy with exhaustion, or maybe fear, but she doesn’t retreat. I test the mattress with my foot and it bends slightly, but appears to be resting on a fairly solid pile of junk. Kneeling down carefully, I crawl across the filthy, sodden mattress, kicking glass off with my boot. Brambles snag my hair and scratch the backs of my hands, but I continue on until I can peer over the side of the mattress. In a nest of newspapers and a soiled, ragged blue blanket sit four kittens, three black, one white, the mother cat curled next to them. Her eyes are sharp and kind and she leans back from the kittens, revealing her shrivelled teats. It’s instinct, not logic, that makes me gently lift each kitten, one by one, into a pouch I’ve created with my cardigan, my other arm pressed firmly beneath them against my abdomen. The mother cat watches me carefully, but without hostility. Her face is placid and terribly sad. I look down at the four mewling kittens and carefully cover them with my sweater to keep them warm before again reaching out a hand to their mother who simply curls herself tighter and lays down her head. Crawling back out, my knees damp and muddy despite the dryness of the day, I pause a moment, waiting for the mother to appear again, but she stays silent and so, with the tiny warm bodies squirming against me I hurry back down the lane to take them home.

Opening the door to the dim flat, I move swiftly past the vine, ignoring the dirty dishes and wet window sill, until I reach the bed and sit down, carefully pulling back my cardigan to look at the kittens. They slept for most of the short walk, but they’re squirming now, so I place each one carefully on the rumpled sheets, surrounding them with pillows so that they can’t walk off the edge. They’re so tiny, their ears are still flat to their heads and I pet them lightly with my pinky finger, overcome by the knowledge of their fragility. I scan the room, wishing I had a basket to put them in, when my eyes rest on a small suitcase on top of the wardrobe. I go to take it down, placing it on the floor and opening it up, then make a soft bed of winter sweaters in the bottom, before moving the tiny, clumsy kittens to it, where they settle and curl up against each other to

sleep. I know they need milk, but one look at the jug in the refrigerator and I know that it just won't do. Making sure the kittens are safe and settled in their suitcase, I stroke the fur over their delicate ribcages, as they blink blindly up at me, before reluctantly heading out the door to seek out formula.

I'm sitting stiffly in a taxi, clutching the bag of kitten provisions in my lap, as we barrel up Wind Street on my way back to the Uplands. Some of the bars are just opening and I lean my head on the window, thinking of the night I met Gareth: I'd never been 'down Wind Street' before – and when the girls from work insisted I come out with them, the first thing I saw was a man pissing on the ancient stone wall of the castle, watering the daffodils by his feet. As we moved down the crowded street in our short dresses and heels, my eyes blurred the flashing lights while I could feel the bass pulsate in my chest as we passed by the entrances of different bars. As we waited to go into Lloyd's, someone vomited over the blue-painted railing onto the cobbles, while others smoked languorously against the wall by the cash machine outside Nando's, the girls having taken off their shoes. I was looking up at the carved stonework and marble on the buildings, cast with the names of serious-sounding banks below mullioned windows and patterned brick, when I bumped right into the guy in front of me who turned around munching on a head of broccoli. He was gingery and tall, and looked down at me with a handsome grin and, holding the vegetable by its tree trunk stem, broke off a floret and held it out to me.

“Hungry?” he said.

“Sorry, I already had supper.”

“Gutted. You're missing out,” he said with a wink. “Where you from then?”

“Guess.”

“Burry Port?”

“Ha! No, guess again.”

“Skewen? Aberdare? New York City?”

“Closer!” I grinned.

“Wot. Yankee, are you?”

“Canuck.”

“Never! I’ve always wanted to live in Canada. Maybe I’ll marry you for a visa then, is it?”

“Is that a proposal?” I felt a dimple appear in my cheek.

“It is now,” he said.

Louise hooked her arm in mine as we moved inside the cavernous, crowded club and I watched him move towards the bar with his mates, prepared to forget all about him, when all of a sudden he reappeared beside me and said, “What you drinking?”

Louise stuck her tongue in her cheek and said with a smirk, “Who’s this then?”

“Gareth. Alright?”

“Gareth, apparently.”

“Apparently,” she said, and the other girls caught sight of him and started nudging elbows.

“Right, we’ll leave you to it then, eh, Lil?” Louise said, while Carys seemed to fist the air and said with a wink, “Get on it, girl! We’re goin’ for a dance, we are. Find us later!”

I’m trying to remember what we said to each other after that, or what became of the broccoli, but all I know is it felt effortless and warm and when after more drinks and a dance and a cigarette shared between us and he whispered in my ear, I didn’t think twice before taking his hand and skipping out of the bar, our laughter echoing down the street.

We ducked down Salubrious Passage, hand in hand, Gareth pulling me to him as the flickering light from the street made soft shadows across his face. He smiled to himself, looking at my lips, and pressed us against the wall. Above us, water dripped rhythmically, shining on the pavement where it bled out, even though it hadn’t rained. My mind was wonderfully quiet; all my thoughts transferred to my senses: Gareth’s firm arm around my waist; the pleasantly uncomfortable flutter in my stomach; his yeasty breath on my warm, flushed cheek. He kissed me, hot and wet and I sunk into him, eyes closed; the sounds of the street muffled, as if heard through glass. I had a vague sense of forgetting something as he moved his slightly rough palm up my skirt, parting my legs with his knee; his fingers reaching the elastic of my underwear, pulling at it gently. For once, or perhaps for the first time, this felt like an equal act; desires and

intentions matching, no feeling of disconnect, no wondering if this man truly wants me, just intrinsically knowing that we wanted each other. I opened my eyes when he touched me to find him staring intently at me and I said, “Let’s go somewhere,” as he slid his hand down my thigh, pressed into me again and said, “Okay.”

“Six-pound-eighty, love.” I’m startled by the driver’s voice and almost disturbed to find I don’t really remember the drive home.

“Oh, right, cheers,” I say, counting out pound coins and dropping them in the tray before stepping out onto the sidewalk and slamming the door. I hurry inside though, eager to check on the kittens, and when I peer into the suitcase, they’re still curled together in a warm ball as I left them, though I’m sure very hungry and, my chest aches to think of it, missing their mum by now.

I drop the bag on the kitchen table and clear the dishes off the counter to set to work. When Gareth comes in, I turn at the sound of the door, flushed and exuberant as I scoop out cream-coloured powdery kitten formula and whisk it with warm water, while reading the instructions for weight to milk ratios. Next to me on the counter are two doll-sized baby bottles and an open box that says *Mamalac for Kittens and Elderly Cats*. Gareth’s eyes rest on the sleeping kittens nestled in the suitcase in front of the gas fire.

“What’s this?”

I turn around again brightly, holding the measuring cup aloft. “Kittens!”

“I can see that... Where did you even get a litter of kittens?” He’s still standing in the middle of the room, staring at me incredulously.

“Down the lane.”

“Have you lost the plot?”

“I think you’re overreacting.”

“Overreacting? Are you mental?”

“Just wait – look how cute they are!”

“We aren’t allowed pets.”

“No one will know. They’re only small.” I lean back to check the line on the measuring cup. The fork in my hand clinks against the Pyrex. “They need me.”

“They look like rats.”

I pause and stare at him, but there's nothing to say. The formula now ready, I pour it into the waiting bottles, tuck them under my arm, pick up the suitcase with the kittens and take them into the bathroom, locking the door behind me. As I sit on the closed lid of the toilet seat, the kittens blink groggily at me as I pick up each one in turn and try to feed it from the tiny bottle in my hand. It's difficult at first; they have trouble suckling and try to lick the rubber teat, whimpering in frustration. I stroke their heads and hold each one close to my breast and eventually coax each of them to drink. I choose not to think about how things are or might have been, focusing instead on soft fur, tiny paws, the feeling of warmth emanating from their fragile bodies against me, and finally I feel only one thing: calm.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Gareth is watching T.V. and eating 'a Subway', which drives me nuts every time he says it. It's a submarine sandwich, a 'sub', *from* 'Subway', okay?

"How was work?" I say, but he just grunts so I give up and open the laptop to read more about infant kitten care and we don't speak again all evening.

Even though I fall into a deep, dreamless sleep, when I wake up the clock says it's only ten after three. The carpet feels damp beneath my feet as I stumble through the shadows to the bathroom. Closing the door before switching on the light so that I don't wake Gareth up too, I plop down on the cold wooden toilet seat and squint my eyes against the harsh bathroom light before noticing a faint movement by my feet. Before me on the bathmat looking up with wiggling antennae, is a creature about the size of my baby finger and the same muddy green colour as the toilet bowl I'm sitting on. "Who are you?" I ask it, and it replies with a wiggle of the head. When I've finished my business, I grab a wad of toilet paper, open the window beside me, and pick up the night visitor; its soft, slowly squirming body felt faintly through the barrier of tissue, before I fling it outside into the bluish warm night.

"Better ring the letting agent's today. There's a slug trail on the tile," Gareth says flatly as he's making breakfast.

"Okay, I'll do it," I reply, blinking the sleep out of my eyes. He hovers down his cereal, drops his bowl in the sink, and says nothing else apart from slamming the door on his way out.

I get out of bed and pad across to the kitchen, peeking at the stirring kittens in the suitcase. They've grown already and it makes me smile as I open the fridge and poke around to see if anything is appetizing at all. I consider the eggs and pick up the milk with no intention of drinking it when something tickles my foot. I reach down to scratch the itch when I realise what it is: the vine is growing. A delicate green leaf lightly rests on the top of my bare foot and I flick it off and slam the fridge door shut. The vine peers out from behind the garbage bin and has crept along the baseboard so quickly I half expect it to move. I'm amazed by how much it's grown in the space of a day and I consider measuring it, charting its progress, seeing how long it'll grow until Gareth notices it's there, but the thought of touching it again makes me feel sick, so instead I go and sit with the kittens. They're crawling on top of each other in one big furry ball and the sight of them makes my heart swell so much it's as though it physically aches. This is love, I think, and the last time Gareth told me he loved me pops into my head: He was standing by the taxi outside the hospital holding a paper bag from McDonald's.

"Thought you might be hungry," he said, trying to sound cheery, "How you feeling?"

I shrugged, running the toe of my shoe back and forth across the pavement. I climbed gingerly into the waiting taxi after him and ate the McChicken sandwich in silence, wiping the 'chicken sauce' off the bun and onto the waxed paper wrapping, trying not to drop the soggy, warm lettuce, while Gareth sucked on a strawberry milkshake beside me. Try as he might to draw out the sweet pink icy sludge, he got no more than a straw-full before a splitting headache crippled him. He handed it to me and said, "Just because I love you," and I held onto it for an hour, long after we got back to the flat, and drank it melted – by then just strawberry milk – as I re-read the part in *Anne of the Island* when Gilbert almost dies and Anne knows she loves him, and the whole time the yellow plastic straw was clenched between my teeth.

The buzzer rings and I pull on a sweatshirt and slip on my wellies before moving through the dark hall to answer the door.

"How are you, my love?" Auntie Bethan holds her arms out to me and draws me into a tight *cwtch*.

"Hiya," I say softly and she pulls back to look at me.

"So, where are these kittens then?"

She follows me through the hall into the flat and I kick off my boots by the door, then immediately flick the switch on the kettle and set out a mug, tea, and milk, while Aunty Bethan bends over the open suitcase and says, “They’re so small! Ooh, can Frank and I have one?”

“What? Of course you can! When they’re bigger, in a month or two.”

“Of course,” she says, carefully petting them. I pour boiling water into the mug for her and we sit down at the table. Holding a kitten in each hand, she rubs their soft fur against her cheeks and closes her eyes dreamily.

“Oh, they’re too lovely!” she says, and I can hear the ache of love in her voice too.

“Gareth thinks they’re gross,” I say, poking the teabag in her cup with a spoon, and Aunty Bethan frowns and raises an eyebrow.

“And he knows everything, does he? Hmpf.” She frowns deeper and nuzzles the kittens with her nose. My face clouds as I scoop out the teabag and fling it in the sink. Stirring in the milk, I turn to Aunty Bethan and push the mug towards her. She looks at me and says softly, “You okay, darlin’?”

“I’m fine.” I try to smile.

“It’s just the last few weeks...”

“Really, I’m fine...” I go to pick up the other two kittens, giving myself a minute to smooth the lines on my face, before bringing them back to the table. As they curve their small bodies against me, I break into a genuine smile.

Aunty Bethan’s shoulders drop and her face softens. “Good. Ignore him – let him sulk all over the shop. These little babies are *lovely*.”

“I know,” I say, and my heart swells again.

It’s evening and I’m sitting cross-legged in front of the full-length mirror braiding my hair, while the kittens are taking tentative steps atop each other inside their bed. Gareth, who won’t speak to me, is watching *Top Gear* and reading *Take a Break*. He does this a lot, but as I watch him reflected in the mirror it’s the first time I’ve thought about how these interests reflect on him as a person. One of the headlines on the cover of the magazine says, *Woman finds boyfriend shagging prize sheep - ‘He’s left*

me to be with Ewe'. Pulling thick strands of hair into a tight braid from each side, I think of *Anne of Green Gables*. Anne would never live in a place like this; Anne would never settle for a 'Gareth Blythe'. Fastening the tail end with an elastic, I have the odd sense that if she were here, Anne Shirley would be disappointed in me. My heart sinks at the thought, as if somehow that's even worse than the disappointment of my own mother, or my own sister. What would Jane make of all this? I've told her about my boyfriend and my flat, but not this.

I find Gareth's silent treatment oddly reminiscent of the sort of thing mean girls do in elementary school, which is a deeply unattractive trait in a twenty-seven year-old man. I stand up and go to him, kiss his forehead and rub his back with a pleading look, trying to coax out the boyfriend I had just a few weeks ago, but he carries on reading and watching his entertainment for morons without so much as a glance at me and I feel both wounded and sick to my stomach. Drawing away from him, he moves his head to see past me because I'm blocking the T.V., so I go to the kitchen sink pretending I want a glass of water, looking out at the pale moon's reflection on the distant snatch of the bay, when my bare foot comes down heavily on something soft, cold, and suddenly very wet. Gelatinous goo seeps between my toes and I look down at my now-upturned foot to see the eviscerated body of Slug Number Two – or perhaps this is still Number One, come back for a second, and last, visit. I wail at Gareth, "A slug! Another slug!", extending my leg out to display the mess on the bottom of my foot.

He looks at me flatly and says, "Not nice, is it? Animals in the house?", before turning back to the television.

"You're such a dick," I say, limping off to the bathroom to hang my leg over the tub and wash myself clean.

After another evening spent ignoring each other, I can't even believe it when we've gotten into bed and Gareth strokes his hand along my thigh just as the alarm clock crows its irritating buzz. He sighs loudly and rolls over heavily, muttering under his breath, "More than a fucking month, like."

"It's for the kittens," I say, getting out of bed to fetch the bottles, but he simply sighs again and yanks the blankets towards him. I pick up the suitcase and move it to the small settee, nestling the crawling kittens in my lap, when I look across at Gareth

and try to comprehend how I used to positively crave him. But as the kittens nuzzle me and begin to drink, somehow I don't even care.

I'm awakened in the morning by Gareth slamming cupboards and the refrigerator door that sounds like it might rattle off its hinges. I sit up on my elbows in bed, watching him until he turns around, his face fixed in a scowl.

"What's wrong with you?" I ask, blinking sleep out of my eyes.

"I'm tamping, that's what." His spoon clatters loudly against the bowl before him, chiming across the room and splattering two spots of milk onto the floor.

"You're what? What's 'tamping'?" I search my brain for meaning, but remain sleepily dull.

"You woke me up three times last night."

"Well, the kittens need to be fed every three hours."

"What, like by their mother?"

"She couldn't take care of them."

"This is a joke. And do you ever get out of bed?" His chin is jugged out towards me like a cartoon character. I could laugh, but his tone is wounding, and I feel like a cat that's caught a bird as a gift for its owner, only to be scolded for it, not knowing why.

"I don't have to get up as early as you."

"Right, because you don't have a job."

"Seriously? I pay my share. And it hasn't been that long."

"Whatever..." he pauses, twisting his mouth.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"No, what?" I say, sitting up now, my voice sharp. The kittens are stirring in their bed.

"It's been over a month already."

"What has?"

"Forget it."

"No, say it."

"Don't have to."

“That’s not fair.” My eyes are stinging.

“I’m ringing the landlord about the kittens.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Fine then. Either get rid of them, or I’m going.”

“Fine,” I say, throwing back the covers. The springs creak painfully beneath me and I get out of bed and go over to check on the kittens. “So go.”

I don’t even look up as Gareth leaves, though when the heavy outer door slams I flinch despite myself. I get up methodically, mix some formula; fill the bottles. The kittens squirm and paw me as I put the bottles to their mouths and I think of how Gramps told me that cats that knead your leg or suckle your neck were taken too young from their mothers. I wet a wash cloth and bathe and poop the kittens, wondering if I’m even doing it right when I hear a rhythmic patter – the ceiling is raining again. The day is grey and wet and after the kittens are settled, I pull on my U of T tracksuit, requisite wellies, and a raincoat, covering my head with the hood, and grab the box of cat food on my way out the door. I half expect Gareth to appear; to tell me he’s sorry, that he’s hurting too. Now I realise what I’ve been waiting for, but have yet to realise will never come. I set off down Sketty Road towards the Uplands shops, dodging slow-moving pedestrians and children on bicycles as I go. No one seems to notice the rain.

There is a sickening, woozy feeling in my chest, like maybe I’ve done something wrong, but I’m sure I haven’t. The cat food rattles rhythmically as I walk and the rain patters lightly on my hood like softly drumming fingertips. When I reach the grotto, I shake the box and wait. The mother cat doesn’t appear. I shake it again and put a foot on the old mattress, but still nothing. The pressure from my shoe causes the mattress to shift and the junk beneath it moves, revealing a pocket of space underneath. I crouch down in the shadows, the skin of my hands appearing as though viewed through blue cellophane. It reminds me of a book I had as a child – *Facts About Cats!* – that said felines couldn’t see red; everything they view is through blue-tinted glasses, and I’m peering in the dim light, looking for the mother, when I almost miss it, thinking it’s a discarded child’s toy, or maybe a lost mitten. I narrow my eyes, trying to focus on what’s hidden in the space before me when I know: a fifth kitten. It’s so small; the others are now at least twice its size, its frail body looks deflated, as though it has been

pressed in a book. A faint, unfelt breeze moves past me and the white fur flutters.

I clutch my stomach and knock over the box of cat food with my knee as I fall back onto the pavement. The grit of sand and broken green glass crunches beneath my feet and again, I'm on the verge of crying, but it won't come. I squeeze my eyes tight, willing the tears to appear, but my stomach twists and I remain dry-eyed no matter how desperately I try. There's nowhere to bury the kitten and I'm afraid to touch it; in case it should somehow disintegrate in my hands. I leave the box of food on the ground and rise up again, looking about me for something to cover the kitten with, but there's nothing and the sky has turned so dark I almost think it must be dusk, not morning, as if the sun never came up at all. The shadows around me make the skin on my back prickle with imagined fears and I hurry out of the lane, running all the way back to the flat, splashing through puddles and leaping over rubbish as I go, and when I reach the door in the garden, panting and hot, I stand outside watching the rainwater dripping in the gutter, putting off opening the door to a darkened and half-empty room.

CHAPTER 10

Bonfire Night

Lately when Jane drinks, she talks about killing. She's called me up a few times now from Llandudno and made me listen to her for an hour at a time. She's never at home when she calls – once she was in a pub (I could hear the quiz going on in the background) and twice she called me from a hotel bar. I imagine her in some pink-painted, seafront Victorian guesthouse, the building grasping at its former grandeur beneath peeling paint and a crumbling plaster façade, while Jane whispers into the hotel's phone receiver, the strained cord stretching across the bar to the stool where she sits. She tells me about the house she now shares with Paulette, the daft neighbours, the silence of the town after 6pm when the shops have closed, and then how she wants to kill... never quite finishing her sentence, but almost surely completing the thought in her mind. Yet despite this, I never hang up on Jane when she calls, because the truth is I just like hearing her voice. She rarely calls me when she's sober.

Sitting on a step in Castle Square, I poke at my half-eaten jacket potato with the small plastic fork. The cold damp of the stone has leached through my jeans, making my bum and legs ache with chill and I stretch them out, gazing at the grey sky that's always on the verge of rain. Across the square, next to the massive television screen that the government so generously and unwelcomingly installed here, the cool breeze lifts the sparse yellow leaves of a tree, tempting them to fall. I think, *this is where I live*, and it feels as though someone is telling me a story. This is where you live, Lily. This is the life you have chosen.

Standing up stiffly, I walk down the steps and cross the square, chucking the cold potato and its Styrofoam container into a garbage bin. The fork misses and falls onto the ground, scattering the pigeons like a gunshot in the middle of a crowd. I look at my watch, but there's time yet before I have to meet Jane at the station, so I head for the market. I never expected Jane to come when I invited her down to Swansea. As her last phone call was coming to an end and I was alone in the flat counting out pound coins to put in the electricity meter, I blurted out, "Come and stay with me! You know, you're welcome to... whenever." There was a pause and a stillness on the line and I said,

“Hello?” thinking she’d gone, but she murmured, ‘Mmm...’ before the receiver clattered and clicked, the arrhythmic buzzing of the dial tone echoing in my ear. But yesterday she called again, sober, I think, and said she’d booked the train ticket while she was drunk and thought it would be a waste not to use it. She must be past Cardiff by now, I think, as water drips on my head from the dingy glass overhang on Oxford Street. I look up, not knowing what I expect to find, and wipe off the droplet with the back of my hand.

Avoiding the Hare Krishna monks selling books on consciousness and weaving through people buying lottery tickets on my way to the market, I duck inside and wander between the stalls, hoping I’ll know what I want when I see it. I pause next to the window of the New Age shop, looking at the rings, tarot cards, candles and crystals, and consider buying Jane a present – she likes that sort of thing – but I don’t want to overdo it. So instead, I go to the fruit stand and peruse the produce, squeezing plums imported from Turkey, rubbing my thumb over the skin’s dusty blue sheen. It’s warm in here and my eyes have welled up, I don’t know why, and I blink quickly as I put four black plums into a battered plastic bowl. “Anything else?” the woman in the green striped apron asks me cheerfully and I nod and say, “Still looking.” She drifts back up to the other end to serve an old couple whose canes hang skilfully from their wrists as they pick out parsnips and winter kale.

I need to feed her, I think, so I add potatoes and carrots to my haul, as well as a fat Welsh leek that I will fry in butter and stew in cream, though I don’t know what we’ll eat it with. I’m hungry all the time now, though I rarely finish a meal. I get halfway through and then lose heart, pushing my plate away, watching the juices run together and grow cold before I wrap up the leftovers that sit in the fridge for days.

Behind me, the fishmonger has four whole hakes, two in each hand, that he slaps onto the crushed ice with a thud and I’m reminded of the first time Gareth took me here, buying me a cup of cockles with vinegar. I ate it up, (even though I don’t like fish), the salty, rubbery, grit of the sea grinding between my molars while I grinned at him, stuffing his face with a faggot. Everything we did was like that; just fish and meatballs – no sense in it, even now.

The aproned woman returns to weigh and bag my produce, handing it out to me as she says, “Four-pound-twenty, babes.” I count out my change and hand it to her with a smile.

“Cheers,” I say, and she doesn’t flinch; my accent imperceptible.

Before I leave the market, I deke into the New Age shop after all and buy some astrological incense sticks for my sister – apparently Gemini smells like patchouli. Jane told me once that because we were born at different times on a cusp or something, she’s a Gemini and I’m actually a Cancer. I don’t really know what that means, or whether she was actually trying to insult me somehow, but still, I think she’ll appreciate that I remembered. As I leave the market, my heavy bag of fruits and vegetables makes deep red ruts in my palms, and I nearly walk into a busker playing an accordion just outside the doors. “Sorry,” I say, dropping fifty pence by his feet, and he nods and keeps playing, swaying from side to side, the expression on his face never changing. My fingers are tingling; the bag is cutting off my circulation and I switch hands, wiggling the numb tips and waiting for the colour of my skin to return to normal. Coins clink in the musician’s cap on the ground and I think of how they call it the ‘floor’ here, which I still can’t get behind. After resting my bags for a moment on a bench across from the Burger King, I walk back to Oxford Street, careful to avoid the predatory, dreadlocked charity canvassers with their cheery grins and important clipboards. I feel a twinge of guilt, but it’s mixed with resentment at their insistence on having only direct debits to help the needy. My flat is raining. I am needy. I glance down at my watch and skirt past the warm tented jacket potato stand, kicking stray brown leaves on the paving stones as I weave through the afternoon shoppers back towards the square. The white Dinky Donuts stand sends out wafts of sweet oil, both tantalising and sickening as it clings in the air and at the back of my throat. A street preacher bellows in front of Marks and Spencer’s, cold air puffing in clouds from his wide mouth as he proselytizes about being saved. He points at me, “Have *you* found the way, the truth, and the life?” I shift my bag into my other hand and shrug, and the preacher turns away to organize his leaflets.

Carrying on, I pass the bus stops on the High Street and a single raindrop hits the tip of my nose. I hurry past the boarded-up shop fronts and gay bars, crossing the road

by the condemned Shoulder of Mutton pub, when the grey stone station rises up before me and my oesophagus feels strained. I take in a deep gulp of air and say to myself, it's only Jane, just as she comes outside to meet me.

I wave at her and she lifts her chin in acknowledgment. Her hair is light again, though streaked with cobalt blue, wavy, and cut to her chin. She wears a sheer black dress over tight black jeans, with rust coloured ankle boots and a purple hip-length leather jacket. A thin green scarf is wrapped around her neck and lifts lightly in the breeze. She carries nothing. Jane has always been a better dresser than me. I suddenly feel like a child in my jeans, Uggs, and knitted sweater with the maple leaves on each breast and *CANADA* woven into the back.

“Where'd you get that?” she says as she comes closer to me, smirking.

“Gramps sent it,” I say, and her face clouds. Evidently he hadn't sent anything to her. We cross the street in the direction of Walters Road and I say, “Where's your stuff?”

She pulls a wad of crumpled cash out of her bra and says with a grin, “All we need, right?”

“I guess so.” Looking sidelong at her, I can tell she's making an effort to look straight ahead, her nose pointed up into the wind.

We walk up the road in silence and she takes a creased green plastic packet of Golden Virginia from her pocket. She skilfully rolls herself a cigarette, curly brown shreds of tobacco fluttering down to the sidewalk. The smooth movement of her tongue licking the soft paper reminds of the time that Mum tried to teach us to sew. We stuck our tongues out at each other as we wetted our threads; needles poised, when Jane threatened to pierce my tongue with hers and sew me to the sofa. She was smiling when she said it, but I pricked her arm and a speck of bright red blood appeared. I said I was sorry and she wiped it away and laughed, but Mum was angry, or maybe afraid. She snatched the needles and thread from us and threw them in the sewing basket, muttering as she picked it up and away from us. ‘We weren't serious’, I said to Mum's back on her way out of the room while Jane rolled with laughter, but Mum just stopped in the doorway hugging the basket, shook her head at us, and went upstairs.

The lighter sparks and Jane inhales deeply, holding the smoke in her lungs for a

good three paces, before blowing it out in thin wisps between her teeth. The sky seems to be lightening, with snatches of blue through the clouds that instantly lift my mood.

“How was your train?”

“Shit. It took, like, six hours. But it’s cool; some guy gave me a can of cider.”

“Really? That’s weird.”

She presses her lips together tightly. “No it isn’t.”

“I guess not,” I say, even though I do think it’s weird. We walk in silence for a few minutes before I say, “Oh, I got you a present!”

“You did?” She looks me in the eye for the first time since she arrived and smiles. “What is it?”

I dig in my bag for the incense and pull it out, displaying it like a prize on *The Price is Right*. Jane keeps smiling as she takes it from me.

“Cool. Let’s burn it and meditate when we get to your place.”

“Okay... but do we have to meditate? I don’t think you’re gonna want to sit on my floor. It’s pretty ‘mingin’.”

She laughs. “Mingin’, eh? Well, how ‘bout we watch...” Flicking the end of her rollie on the ground, she reaches inside her jacket and whips out a DVD. “...*Encino Man!*”

I stop dead on the sidewalk, my mouth agape in a grin. “Shut up!”

“You shut up.”

“I can’t believe you brought this! I have hardly any movies here.”

“Glad you’re putting your degree to good use,” she says.

I furrow my brow at her, but I’m still smiling. “Wait though, does the box say, *California Man?*”

“Yeah. I guess British people didn’t get the name?” she says, returning the DVD to her inside pocket, but carrying the incense in her hand.

“But the name doesn’t matter... it’s a Pauly Shore movie.”

Jane shrugs. “I don’t know, why don’t you go write an essay about it, or something?” I stick my tongue out at her and we carry on walking. After a time she says, “So, what’re we gonna do tonight?” Jane starts rolling another cigarette. She looks both peaceful and somehow fierce, like a wild animal that won’t hurt you as long

it remains undisturbed.

“Well, it’s Guy Fawkes Day... I thought we could go see the fireworks on the beach?”

“Can we drink?” She says, not looking at me, her cigarette hanging limply from her lip.

“Yeah, ‘course.”

“Sweet. I’m in.”

I’m watching for Jane’s reaction as we approach the house on Sketty Road, but her face remains blank. The blue paint on the door is flaking and on the pebbled front yard, two bags of garbage have split open, banana peels and rotting takeaway containers splayed out next to some old batteries, likely leaking acid into the ground. As we step into the dark hall, there’s mail spilling out from the letter slot on the cracked Edwardian tile floor, while a pile of out of date phonebooks sits in a corner next to an empty crisp packet; prawn cocktail. She follows me along the ugly carpet, stepping on the moths in the pattern and through the musty air to the door of my flat. I unlock it and Jane brushes past me and surveys the room.

“It’s very ‘Lily’,” she says after a minute.

“Is that a good thing?” I feel desperate for her approval, as if her liking this place will make my being here alone somehow okay.

“Yeah, the blue, and the scarves and stuff... they suit you.”

“Thanks.” I’m annoyingly relieved.

She looks around again and her eyes rest on the cat food bowl on the floor.

“What’s this?” she says, as Seraphina’s soft white tail appears from under the settee. Jane gasps, “You got a cat?”

“Oh, yeah, well actually, I got a litter.”

“You what?” She says, reaching down to coax Seraphina out.

“I found them... it’s kind of a long story. Anyway, Aunty Bethan and Uncle Frank took two of them, and one of my friends from work took the other.”

“Where’re you working?”

“A pub. I like it; the people are nice and it’s kinda fun sometimes. Easy money.”

“Don’t I know it... It’s a teenager kitten!” She says as Seraphina emerges and Jane picks her up, nuzzling her with her nose. After a moment she says, “Where’s Gareth?” and I see the gaping holes in the room: the empty hooks on the back of the door, just perfume and make-up on the dresser, one fork, one knife, and one plate in the drying rack.

I blink dumbly at her. “Oh, ha.” My laugh is mirthless. “Cardiff,” I lie. I don’t know where he is.

Putting down Seraphina on the kitchen table, Jane sits on the arm of the settee and it creaks uncertainly. She starts rolling another cigarette and it looks like she’s about to light up in the room, when she hops up spryly to sit on the windowsill, opening the latch into the seemingly sudden dusk. Leaning against the frame with her legs crossed and her head tilted slightly back, she blows out blue smoke through barely parted lips into the cool air. She’s so beautiful.

Finding all the food I bought suddenly (completely) unappetizing, I ask Jane, “Pasta okay for supper?”

She turns to look at me where I stand next to the sink. “Will you make it like Mum does?”

“What, Kraft Dinner?” We both laugh then, effortlessly, forgetting to repress whatever it is we’ve become so accustomed to feeling.

“No, that way, you know.”

“Okay,” I say, because I do know.

Lighting the tiny white stove with a long match, I watch the blue flames lick up around the pot before settling down to bring the water to a boil. As I chop the onions and parsley, Jane finishes her cigarette and closes the window. She wanders around, peering at the sparse bookshelf, opening and closing the wardrobe. Holding long hard strands of spaghetti, I feel the weight of them in my hand, enough for two, and let them roll down my palm into the salty water. Jane finds my CDs and puts on Britney Spears, *Hit Me Baby One More Time*. This was one of our twin-hood secrets – we’d never have admitted liking Britney to anyone at school – and I turn around to grin at her for the blast from the past, but she pretends not to see me and tries not to smile.

While Jane leafs through the latest *Heat* magazine, I open a can of tomatoes, stirring the contents in with fried onions and garlic, adding tuna and black olives, then sucking the salty, oily juice from my fingertips as we both sing along to the music, loud and out of tune. When the pasta is ready, I divide it onto two plates and ladle over the sauce, then place them on the tiny table for two and Jane sits down in Gareth's chair.

"Thanks, Sis," she says, picking up her fork. "...you got any booze in the house?"

"Uhh, I think I have some sherry?" I don't think she'll actually want to drink it, but she gets up and takes the bottle from the top of the fridge where she'd evidently already spotted it and pours herself a mug full.

"You want any?"

"Just a little one," I say, afraid that if I refuse she'll for some reason be angry with me and my sister will simply leave me, again. I hear her voice over the phone echoing in my head – "But sometimes, I want to kill..." and I want to ask, kill what? She fills a second mug halfway and sits back down, taking a large gulp of hers and tucking into her spaghetti. We're both slurping it up, intentionally letting it splatter on our cheeks and chins, delighting in the red spots hitting the white table. I flick my fork to swirl the strands of pasta and accidentally let out a stream of splatter that hits Jane on the forehead. She looks up at me and there's a fierceness in her eyes softened only by a twinkle that I haven't seen in years. She picks up an olive and beans me in the chin with it. My mouth hangs open in mock outrage.

"Trying to catch flies?" Jane says; a perfect imitation of Gramps. She gulps back more sherry.

"Dying of thirst?" I say, giving her one of Mum's ineffectual looks of disapproval.

"Fuck off," she says slowly, her cheek twitching before she grins.

"You first," I reply and my chest seems to swell.

She finishes her sherry and sets down the mug. Her face has fallen into a soft half smile and her eyes are glassy, or maybe it's just a trick of the light. "What time are the fireworks?"

"Seven." We're looking at each other in the eye now. It's like a staring contest

and neither of us wants to break the gaze first.

“Okay. I’ll do the dishes.” She stands and picks up our empty plates, dropping them with a clatter into the sink. “Done,” she says, hands on hips and grinning.

We’re standing in the bathroom in front of the mirror, each wiping spots of tomato sauce off our faces with rough blue washcloths. It seems to me that Jane and I have never looked more alike than right now, even though her hair is short and half blue and mine is still long and blonde; her eyes rimmed in dark black liner, while my own soft brown pencil has nearly rubbed off over the course of the day. She wipes the cloth down the side of her face and I’m transfixed by the contrast between our lips; hers still stained from reddish lipstick, mine pale and chapped, but both still somehow entirely, exactly the same. I wanted so badly before to be free of our twin-hood, to be seen as unique; an individual, and now it doesn’t seem to matter at all.

Before walking down to the beach, we stop by Bargain Booze for supplies. A bell dings as we push open the red painted door into the bright shop. Jane scans the shelves of bottles behind the counter and then turns to me and says, “Wanna just get some more sherry?” By now I have the taste for it so I nod and she says to the guy at the cash register, “A bottle of your cheapest sherry, my good man.”

He cocks an eyebrow and reaches for the QC Red Ruby, resting it heavily on the counter. I grab four types of crisps and throw them onto the counter too. As I’m digging in my deep, seemingly bottomless bag for my wallet, Jane pulls the wad of cash again from her bra and hands the guy a £20 note. I try to give her a tenner, but she waves her hand dismissively and says with a grim look, “A gift from the wife,” before grabbing the plastic bag of fortified wine and Monster Munch and leading the way out of the shop.

We make our way in silence down to the beach through the winding streets of Brynmill, while the dark sky above grows duskier from the smoke-haze covering the city. The yellow street lights are fuzzy overhead and the smell of wood smoke clings inside our nostrils. In the distance, there are low, muffled explosions followed by a few sparkling fireworks that glitter briefly above the rooftops before falling into ash out of sight. Approaching the cricket grounds, Jane and I take in the sight of the full stadium and packed crowds lining the hill along Oystermouth Road. She tugs on the sleeves of

the baggy orange hoodie I've lent her to wear, seeking holes in the cuffs for her thumbs, but finding none. I don't know when I lost that habit, but I wish I hadn't, just for the comfort it might give her in this moment. I'm leading the way as we cross the road and push through the crowds on the hill. Jane's heels sink into the soft, muddy turf and when I reach a hand back to see where she is, fearing she's been separated from me by the crowd, she grips my fingers tightly like a small child, steadying herself. We reach the sea-wall at last and pause to look out over the bay; the black water like rippling oil. Across it, there are fireworks visible in Port Talbot, rising up above the flaming smokestacks of the steelworks. We watch them in silence until the shifting of the crowd announces they are beginning behind us at the stadium. All these packed in people make me feel antsy, so I nudge Jane and we clomp down onto the sand away from the 'oohs' and 'ahhs' of the crowd and find a spot to sit on one of the dunes.

Nestling our bums in the sand, we sit in silence as the first few firecrackers erupt and glitter around us. Jane twists the cap on the bottle of sherry and takes a deep swig before passing it to me. The syrupy liquor coats my throat with a smooth burn. I make a divot in the sand to rest the bottle and we look out at the suddenly apparent anarchy on the beach. Bonfires dot the length of the bay, while teenagers throw fireworks into the open flames and, once crackling, out to sea. Above us, the Council's fireworks make broad, coloured canopies of hissing, squealing light. Jane and I lie back in the sand, passing the sherry back and forth as we watch and wait for the droplets of fire to fall onto us in a shower of hot ash.

We languish in the sand for some time until there's a lull in the display above and Jane turns her head to me. "If you were an animal, what would you be?"

I think about this seriously for a moment, crunching on some Cheese and Onion chips. "A doe."

"What, like a deer?"

"Yeah. I like them. They're beautiful and gentle and...majestic."

"Yes... but people also shoot them all the time. Like Bambi's mum."

"Well just because some dumb guys in pick-up trucks want to hunt me while they drink beer and wear stupid hats isn't a reason to not be a doe."

"Okay, true... I'm just not sure you'd be a deer."

“Why not?”

“I see you more as... a bird, maybe. Like a nuthatch.”

“A nuthatch? I don’t want to be some sucky nuthatch! Cats eat them all the time, anyways.”

“They’re cute! And sort of soft and...aloof. Besides, would you rather be killed by a cat or a bullet from some hunter’s rifle?”

“Way to get heavy, Jane. And actually, I’d still rather be a doe. Cats are ruthless with their prey.”

“Says the Cat Lady.”

“Well, what would you be?”

Jane takes a swig of sherry and says without hesitation, “A cat.”

“As if! You want to viciously hunt me?”

“I thought you were a doe?”

“I am! But you think I’m a nuthatch!”

“Well, what do you think I should be?”

“A skunk.”

“What! Why?”

“Because you look cute, but you smell like bums.”

“You smell like bums.” Jane’s shoulders shake with laughter and she passes me the bottle again.

Beyond the taupe-grey curls of smoke from the bonfires, the night sky is clear and dark and speckled with stars that seem to burn brighter when the sparks of burst firecrackers fall and fade. It doesn’t feel like Jane and I are trying to be comfortable with each other anymore, it’s simply a fact. And yet, it’s not like before, it’s not like when we were younger. For so long I’ve thought of my sister in terms of who she used to be; how she might have thought of things or reacted to them, but the old rules just don’t stick anymore. She and I are the same in essence, and that is what makes being together comfortable, but there’s something else – a sort of weight that’s settled on our shoulders like a layer of heavy snow. Perhaps it’s just growing up, or maybe it’s just time. I used to think time moved at a snail’s pace, like I’d been waiting for a thousand years for anything at all to happen and it was just excruciating, like how watching a

clock can double the length of an hour. But lately, it's like the earth has been vibrating or spinning at an increasingly quickened rate because events seem to tumble on top of each other and finally things are happening, time is moving, but all at once, I'm afraid I won't be able to keep up.

"I have to pee," Jane says, and she jumps up, brushing sand off her trousers.

"Me too, I'll come with you." I stand up as well, tossing the chips and sherry back into the plastic Bargain Booze bag.

Jane looks up the length of the beach and frowns. "Where're we gonna go?" We're in a particularly exposed spot. I point towards a stone rook and we start walking towards the shrubbery down the beach. We move along the dunes, weaving between groups of people settled around bonfires drinking cans of lager, nearly every one with a resident guitar player. Above us the fireworks seem to be reaching a crescendo as our feet sink heavily into the soft sand and Jane stops to point and laugh at me, crossing her legs. "Why are you walking like a cave man?"

"I'm not!"

"You are!" she says, cackling and imitating me by thumping ahead and swinging her arms like a gorilla.

"No, I'm not!" I whine, trying to catch up to her and realising she was right. Our identical laughter chimes together and it's hard to carry on, with both of us bursting and crossing our legs, drunkenly trying to hold our balance in the sand.

"Oh fuck, I'm gonna pee myself!"

"No you're not!" I scream, grabbing her hand, running and dragging her down to the hardened, slightly damp sand, last touched by the tide. We carry on this way, jogging and laughing amid the bonfires and loud bursts of firecrackers around us until we reach the scrub trees along the path to Mumbles, seeking out a spot sheltered by twiggy branches to use as our make-shift loo. "Don't forget to find a hill," I say, and Jane smiles at me in the shadows as we push through the brush. It's classic outdoor Girl Guide training: squat at the top of a hill so that you pee down the slope and not on top of your feet.

We both unfasten our pants and crouch down a few feet from each other, muffling our giggles so that we remain unseen. Quiet now as we each let out a hot

stream, Jane says, “Lily Marie... where’s Gareth?”

I turn to her quickly. The sound of his name makes me wince. “I told you. He’s in Cardiff.”

“Lil...”

“What?”

“I looked for his stuff... in your apartment. So he took everything he owns to Cardiff for the weekend?” She shakes her bum before rising and pulling up her pants.

I don’t know what to say. I shake and rise too, mute as I button my jeans and pick up our bag. “He... I don’t know where he is. We broke up.” I start pushing my way back through the trees to the beach and Jane follows in my path. I forget to hold the branches back so that she won’t be hit in the face, but she doesn’t seem to mind. Out in the open, I walk a little ways and plop down heavily and Jane drops next to me, lying back in the cool sand.

“Well, what about you? Where’s all your stuff?”

She lets out a ragged sigh, her face hardening. “I don’t know where my stuff is. Paulette probably chucked it.”

“Why?” My response sounds innocent and foolish. She shrugs and looks at the sea. The tide is coming in.

“So Gareth left you?”

“So you left Paulette?” We turn to each other, answering each question without speaking.

“What happened?”

“He wasn’t a cat person?” I pick up a stick and start digging in the sand with it.

Jane’s cheek twitches to make a dimple and soon her shoulders shake from laughing. She sits up and opens a bag of Smoky Bacon flavour chips, stuffing some in her mouth with pinched fingers.

“It’s not funny!” I’m laughing now too, even though I meant what I said and I keep saying it, over and over, because I want her to understand, but neither of us can seem to stop. Trying to catch my breath, I say, “So why’d you leave Paulette?” and Jane laughs harder then, gripping her knees as she says loudly,

“Because I hit her. I hit her head against the doorframe and pushed her and she

fell against the radiator. She got me out the front door and locked it and when I couldn't kick it in, I spat through the letter slot and left!" She laughs hysterically now, gasping for breath. She tries swigging from the sherry bottle, but she's shaking so much she can't manage to bring it to her lips. I'm looking at my sister and I can feel my eyebrows knit, just like Gramps' and Mum's do, and I understand now that they weren't ever really angry with us, just worried, achingly, frighteningly worried. I wonder fleetingly if she actually did kill Paulette, but I think if she had she wouldn't have come to see me. When her laughter turns to sobs, I take the bottle from her and push it into the sand, putting my arm around her shoulders and pulling her to me. Jane leans over and puts her head in my lap. When her sobs quieten down, she says, "Kittens are cuter than babies," and I nearly choke on the lump in my throat.

A teenaged boy lights a cracker in a fire pit and runs with it towards the water. The tide is still far out and he runs and runs, seeming never to reach it, screaming wildly as green sparks pepper the sand by his dancing feet. I stroke Jane's hair by her temple and I can just feel her roots, soft and pale next to her skin. When her breathing is quiet again I say softly, "I had a baby," and my shoulders begin to shake. "I mean, I didn't. I had a... but, I was pregnant..." Jane's muscles stiffen and I'm afraid she's about to leave, but instead she sits up and wipes the tears from my cheeks, and pulls me over to lay my head in her lap, stroking my hair as I did for her.

"I couldn't have a baby now... not with... him, but..." I say between sobs, finally getting the words out that had been lodged in my throat for so long.

"But?"

"I still kinda wanted it, you know? Even though I did the right thing."

Two children run past us waving sparklers. I sit up and look at my sister. "I'm sorry," I say, holding her gaze and taking her hand to make sure she knows what I mean.

It feels like she ought to say sorry too, as though our sins against each other have been equal, but she just says, "Okay," and squeezes my hand, and it is okay.

Without speaking, we stand up brushing sand off our bums and gathering the empty foil packets, sherry, and a sea shell or two into our bags. After climbing the hills of Brynmill, when we're finally back at the flat, we take off our sandy clothes and put on

pyjamas, brush our teeth, and fall asleep together on the pull-out like we did when we were children, facing away from each other, our backs just barely touching.

CHAPTER 11

Sin City

“What time is it?” Jane squints in the pinkish-red light, peering across the room as she tries to read the clock above the bar.

Speaking over each other, Daniel says, “Quarter past three,” as I say, “Quarter after three,” which halts us in our speech and we smirk at each other.

“*Quaaarter aaafter*,” Daniel mocks me in a terrible cowboy twang.

“I don’t sound American!” I rail, as he mimics me again and I pout and cross my arms, lifting my chin in exaggerated outrage. He pokes me in the ribs, which makes me crumple, and I poke him back, causing him to slosh his pint.

“Why don’t you two find a dark corner and fuck it out already?” Jane says cocking her eyebrow, then quickly claps a hand over her mouth. ‘*Sin*’ is scrawled across the back of it in black permanent marker from our pub crawl visit to Sin City earlier tonight.

“What’s the matter?”

“I cursed!” she says, and Daniel and I laugh into our drinks until we realise she’s serious.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I say, and she gives me a hard stare, but can’t sustain it. Her face melts beneath her bleached blonde bangs, tied up with a head scarf printed with roses. Lifting her tattooed arm, she gulps back half the whiskey and soda in her hand before plonking it on the sticky table and wiping streaks of condensation on the thigh of her jeans.

“Tonight it doesn’t matter. Tomorrow I am washed clean.” Jane looks up wistfully towards the door, or perhaps towards tomorrow, which is really already today. Daniel and I glance at each other quickly, suddenly serious, and I down the dregs of my vodka and lemonade. Pushing back my chair across the rough old floor boards, I rise and shake my empty glass.

“I’m gonna get another. You want?”

“Aye, go on then,” Daniel says and Jane gulps back the rest of her whiskey in agreement. I weave my way through the small crowded dance floor as drunken revellers

sway and bounce off each other, the room reverberating with the bass of 'Blue Monday' and the energy of an approaching dawn. It's 80s night at Mozart's, a funny, run-down old hotel-cum-booze can, where the windows are draped in black sheets painted with white trees and fluorescent posters of pop stars of the past cover the dingy walls above dark oak panelling. As I wait for a space at the bar, I gaze up at the white coffered ceiling and cast my eyes down to the wavy mirror above the old fireplace, long ago bricked in. My reflection appears warm and ethereal in the colourful wash and reflections of candlelight that come from tapers stuck in wine bottles along the marble mantle. The green glass bottles covered in thin trails of dripped red wax transfix my drink-dulled eyes and I'm startled out of my trance by a drunken old man who stumbles and knocks me against the bar. He grabs my arm and says something incomprehensible. I shake my head and he repeats it, looking at me desperately with red, watery eyes.

"What?" I shout over the music, trying to free my arm.

"*Wyt ti'n siarad Cymraeg?* Do you speak Welsh?" He says imploringly through a cloud of foul, yeasty breath.

"No," I say.

He leans in closer and says with a curled lip, "Why not?"

"Because I'm not Welsh," I counter, leaning away from him and he lets me go, throwing up his hands in disdain before wandering off unsteadily. As I push through to a space at the bar, it strikes me that it's only since leaving Canada that I've identified myself as a Canadian at all.

The bartender tightly *cwatches* the pretty blonde barmaid as she laughs beneath her enviable fringe. He releases her and smiles jovially at me as he says, "Hey, you okay?" and the swimming pink, red, and blue lights dance off the liquor bottles and the mirror behind. He has long, sleek, brown hair, prettier than mine, I think, and I smile back.

"Yeah, fine. Can I 'ave a pint of Cwrw Braf, a vodker an' lemonade, and a whiskey an' soda, please, babes?" He nods and reaches down for a glass. I started using a fake Welsh accent a few months ago, mostly in shops and on buses to make myself understood, and tonight it appears to be a success. But the truth is, I do it mostly because I get tired of having to explain where I'm from and why I'm here and who my

Nan was every day of my life. The barman slides a pint of bitter towards me. “Ta,” I say, when a hand on my bum makes me start.

“ ‘Ta’, is it?” Daniel presses up close to me and I pretend not to be embarrassed that he’s caught me playing Welsh. “Thought I’d give you a hand,” he says, smiling like a cat that just ate a canary.

“Stop looking at me like that,” I say, holding his gaze.

“Like what?” He presses closer.

“Just stop,” I say, pressing in too, aching for him not to stop at all.

“Actually, I was just checking out that fit bird behind you.” His eyes flit past me and my face falls. I glance over my shoulder to see an old woman with white hair teased into a cloud around her head, perched on a bar stool and nursing a half-pint as she glares at the room through lizard eyes, tugging at the sleeve of her fleece.

Turning back to Daniel, I say, “Ooh, you taking her home tonight?”

“I hope so,” he says, smiling down at me. My breath is short and my thighs tingle. His light brown hair is tousled and in the soft, warm light, he appears flawless – smooth skin and two days growth of beard, his eyes dancing and his white Duran Duran t-shirt all aglow. I have the strongest urge to lean in and kiss his neck, just so, beneath his ear. It feels like we’re holding our breaths and just when I’m almost brave enough, I cast down my eyes and he turns to pick up our drinks. The moment passes.

“That’s eight-pound-fifty, please, babes.”

I pay the bartender and he looks at Daniel and then gives me a wink. “Cheers,” I say, laughing.

We push back through the crowd, bopping to ‘A Little Respect’ by Erasure as we go. When we reach the table, Jane has disappeared. “Gone to the loo or summat,” Daniel says, playing Northern, and we sit and sip our drinks with faint smiles, suddenly shy.

“This DJ’s good,” I say, peering over the crowd to see a familiar-looking girl with brown hair dancing behind the DJ booth with a few of her friends. They all have thick bangs, one a perfect *Anne of Green Gables* ginger, the other sleek and black. I think of Jane and the barmaid and suddenly my hair seems horribly inadequate. “Should I cut my hair? Should I get bangs?”

“What? What’s ‘bangs’?”

“You know, like fringe. Should I have a fringe? Like, look at them,” I point with my thumb at the DJ and her friends, “they’re all, like, *fringetastic*.”

“Yeah, go for it, they’re fit,” Daniel says, his eyes twinkling. “In fact, I’ll cut ’em for you myself, come y’ere...” he reaches forward to muss up my hair and I bat him away laughing.

“Bugger off!”

“Ooh, look at you, bugger this, ta that...”

“Will you leave me alone? You are such a pest.”

“You love it.”

“What’s that? You love me?”

“That’s not what I said...”

“Oh...” We’re silent again, more shy than before. It’s so hot in this packed room that I can feel sweat roll in beads down my spine beneath my dress. I’m wearing short black leggings, pink flats and, without doubt, my favourite dress of all time that has pictures of tiny stags and bunnies on it. My fashion sense has greatly improved since living with my sister. I’m bouncing my knee in time with the music and Daniel watches me over the rim of his glass, or maybe he’s just keeping an eye on the doorway for Jane. I never used to question that sort of thing; it seemed I always just knew when someone liked me. But ever since Gareth, it’s like I don’t fully trust my instincts. I don’t know exactly when it happened either, I just lost it, like when I was a girl and ribbons would slip from my hair unnoticed on the wind.

‘Karma Chameleon’ comes and goes from the speakers by the mantelpiece as we sip our drinks and after a time Daniel says, “So, what you think of your sis joining the God Squad?”

I let out a short laugh and shrug. Jane is getting baptised tomorrow into a new evangelical Christian existence and we are supposed to be giving her one last night of sin. I keep singing that Elvis song in my head, ‘One night of sin, is what I’m praying for...’ only, even though I know the real lyrics are ‘One night of sin is what I’m *paying* for,’ I sing it wrong every time. “I dunno. It’s just...”

“...not ‘Jane’?” Daniel offers.

“Yeah, not very ‘Jane’.” We look at each other sadly, wanting there to be more to say, but unable to find the words. This sudden conversion is hard to fathom for us, but does it necessarily mean it’s not ‘Jane’? Maybe, as much as we love her, we just don’t really know her at all.

“What’s not very me?” Jane is suddenly standing next to me and I feel mute, so I just hand her the whisky and soda.

“Cocks?” Daniel grins up at her and she tries to be annoyed.

“Actually, I’m all for ‘em, long as I’m married.” She looks pleased, smug even, and I have to force my dropped jaw to close. Daniel buries his own shock in his pint as he takes several large gulps. The toe of his shoe touches my own and I try to catch his eye, but he won’t look at me.

“Where were you?” I shout to my sister.

“Just shared a fag with a hot dude outside.”

“Oh yeah? Gonna shag him then, is it?” Daniel says, eyeing her sharply.

“Like I said, not without a ring.”

“Gonna marry him then?”

“I doubt it.”

“How come?”

“Because he has a tattoo of a farting baby on his leg.” Wham! deplores us to ‘Jitterbug’ and Jane grabs my hand. “Ahhh, Lil, it’s your fave! Let’s dance!”

“Your ‘fave’?” Daniel looks at me, bemused and mocking again as I rise from my seat and follow Jane into the surge of dancers, turning once to stick my tongue out at him.

Jane swings my arm as she bops and bounces to the music and sloshes her drink. I think of when we were teenagers and she’d put on The Prodigy in our bedroom and dance endlessly, blind to the world and tearing up a hole in the carpet, her own one-girl rave. We’re singing at the top of our lungs, but can barely hear ourselves next to the din of the speakers. Watching her now, I think of the other day when Jane and I were at Uplands Kebab House eating chicken and chips and she told me I was going to Hell. She said it sadly, like she wished I could come to Heaven with her, but won’t be able to until I’ve “accepted the Lord Jesus as my saviour”. Then we went back to the flat and

watched *St. Elmo's Fire*, and when Andrew McCarthy nailed Ally Sheedy, Jane said, "God, I love this movie," completely forgetting, I guess, to disapprove of all the pre-marital sex, adultery, cocaine, and saxophones, not to mention taking the Lord's name in vain. I considered questioning her about it but didn't quite have the strength for another theological debate, so instead I ranted about how Emilio Estevez is plainly a stalker, to which Jane agreed and then we played a game of Gin Rummy.

The song finishes, blending into The Cure's 'Pictures of You' and we plop down in our chairs, out of breath and smiling. Jane probably drank a bottle and a half of wine tonight before starting in on the whiskies, but so far seems relatively sober. Perhaps it's an effect of her newfound faith, though it does feel as though we're watching a leak trickling from a dam; any minute now, she might burst. Daniel looks at us with raised eyebrows, as if to say, 'what now?', and we shrug. The arms on the clock above the bar seem to have moved in double-time, now reading quarter to four. I groan and point. Jane remains unmoved, or unconcerned, while Daniel rubs his face and takes a few gulps from his pint. The high of the evening seems to have passed, and yet I feel strangely desperate for this night not to end. It's as if as soon as we leave this bar, as soon as we're released from the windowless dark heat and noise and the lurching drunks and swooning dancers, everything will be inexplicably different.

We swirl the drinks in our glasses and watch the people around us until the lights come on suddenly when the clock strikes four. Everyone stands around dazed, blinking like roused kittens. A few people implore the DJ to play one more song, but are met with shrugs and shakes of the head. The dingy white paint on the walls above the wainscoting is oddly harsh and glaring, and the old rough floorboards are smeared black from peoples' shoes and spilled drinks. I've been leaning my elbow on the table and I pull it to me with a jerk, releasing myself from the sticky surface. The bartender with the lovely long hair walks through the room shouting at us all to drink up and, with a laugh, get the fuck out, and so we look at each other with weary, drooping eyes and rise achingly from our chairs, downing the last of our drinks. We wander through the rabbit warren corridor out to the street and look up to the sky. The dawn is already upon us, ready to break. It'll be light by the time we get home. A warm breeze rustles the leaves in the trees across the road at St. James' Church and I notice Jane staring at the old stone

building. Her eyebrows are knitted and she frowns slightly. Perhaps she's feeling guilty for our (rather fun) night of sin, or maybe she's just nervous. She had her eyelashes tinted this week so that when she comes out of the water she won't look blind. I glance at Daniel, but the light and the breeze of the coming day seem to have taken away our momentum. He crosses his arms and starts walking towards the flat.

As we make our way up Walters Road, the sky lightens above us and the day unfolds. We're quiet, though one of us will make the odd joke every once in a while, still drunk after all. As Jane unlocks the heavy, scuffed door of the house, I take a look back at the whitish blue of the sky and let out a breath. Everything changes, I think, and we move through the damp-smelling dark hall to the flat. Once inside, we each turn our backs to each other with cast down eyes as we strip off our clothes to get ready for bed. There's no need to turn on a light. Jane and I crawl between the sheets on the pull-out, while Daniel flops down on the too-short settee and pulls the scratchy Welsh wool blanket over his half-naked body. I'm very conscious of his nearness, the thin fabric of the sheets and my nightgown, how the wool must feel against his skin, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the thought of him and the tingling of where his eyes might be watching my back. I peer at Jane; her eyes are shut but I know she isn't sleeping.

"Janey," I whisper, knowing Daniel can hear me anyways.

"Mmm," she hums, not moving.

"Are you nervous?"

She waits before she answers, choosing her words with a masticating tongue. "No. Excited." She reaches out and pats my hand resting on the pillow by my cheek, then rolls over and away from me, as if I am the one who ought to be excited, or needs comforting, after all.

When I stir out of sleep around noon, the sun is streaming in from the window in hot streaks across my face. I rub my eyes and Daniel says from the kitchen, "Gonna be a hot one, innit," and for a moment I'm confused, or still half-dreaming, and I imagine that this is our flat, mine and his, and it's him next to me in bed and setting out our mugs on the counter. I blink and open my eyes wider and, remembering, am thankful to have the sun to blame for my flushed cheeks.

"Yeah, looks like it," I reply, sitting up in bed and crossing my arms over my

braless chest, my nipples too sensitive beneath the thin cotton of my nightgown. Jane still sleeps like a log, heavy and unmoving, and I purposely labour to get out of bed, making it creak and bounce so she'll stir without being angry at me. She groans. When we were kids, I used to just jump on the mattress until she kicked me; she's never been a morning person. I pull on my old U of T hoodie and pad onto the tile floor where Daniel leans against the counter, shirtless and barefoot, but wearing jeans. His skin is smooth and slightly brown from the sun; his toes long and surprisingly hairy. I smile at the floor.

"Brew's ready," he says, handing me a milky mug of tea with the bag still floating in the cup. I can't bear to tell him I'd rather just have strawberry squash, so I take it with feigned gratitude, lifting up my eyebrows and smiling in soft surprise to meet his eyes for the first time today. We hold each other's gaze for a moment too long and a dimple in Daniel's cheek twitches before he looks down at his cup. The steam hitting my nose is not unpleasant, though and, feeling completely dumb, we stand in the sunny room holding our mugs, watching Jane pretending to sleep. She springs up suddenly and we're both so startled we slosh our tea.

"Afternoon!" she says, grinning. She leaps out of bed, apparently hangover-less and claps her hands together once, displaying the back of her *Sin*-scrawled hand.

"Right, let's get a move on. The Lord awaits!" And so, we do.

When we arrive at the church, there are people milling about outside smoking cigarettes, and plenty more carrying cakes and trays of food through the open door of the squat brick building. It lies somewhat conspicuously between rows of terraced houses on a flat street in the Sandfields. Jane was invited to the church one night in December when, drunk and having cut her foot after taking off her shoes, a Good Samaritan handed her a pair of flip flops and told her Jesus had a plaster for all her ills. She kept it a secret at first, saying she was going surfing or that she'd picked up extra shifts at work. When she said she was taking a beadwork course in the hall there, that's what finally tipped me off. Eventually she confessed when I came home early from work one day and found her reading the Bible on the settee with a yellow highlighter in her hand. She said it had opened her eyes. She said she wished I would join her and open my eyes too. I asked her why she didn't just go back to being a Protestant and she shook her head as though

I'd said something very silly. "We're different at Lightways Church", she said, and that's when I wrote to Daniel. He knew all about it, though; she'd told him herself a month earlier in a drunken phone call. Between us we decided to leave her be until she got over it, as she surely would. We kept writing to each other though, to keep updated, until she carried on so long, and we carried on writing so long, we forgot what we were waiting for. I'm vaguely concerned that I have developed an arrhythmia from the lurch and skip of my heart each time I see his name in my inbox.

My skin prickles when he strokes the back of my arm and says in a low voice, "Let's go in then, shall we?" Jane is held back upon her arrival by stopping to chat and laugh with every person she passes in turn. She knows everyone and they know her. I think her recent peroxide blonde dye job is an attempt at a more naturalistic appearance, but with the tattoo of a pair of swallows coming out of a rose above a pirate ship covering her left forearm, the piercings in her ears and librette, and the turquoise dress styled after a 1950s diner waitress, or maybe Britney Spears in the 'Toxic' video, she hardly blends in. Still, though, amid the ladies in too-tight suits and pantyhose poking out of their open-toed shoes, no one seems fazed by her. Indeed, it's almost like she's famous as the sun seems to gather around her, shining off her hair and emanating from her beaming smile before it bounces off her skin.

As Daniel and I pass through the congregation, we're both greeted continually by people we've never met, but who seem to know us. I forget sometimes that my face gives away my connection to Jane, but she must talk about all of us, because when we step inside and spy Uncle Frank and Aunty Bethan, they appear to be receiving the same warm welcome. Someone hands me a cup of tea and a Bakewell Tart and says, "We've all been waiting to meet you!" and, winking at Daniel, "and you!" He and I look at each other, amazed. It reminds me of when Bill and Ted are on their Excellent Adventure and they're treated like gods for saving the world with their awesome music. I half expect the priest (or, pastor, I think?) to look like Rufus.

I take a bite of the tart in my hand and the white glaze clings to my teeth. Sickeningly sweet, it tickles the back of my throat and I swallow, washing it back with a mouthful of tea that burns my tongue. We're standing to the left of the door where people chat and come and go, or loiter by a folding table set up with plates of sweets and

tea and cups of orange squash. Children run about, weaving between peoples' legs and a woman near me holds printed programmes of the service in one hand and a baby with the other, bouncing it on her hip. The baby laughs at something unseen and my chest aches. I blink twice and look instead into the church. The wide, square room is painted pale yellow with biblical passages painted at random in a dark blue scrawling script across the walls. Old couches and chairs like we had at school are arranged in a sort of horseshoe shape in front of an electric organ and a projector screen on a stand. Above it is painted in larger script, "*I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,*" and further above that, a crucifix has been screwed to the wall just below the ceiling. 'Not very Jane', I say softly to myself, thinking of last night. But then, I can see why this place appeals to her. She's never liked tradition or old-fashioned things. She hated doing history at school and used to pretend to be suffocating when we'd go on field trips to museums or anything old. She's always had a penchant for the downtrodden and rough, and sometimes, I think, wishes we were a little less or a little more middle-class – she hates to occupy a middle ground in anything, always preferring one extreme over another. She breezes into the room now, still the belle of the ball, and I start to hum the *Cheers* theme song because that's another thing – to be where everybody knows your name in a strange town and a foreign land must be awfully nice.

Uncle Frank and Auntie Bethan have taken seats and beckon us over to them with waving programmes. As we sit down, Daniel says, "Alright, Mr. and Mrs. Jenks?"

"Alright, Dan? Lil," Uncle Frank winks at me and smiles lightly as he adjusts his tie. The heat has risen as the room fills and despite the open door, it threatens to be stifling in here soon.

Auntie Bethan reaches over to pat me on the knee. "Alright, Chick? She looks lovely, don't she?"

"Mmm," I smile back. Their supportive and unquestioning reactions are a shock to me. I imagine our own parents being here, sitting quietly at the back holding hands, or looking stunned and uncomfortable when engaged in small talk. Not for the first time, I wonder what it would have been like to grow up here, with Auntie Bethan and Uncle Frank as our parents, Lily and Jane Jenkins, instead of Sled.

Jane has taken a seat on one of the sofas at the front, while the pastor takes his

place in front of the projector screen and the rest of the congregation finds seats. In each row and on the couches a few people fan themselves with their programs. I can feel the backs of my thighs sticking to the hard plastic of the chair and hope it won't leave a sweaty stain when I stand. The lyrics to a hymn appear on the screen and when the room has calmed, the organist and a man with an acoustic guitar begin to play. Two hymns are sung in succession and I'm surprised to see Jane knows all of the words. I feel oddly ashamed to have my mouth closed while everyone sings and I start to mime the words, though no sound comes out of my throat.

After a short sermon (is it a sermon?) about new beginnings and fresh starts, the pastor, Dai, says, "Now, I'd like to welcome Trevor, Ffion, and Jane to come up here and give their testimonies, to tell us how Jesus has touched their lives." They all rise from the sofa at the front and stand before us as Dai steps aside.

Trevor speaks first. It's hard to tell how old he is – he could be anywhere between 40 and 80 – as his pockmarked rough skin and thin hair suggest both age and a life of hard living. Below the rolled up sleeves of his plaid shirt his hands shake, but when he speaks his voice is clear and steady. "The other night, I was down Wind Street, been drinkin', been down the casino on the fruit machines, and I was drunk, truth be told, when I run into Dai, here. Now Dai, he come up to me an' he says, 'Trev, what you doing, mun?', and I was really ashamed, I was. Really ashamed. An' he said to me, he said, 'what would Jesus do?' and I thought about it and knew, I just knew, I did, that Jesus was disappointed in me. Now, I loves coming to Lightways, and I loves Jesus, I do, and that's why I'm getting baptised today. I been naughty all my life, lived really rough, like, but Jesus have taught me, I don' have to." As he stops speaking he looks surprised, as if he'd forgotten for a moment that anyone had been listening, and I feel suddenly embarrassed; like I've just eavesdropped on a private prayer. Everyone claps and Ffion, a teenaged girl in a pink tracksuit with a scraped back black ponytail and gold hoop earrings, steps forwards.

She appears almost angry at first, but then I see she's simply nervous and she colours when she opens her mouth to speak, fidgeting with her hands. "I don't know what to say, really, after wha' Trev's just said. I loves coming here too. And you know, since I found Jesus, my life's just got so much better. I got my baby back out of care,

I'm not drinkin' hardly, and I'm just really, really happy, like. So that's it, really." She steps back and smiles at Jane and Trevor, triumphant.

Again, everyone claps, and now all eyes are on Jane. I feel nervous on her behalf and wonder if it's a twin thing, being in tune with each other, until I glance over at Aunty Bethan who has twisted her program up into a sweaty, stiff baton. Jane steps forwards and swallows once before smiling out at all of us. She looks sweet, innocent even. She looks like... me. All of a sudden, I wish she would dye her hair back to black. "I am getting baptised today," she pauses, breathes again, "for my sister." She looks at me quickly, a smile flitting across her lips before she goes on, "if it weren't for Jesus, I think I'd be far away from Wales now. I might even be dead now. If it weren't for Jesus, I might have run away and not stayed in Swansea with my sister, who really needed me, when I really needed her. So, for that gift, I can only thank Jesus, and I just pray for the day when she joins me on this journey."

I sit stunned, staring at her and trying to avoid the pitying and smiling faces of everyone else in the room, for they're looking at me now, not her.

Daniel leans close to me and whispers in my ear, "I don't get it."

I stare straight ahead, watching my sister take her seat again and say under my breath, "Neither do I."

Aunty Bethan dabs her eyes with a tissue while Uncle Frank loosens his tie so much he simply slips it off and stuffs it in his pocket before unbuttoning the collar of his pale blue shirt. There is another hymn that Jane sings loudly, though she never looks back at us. Dai the pastor says a few more words before inviting everyone to take a cake on the way out and meet us at Caswell Bay in thirty minutes for hot chocolate and blessed new beginnings in the sea. Everyone rises and we file out to the street after Jane and the others make their processional exit. Daniel catches up to Jane and I can't be sure, but I think he says to her, "Jane, what you playing at?" But the noise of the chatting congregation and the distance makes it all so unclear; I might have imagined it all.

Once outside, I wait in the backseat of the car with Aunty Bethan and Uncle Frank in the front until Jane and Daniel squeeze in next to me and we're like a tin of nicely dressed, suntanned sardines. After rolling down the windows, Uncle Frank turns

around to us with his hands on the steering wheel. “Right, ready?”

We all say, “Yes,” as I’m pressed hard against the window behind Uncle Frank, Jane in the middle with knees poking up to her chest, and Daniel squashed against the opposite window. I’m sweating already and wish I hadn’t gotten in first. Auntie Bethan turns around in her seat with tears in her eyes and says to Jane, “That was beautiful, that were. Really lovely, for you and your sister.”

“Thanks, Auntie B.,” Jane says, turning to me. “So, what did you think?”

Daniel watches me as I form my response. “I... I thought it was nice too,” I say, and then turn to look out the window as we head for Oystermouth Road and Swansea Bay rolls by.

The sand is cool and packed beneath our feet from the receding tide. The rocky cliffs rise up on either side of the bay towards a greying sky, fabricating an early dusk. Although I think only church people are at the beach, it seems busier than normal, somehow. There is a buzz of excitement; the whole congregation must be here. Beneath the closed up café, next to the rocks, a bonfire has been lit and children are shooed away from it and then run down towards the lapping water. When their toes sink into the sand and are immersed, they let out squeals of shocked glee and retreat momentarily before going further in and being scolded by their mothers who are too far away to really care if they get soaked. Jane has changed into her bathing suit that she has covered over with a long, white, floaty dress thing. She and a few others are standing with Dai, Trevor, and Ffion close to the water. The others simply wear their bathing suits – I’m sure Jane imagines that her covering is somehow more romantic or biblical. Auntie Bethan and Uncle Frank are talking in a crowd further off, while Daniel and I stand just beyond the reach of the tide, having been assigned special duties: he is the towel bearer, and I am the photographer. As we wait for the baptisms to commence, the tide pulls further out and more clouds roll in above us, though in the distance towards Devon the sun shines beneath the cloud canopy and glitters on the faraway sea.

Dai waves at the people on the beach and everyone grows closer to the water, while he, Trevor, Ffion, a deacon, and Jane all walk further into the water until they find a spot deep enough to be submerged. We wade into the water until it reaches just below our knees and Daniel sighs next to me, looking out. “What ya thinking about?” I ask,

watching my sister and the waves beyond.

He hesitates, sighs again. "I dunno. It's just not... Jane."

"No," I reply.

"I don't know whether...", he pauses again, perhaps unsure if he ought to continue. "...whether she really believes it, or if she just likes what it gives her. The community and that."

"I just don't see what it has to do with me." I'm surprised by the resentment in my voice, but Daniel doesn't seem to notice. A low wave rolls in and laps at our shins, splashing up onto the hem of my skirt.

"She just wants to keep you," he says, looking at me now. The light begins to break through some of the periwinkle clouds and shines on his outward cheek. He squints one eye, watching me. I open my mouth, wanting to respond, but I just don't know what to say. The way he looks at me makes me feel like an open book, as though he's already privy to all of my secrets; that they weren't that hidden anyway.

Dai the pastor speaks in a loud voice, but his words are carried away on the soft breeze with the tide. He's saying something kind and something else about Jesus; I think he says a prayer. Then he and the deacon each take an arm of first Ffion, say a few words, and dip her backwards so that she is plunged fully beneath the surface and she emerges grinning in a great stream of water, pulling from their grasp and running to a pile of clothes on the shore. Next they take Trevor, who is surprisingly small and frail looking in his faded old trunks, and after their speech they lean him back carefully, pulling him up again through the white froth of the surf. He wipes his face with his hands and smiles and I think of how tight it feels when seawater dries on the skin. He wades away from them and finally, it's Jane's turn. Her face is stern and focused, as if she's about to run a race or engage in a debate. She looks into the distance towards the treed hills behind the car park. She mouths the prayer with Dai and her body goes soft as they dip her backwards into a low crashing wave. When she rises she pushes her sopping hair back and opens her mouth in a smile of surprise and I think of the first swim of every summer at the cottage when we'd plunge into the lake with a running jump, screaming before we even broke the surface. Those on the beach and wading in the water clap and everyone moves in towards the shore. As Jane comes towards us, I

snap a few more pictures until she is so close, the last one is inadvertently a portrait.

Daniel holds out the towel for her and she takes it gratefully, patting her face.

“So, how d’you feel?” Daniel says, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“I feel weightless. I’ve never felt anything like this,” and she laughs such a joyous laugh I’m taken aback by its ring. It’s like a wind chime or a wedding bell and I feel cut by a stinging pang of jealousy, or is it loss?

“You look... radiant,” I say.

“Thanks,” she says, breathlessly.

Jane is swiftly stolen away in an embrace by Aunty Bethan and then the rest of the church as they beckon her towards the now roaring fire. Without speaking, Daniel and I wander in the opposite direction along the beach. The afternoon sun has illuminated the water, but the sand remains cool and dark. Reaching the rocks, we follow the receding line of them in the sand until we are beyond them in the half-bay accessible by the receding tide. In an alcove of rock that rises up above us, with the soft sand between my toes, I look into the little tidal pools, hoping to find a starfish even though I don’t know if they exist here, and then at Daniel, who takes my hand. Everything is too beautiful; I feel as though I’ve been muted again, heavy with the repeated weight of being unable to speak. Daniel’s eyes search my face, moving down to my lips and I part them slightly, waiting, waiting, but he drops my hand.

“What is it?” I say and he steps away from me, dipping his toe into a warm tidal pool. He shakes his head. “Why not?” I’m indignant. I must have imagined it after all.

“I promised your sister I wouldn’t,” he says, and my head rattles.

“But why?” I’m like a broken record, or a child who doesn’t yet have enough knowledge to understand a very simple thing. He shrugs and shakes his head again.

“You can’t just say something like that... this isn’t like, *Eastenders*, where they further the plot by hanging up the phone mid-sentence.”

“You watch *Eastenders*?”

“Daniel!”

“She just told me to leave you alone...”

“So? For what reason?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do know!”

“Look, I’m sorry I’m being a twat... it’s just, she said it was for you. She seemed to think you didn’t want... anyone.”

I turn from him and look out to the sea, dumbfounded, or perhaps embarrassed. After a moment I say in a soft voice, “Why wouldn’t I want you?”

Daniel appears in front of me then, takes my face in both hands and kisses me softly on the lips. We regard each other with searching eyes and I lean in to kiss him again, but he draws back.

“What now?”

He smiles and looks at me under lowered lashes, surprisingly bashful. “Just not here, okay? Later though, when the God Squad have gone.”

“You mean when Jane can’t see us...”

I’m watching him and he stiffens, clenching his jaw briefly, but he looks at me seriously, the sunlight reflecting off his green eyes, his shoulders broad and strong as he says, “No. This is just...I’ll be honest, I don’t really get what she’s after, either...”

“Well, I never have, and she’s my sister.” Daniel puts an arm around my shoulders and we look out at the slow moving sea when I remember the camera slung around my wrist. The last picture I took of Jane still remains on the screen, her radiant face surrounded by a halo of wet, wheat-coloured hair, the rolling greys and blues of the sea and sky churning all around her. “I don’t get it,” I say to no one. “I just don’t get any of it.” Daniel holds me close to him, and after one more look at the incoming tide, we start walking towards the bonfire.

CHAPTER 12

'Funeral'

Ever since I found the note, I've constantly been holding a mug in my hands. *Cuppa tea, is it? Put on the kettle, shall I?* It's as if everything will crumble if I am not in possession of hot liquid in a ceramic vessel. But the thing is, I don't really like tea. Once in a while I'll drink a coffee and if it's snowing I'm partial to a hot chocolate, but I simply cannot keep up with the current demands of tea consumption. At first I would politely refuse. I thought that saying *No, Thank You* was the right thing to do – I didn't want to be any trouble – but this would bring on a look of mild panic in the offeror. They'd clutch the empty mug with childlike disappointment, eyes flitting towards the kitchen, so I'd say, *Aye, go on then*, and they'd be washed with relief, turning to fill up the kettle with a spring in their step. It's better when I say it Welshy like that too for some reason. My natural accent seems to put people off, or remind them of Jane, perhaps. So I always agree now and it's met with the busy opening of cookie tins and the slicing of cake, the tea tray clattering, the kitchen filled with steam. *Milk and sugar, love?*, they always ask hopefully, as if those additions will make their task even more worthwhile. I nod and when they pass the hot cup to me by the handle, *there we are then*, they can relax, duty done.

Usually I'll take one or two sips after it's cooled a bit, and then it just sits in my lap, un-drunk. No one seems to mind, though. The point is the making of it. Perhaps everyone just needs something to do. All of this waiting around – for people to arrive, for me to break down, for any reason at all – is almost worse than the impending 'funeral' itself.

I'm standing at the sink in Auntie Bethan and Uncle Frank's kitchen, considering whether to wash some dishes, but I know that Auntie Bethan will be upset; she doesn't want me to do anything and she wants things to do, so I just stare out the window at the back garden where spring is beginning in earnest. Crocuses and daffodils are blooming in soft clusters all along the fence, framing the bright shoots of grass. The patio table is overturned on the paving stones and all the chairs but one are covered with a tarp. This lone chair, left exposed to the elements and streaked with brownish-grey grit from the

winter rains, is where Uncle Frank sits to smoke his pipe. He favours cold evenings when he can see the blue smoke rise in frosty plumes towards a clear sky. Sometimes I think he prefers the ritual to the smoking itself. My parents will be here soon and I'm dreading their arrival more than the faux funeral. I feel inexplicably angry with them, as if this is all their fault. I dump yet another full cup of tea into the sink and watch how it coats the stainless steel in a milky brown glaze before spiralling down the drain. A soft hand rests on my shoulder and I jump, startled by Aunty Bethan and her silent entry to the room.

"Sorry, darlin'. There's someone here to see you, lovey." She looks at me with her eyebrows pinched together, her red eyes expectant; I try to soften my expression even though my stomach has clenched because I'm expecting to see Mum in the doorway. Turning to look though, I see it's only Daniel. I let out the breath I didn't know I was holding. Daniel.

"Hia, babes," he says and smiles. No one has smiled at me in a week; it's as if I've been lost in the desert and he's offered me a drink. I smile back and he comes over to me and wraps me in a bear hug. Aunty Bethan retreats, taking the cookie tin with her into the front room. He smells of soap and warm wool as I burrow into his sweater; a thick and bulky beige cable knit flecked with brown that reminds me of one Gramps used to wear on walks in the forest.

"You're not wearing black," I say, lifting my chin to look at his face. He's more bearded than the last time I saw him and he's dressed like a Topman mannequin. So stylish.

"Neither are you," he says, and it's true – I'm wearing a tight, long-sleeved cotton mini dress in bold orange and pink stripes over grey tights and flat pink shoes. It belongs to Jane, not that she ever wore it much, so I'd adopted it ages ago. Still though, Aunty Bethan said to me this morning, "Oh... you're wearing that, dear?" as she tied the belt on her sombre navy blue cardigan.

"She would have laughed at us if we'd played the classic mourners," he says with a bitter smile.

I nod, but can't answer. He's spoken of her in the past tense. People keep doing that and it makes me want to scream. I'm afraid though that if I start shouting – *It was*

only a note! You can't have a funeral without the person it's for! – they'll throw cups of tea in my face and ply me with cookies and put me to bed saying things like, *Poor dear, she's hysterical...such a shock, she don't know what she's saying*, and then I'll want to correct their grammar and they'll send me off to the loony bin and dismiss it all with the classic trope, *She gets it from the mother*.

“Should we go out back for a fag?” Daniel jerks his head towards the sunny garden and I nod with relief. The back door opens with a pop, like breaking a seal on the lid of a jar, and we go outside into the wonderfully chill air. I sit down on Uncle Frank's chair while Daniel leans against the barbecue, taking out a packet of Amber Leaf and rolling us a cigarette each, lighting both in his mouth before handing one to me. He is unbelievably sexy.

I take a deep drag and stifle a cough. “I don't even smoke,” I say, which is mostly true. I've smoked occasionally for years, but am resistant to forming the habit. It just always seemed like so much effort, though right now I wonder if I might as well start.

“Just thought you'd want an excuse to get out of the house.” Daniel looks down at me and shrugs. His eyes sparkle like green glass in the sun.

“I did...but why couldn't I just go outside on my own?”

“Everyone would watch you. Speculating, the nosy bastards.” He looks at me sidelong and I pretend not to notice.

“True,” I say, smiling wryly.

We each take long pulls from our cigarettes, looking out towards the shed where Uncle Frank grows his seedlings. It's only February, and yet the flowers in the beds are nearly in full bloom; the stench of the paperwhites at the back of the yard wafts over to us, tickling under my nose. I rub my arms, the cotton soft and cool against my skin and I shiver as goosebumps prickle under my sleeves. This is Jane's favourite weather.

Daniel's eyes are fixed on the shed as he says in a quiet voice, “Why'd she do it, Lil?” His cigarette hangs limply between two fingers, turning to ash.

I don't know what to say because the truth is I don't believe for a second that my sister is dead. I came home one day about a month ago and there was a note on the dresser written on a page ripped from her bible. When I tell people that part they always

ask me what page – as though this is a Nancy Drew mystery and the clue lies in the verse she chose to defile. But the thin, watery paper that nearly rips every time I touch it, is an extra page added by the printer. Apart from her scrawled words, all it says in tiny letters at the bottom is, ‘Printed in China’.

Through a cloud of smoke I exhale the words, “She didn’t. And you know it.”

This is what the note said:

To my Sister, Lily Marie –

Thank you for being a friend. Your heart is true; you’re a pal and a confidant.

Tell Mum and Dad I’m sorry. I just can’t do this anymore.

– Jane Marie.

We hadn’t crossed paths that day, which was unusual, but not alarming. At first I assumed it was a joke, but everyone else was majorly disturbed. They thought it so heartfelt, so tender, but more than that, they saw it as an admission of guilt and death. No one noticed that she directly quoted the *Golden Girls* theme song. After five days without any word from her we filed a missing person’s report and in seven years or so we can believe that she’s dead. I expect her to appear every day, every hour, even. Except that my family and Jane’s church have planned this ridiculous prayer circle/vigil/funeral thing today and I’m expected to be the guest of honour. This whole thing is one big grotesque charade and now Mum and Dad have actually flown here to play the part of the grieving parents.

Daniel flicks his smoke onto the pavement and crushes it under the scuffed rubber sole of his Converse shoe. “Don’t get me wrong, Lil,” he says, “I’m on your side, but...”

“But what?” I look up at him quickly and hold onto the arms of the chair, suddenly shaky.

“She’s selfish and she’s gone, Lily.” He looks at me beseechingly. When he says my name ‘Lily’ sounds diminutive and suddenly very intimate and very sweet. She’s gone. My chin is quivering and I’m trying to stave off the feeling that’s creeping

up my back. I'm aware of being terribly afraid, but more so, terribly angry, except it's still at arm's length, like I could stop it from enveloping me if I just stood up, ran away. "It was only a note," I say, as I drop my cigarette and rise from the chair, ready to bolt into the house, but before I do, Daniel catches me by the wrist and pulls me to him. He enfolds me in his arms and kisses each of my eyelids as hot tears stream down my cold, rosy cheeks. "I know, love, I know..." It's ringing in my ears now though, what I had refused to hear ever since I found that silly, stupid little note: she's gone, she's gone, she's gone.

With Daniel still holding me, I wipe my eyes with my palms and take a deep breath that rattles in my chest. Resting my head on his shoulder, I regard the garden. Moggie, Seraphina's big tomcat brother, walks lightly along the edge of the flower bed carefully avoiding the spongy-looking lawn. Cats are always wary of open spaces, and right now it seems as though any weight on the turf would cause thin brown mud to bubble up to the surface, submerging the grass. The idea of walking on it makes me feel almost seasick and I realise I've barely eaten all day. Too much tea and no food leaves me feeling hollow inside: I could rap on my belly and it would echo for days.

"I'm hungry," I say, and Daniel releases me from his warm arms, nudging me towards the kitchen. I think of all the food Auntie Bethan was preparing this morning and eagerly step inside to forage through it when I'm met with the sight of my parents. They're standing by the stove chatting to Auntie Bethan and Uncle Frank. Dad is wearing bright white running shoes, a brown and grey sweater, corduroy pants; he's turning his wedding ring around and around on his finger. Mum has dyed her roots recently, probably yesterday, since her hair glows yellow straight from the scalp. She's wearing a black dress made of crushed velvet. It's low-cut, so she's put on a mauve scarf, but her skin in contrast looks too pale. I'm having trouble seeing their faces.

The conversation stops when I enter the room. Daniel hangs back by the door and I wish he would break the ice, make a joke, distract all the attention from my flushed face. Mum comes over to me and gives me a weak hug. I try to reciprocate it, but my arms feel leaden and she stiffens as she retreats. She'll think I've rejected her now and will look at me reproachfully for the rest of the day. Dad moves towards me next to put a hand on my shoulder and, while retreating back to Mum, says, "Long time no see."

“How was your flight?” I force my eyes to focus on their faces and they seem bewildered, like lost children. There’s a rumbling noise and I realise that the kettle has started to boil; it’s shaking in its plastic cradle.

Dad answers, “Oh, it was okay. Very nice man sat next to us, does sales work in London, had this tiny little cell-phone that sticks right in your ear, no hands.”

“It was really something,” Mum pipes up. “The bus was long though, eh?” she looks to Dad and he nods several times in solemn agreement.

“Very hot,” he says.

“Yes, too hot,” she agrees and purses her lips.

Everyone in the kitchen is suddenly very interested in the skin on their fingers, picking hangnails, rubbing knuckles, cracking joints. Uncle Frank reaches up to open a high cupboard and takes down a packet of Digestive biscuits, while Aunty Bethan starts setting out mugs on the table. “Cuppa tea, is it?” she says, turning brightly and Mum and Dad look at her with the right kind of relief.

Daniel finally steps forwards, pushing past me with a hand outstretched to Mum and Dad. “Alright? I’m Dan,” he glances at me, “friend of Jane’s.” The sound of her name reverberates through the room like an electric current. They each say a feeble, or maybe frightened, “Hello” as he shakes both of their hands in turn. There is an awkward pause until Daniel says, “S’cuse me, I’ll just pop to the toilet,” and he flees the room.

Mum and Dad look weary, so I pull out a chair from the kitchen table and motion for them to sit down. Aunty Bethan places the teapot, wrapped in an olive green knitted cosy, on a trivet on the table and distributes the mugs. Everyone sits down and Uncle Frank helps himself to a cookie then shoves the open package into the centre of the table.

“So,” Dad says, “How’s school?”

“Dad... I’m not in school, remember?” I say. I can feel residual teenage sullenness rising in me as I slouch in my chair and play with the handle of the mug before me.

“Oh, right, I forgot. Sorry...” Dad looks sheepish and I feel momentarily guilty until Mum takes his hand, cocking her head in sympathy towards him, not me.

Aunty Bethan stands to pour the tea into the waiting cups and stretches her arm

to the counter to grab the milk, plonking it on the table. When all the cups are filled, Mum tries to drink hers right away and she flinches, gasping in surprise as she burns her tongue.

“Too hot,” she says to no one in particular, though with a note of blame directed towards the mug.

“What time are the Bible Bashers arriving?” Uncle Frank says as he bites into another Digestive.

“Frank, what’re you like?” Auntie Bethan is suppressing an aggrieved smirk. “Half past one.”

Steam rises invitingly from the tea in my mug, but I can’t even bear to take one sip. An iridescent swirl appears on the surface like a puddle of gasoline in the sun, and I dip a cookie in it to disturb the sight, letting the biscuit soak up the hot liquid and dissolve into soft floating crumbs in the cup.

“Lily Marie, don’t play with your food.” Mum knits her eyebrows and frowns at me admonishingly.

I drop the rest of the Digestive into my mug and push back my chair with a loud, ear-piercing scrape on the ceramic floor. “I’m gonna take a nap,” I mumble, and Mum reaches out a hand to me, brushing my wrist with her warm fingers. Her eyes are pleading, but she doesn’t say anything more.

Auntie Bethan starts babbling to fill the seemingly endless cavern that is the tiny kitchen. “I’ve done the food, I have, all ready in the fridge and on the table – it wouldn’t all fit in the fridge, see – but I didn’t know how much to make. You never do though, do you? I…” Her voice trails thinly behind me as I leave the room.

Passing through the dim panelled hall, I spot platters on the coffee table in the lounge all covered in thick plastic wrap and tin foil: impenetrable. I swing myself onto the stairs with a wide hand on the banister and take the creaky, dark wood steps two at a time, pausing on the landing, and then up to the top and over to the door of the box room. Daniel’s voice comes faintly through the closed door “...I know that, but this has gone on too long...”

My heart pounds in my throat and I hold a hand to my chest. My first thought is ‘he’s talking to another girl’ and I feel sick with guilt for forgetting my sister, but also at

the fear of it too. I turn the old handle so that it rattles loudly and open the door, feigning surprise. “Oh, sorry, I didn’t know you were in here…”

Standing by the window, Daniel drops his arm, trying to hide the phone by his hip, then brings it to his ear again and says, “Make sure you ring later,” before switching it off and putting it in his pocket.

I’m hovering in the doorway, my hand still on the knob as I say, “Should I go, or…”, which is ridiculous because it’s my room. He steps towards me quickly, illuminated by the bright beam of sunlight that pours in through the window as he passes the small single bed. He shakes his head and takes my hand before pushing the door closed behind me.

“Sorry I left you down there.” He’s still holding my hand and he looks at me guiltily, or perhaps with pity.

I take my hand from him and sit down on the low bed. “It’s okay,” I say, looking sideways at him. The bedding is soft and white, but the walls are painted a deep magenta that casts everything with a rose-coloured glow. This is where I’ve slept since I gave up the flat a week ago. Seraphina likes it here because this house is always warm. “I told them I’m taking a nap.” That makes it sound as though that was never my intention, although I would love to sleep. I can barely sleep these nights for fear of the dreams, they’re so vivid and so frightening, enduring them is more exhausting than staying awake. I slip off my shoes and lay myself out on the bed, resting my head on my arm atop the pillow. Now Daniel is the one who looks unsure, if only for a moment, until he kicks off his own shoes and lies down next to me. We’re side by side on our backs, but the bed is so small that we cannot avoid touching; his warm sleeve on my bare wrist, my hip against his side, the bones of our ankles, mine left, his right, softly knocking.

“Who were you talking to?” I ask quietly, trying to disguise any jealousy in my voice.

“Hmm? No one,” he says and breathes out heavily.

“No one?”

“Tell you later.” He stares grimly at the ceiling. There’s a bird twittering outside the window; it must be sitting in the branches of the ornamental cherry tree in

the front garden. I don't know what kind of bird it is, but I hope that it's a lark. I don't know that I've ever heard a lark sing. Gramps would know. He tried to teach Jane about birds, but she was never interested. Daniel rolls onto his side to face me, the tiny bed groaning and sagging from the weight of his movements. I consider whether or not this makes me nervous, wanting and not wanting him to touch me, but decide it's simply anticipation intensified in the small, warm room.

"Lily..." Daniel is hesitant. I can feel his breath on my cheek.

"Yeah?" My chest rises and falls, each breath like the crest of a wave.

"I..." Whatever he wants to say is on the tip of his tongue. I have the feeling that I could reach over and pluck it between pinched fingers in one swift movement and I turn my face to his and look into his eyes. He's so lush. Now I'm even thinking Welshy, but it's true. The words still hide in his mouth and he appears to swallow them just as he leans in to kiss me, once. Drawing back, he sighs, brushing my hair away from my forehead and cupping my cheek with his hand. He looks sad, almost remorseful, and I wonder if he's going to leave me. "What is it?" I say, turning my body to his, but he just shakes his head. Daniel reaches around my waist and pulls my body closer to his. His eyelids drop, the soft, light brown lashes brush the skin above his cheekbones.

"Nothing," he says through a heavy breath, "nothing." He kisses me again, harder this time and our bodies draw closer. Hooking my finger into a loop on his jeans, I pull his hips towards mine and he tightens his grip around me, moving his hand down my back to my bum, around my thigh, between my legs. We kiss with more insistence, as though we must, we simply have to, or, or... He's scratching at my tights, pulling them down as I unbuckle his belt, pulling at the button on his jeans. We're gasping between kisses, our mouths wet and warm, and he groans when I take hold of his erect penis, stroking it firmly, and I sigh as his fingers slip between my thighs where it's warm and wet. I peel off Jane's dress and toss it to the floor, while Daniel pulls off his jumper and shirt, and we carry on this quick strip tease until we're both naked on the bed in the pinkish sunlight, breathless and smiling softly as we face each other once again in a light embrace. I kiss him and feel his smooth skin, his firm buttocks, look down at his strong thighs. He rolls onto me, teasing my legs apart, kissing my lips, my neck, down

to my breasts, pausing at my nipples, kissing down my soft stomach, pausing again before kissing between my thighs, slowly and softly at first, then with more insistence, as my back arches, as I gasp for breath, my eyelids fluttering in the sunlight, I run my fingers through his hair, pointing my toes and scratching the skin on his shoulders, he looks up at me and my cheeks flush not with embarrassment, but warmth. I can barely breathe and he moves up to kiss me again on the mouth, entering me deeply as our hips meet slowly and Daniel curves his arms under me, holding my shoulders, holding me to him. We kiss softly, then deeply and then we're kissing so hard that everything tenses and I'm pulling him into me, and I can't feel my toes and everything's faster and faster and our hips writhe to meet each other and I all I can think is, I love you, I love you, I do, and he's shaking and holding my face and when his rigid body releases onto me I'm still holding him fast and he doesn't withdraw, we just keep holding each other, fully entwined and I'm desperate to stay like this always, to never let go.

Still catching our breaths, I kiss his eyelids and he sighs, kissing my face until a cloud passes over the sun and a brief shadow falls across us. Daniel rolls onto his back as the sun reappears in warm, lemony streaks. After a time he says, "I didn't think it would be like that," and he looks over at me, almost apologetic.

"Me neither," I say, my voice airy, and I reach an arm across him and he takes my hand in his. Our chests rise and fall in and out of shadow as the clouds pass over and away from the sun. It feels as though neither of us can say another word, or perhaps we don't want to. I wish this moment could be held suspended in time, even as I can feel it slipping away and the muffled sound of voices travel up the stairs to us. The funeral has begun.

We dress in silence, though every noise seems to reverberate in my ears; the jingle of Daniel's belt buckle, the birds twittering outside, the swish of my tights being pulled up, the snap of the elastic, plates clattering downstairs, a door slamming, twice. Once dressed, I run my fingers through my hair, shaking it out, and stand in front of the closed door. Daniel steps beside me and takes my hand. "Ready?" He says. I stare at the doorknob. *No, of course not. I want to stay here in this room with you, watching Cool Runnings and eating those little powdered mini-doughnuts and making love for*

eternity.

But I let out a shaky breath. “Ready,” and open the door.

Daniel holds my hand as we enter the front room. Everyone is suddenly hushed as they sit on sofas and chairs around the perimeter, a horseshoe of sympathy. My parents are sitting in front of the hearth. I’m looking at the shiny green glazed tiles on the fireplace surround just past my mother’s face. I know that she’s looking at Daniel clutching my hand and that she’ll be wondering if he’s my boyfriend, which will in turn make her feel guilty since she’s supposed to be thinking about how Jane might be dead. Dad is staring at me and his lips part to speak, but their faces are fuzzy to me again and my eyes focus hard on the tiles, the black grate, the empty hearth lurking quietly behind them. I imagine it swallowing them whole. Daniel gives my hand a squeeze and I break my trance and say, “Hi.” My voice sounds so small, like a child interrupting an adult dinner party.

Mum says, “Hi, Honey,” in a quivering voice and Dad says, “Hello, Lily-Lou,” swallowing hard. I wish he hadn’t called me that; it reminds me of how I love him. I wish Gramps were here, though he’d think this was ridiculous, so I understand why he chose to stay home. All of Jane’s church friends are holding lit candles; thin white tapers like you’d see at a Midnight Mass. I used to call Jane’s church services ‘mass’ on purpose, just to watch her eye twitch. I’m struck by my fleeting callousness and try to squash it down into my stomach. Glancing at the coffee table, my eyes rest on a framed photograph of Jane from her baptism: a portrait with her face aglow, the grey-blue sea rolling behind her. I’d forgotten that her hair had been blonde then; before she left, she’d gone back to purple. Maybe that was a sign.

“I took that picture,” I say, and the church people look at me with eyes nearly overflowing with pity.

“Of course you did,” one woman says, and I don’t understand what that means.

Next to the photograph of Jane is a bible, some lilies in a tall vase, and the plates of “British Party Food” that Auntie Bethan prepared earlier: triangular sandwiches, cheese and pineapple on toothpicks, Party Rings, mini-sausage rolls, bite-size Scotch eggs, and cheese and pickled onions on toothpicks. The pickled onions make me want to laugh and I turn to Daniel and touch the tiny scar above his eyebrow. He gives me a

quizzical look and I wonder if he's trying not to laugh, or maybe cry, at the scene before us.

"Come and pray with us," another church person says. My eyes flit from Mum, who looks plainly frightened, to Aunty Bethan, who is unsuccessfully hiding a glass of Chardonnay under her chair.

"Oh, but, there aren't any more seats, so..." I picture Daniel and me upstairs on the small bed in the box room, skin on skin, the springs aching, and I blush.

This makes everyone suddenly uncomfortable, as though they don't deserve their seats if I don't have one. They shift and shuffle and a few people start to stand when I say, "It's fine, really, we'll just sit in the middle here," and Daniel and I walk to the centre of the room, still hand in hand, and sit cross-legged on the floor like children. I really want to eat a sausage roll, but the food looks untouched, so I don't know if I should. Daniel watches me eyeing the food and turns his face into his shoulder, hiding a smirk.

"You're so like your sister," someone says, and I feel ashamed that I can't remember any of their names. The others nod in agreement and a drip of hot wax hits the skin of the speaker's hand. She flinches but doesn't wipe it away. I wonder if this is some form of self-flagellation and think, I should make a movie about these people, *Spinal Tap*-style.

It seems that the praying is happening silently. Some people have their eyes closed, while Mum and Dad just look stricken and Aunty Bethan keeps reaching down for covert sips of wine. Uncle Frank's head is just visible through the window beyond the hedge. He's smoking a pipe and looking disgruntled; I'm pretty sure he thinks this is all bullshit too. I take a Scotch egg and pop it whole into my mouth just as someone asks me a question.

Angharad runs the crèche at the church and gives really great manicures.

"Would you like to say a few words 'bout your sister?"

My jaw moves slowly, like a cow chewing its cud, as I process the Scotch egg. It's formed a sticky, salty mass in my mouth that is both pleasing and revolting. I'm trying to figure out how this whole thing is supposed to go – are there speeches? Will we all have to hold hands? How long will it last, twenty minutes, or all day? I choke

down the ball of food with a cough and say, "Like what?"

"I dunno... how much you loved her?" There it is again, past tense. She is filled with a sweet piety that's making me sick. I think that Mum has started to whimper behind me, but I can't bear to turn around to look. Aunty Bethan downs the last of her wine and people shift in their chairs. Maybe they'd like a sausage roll too.

I'm rolling over it in my mind, whether to please these people with a speech about my beloved sister, or whether to lose it; to really let myself go. I've never done that before, but it's always seemed like an exciting, even titillating thing to do. Jane would do it. Even with all her newfound Christianity, when the time warranted, she would most definitely tell them all where to stick it.

I clear my throat and stand up. Daniel is looking at me warily from the floor; I think he senses my imminent regret. "My sister," I pause, "left a note."

Those shifting in their chairs glance quickly at each other, gearing up for a heartfelt benediction. Their candles are becoming dangerously short. "She didn't write up her will, she didn't say she wanted to die, she didn't slit her wrists," I glance at Mum and Aunty Bethan tips over her glass. "I love my sister, not *loved*, because she's alive, okay?" I look around the room and I'm surprised by how genuinely horrified the faces are.

"Oh, Lily..." It's Mum. Her eyes plead with me to make it better, to be good. Dad is holding one of Mum's hands in his lap, his eyes fixed on his thumb rubbing her smooth skin over and over.

"What?" I realise I've been jutting my chin out, shoulders back and ready to fight. And yet no one looks particularly inclined to take me up on it.

"The Lord preaches acceptance, Lily, and part of that is accepting what's true..." one of the church people says earnestly and I can feel the ire rising in my chest.

"Oh, give me a break! You people don't even know her. This is what Jane does. Right, Mum and Dad?"

Mum shakes her head, her eyes still pleading with me to stop. Daniel stands up and whispers something into my ear, but I can't hear him; my heart is pounding too loudly. Somehow he gets me to walk out of the room and out the front door. Standing on the step, I let out an exasperated growling scream. I expect him to look alarmed, but

he just moves me further down the walk to where Uncle Frank is smoking his pipe.

“Bloody nuisance, this,” Uncle Frank says, squinting into the sunlight.

“Yeah, no kidding.” Even as I stand here fuming, I’m amazed at how angry I’ve become. It feels fantastic.

“Lil, what’d you do that for?” Daniel’s eyebrows are knit. He looks as though he wishes he could rewind the last fifteen minutes.

“Please don’t make me feel shitty right now.” I’m digging my toe into the muddy lawn, looking at him from under lowered brows. I hate this feeling, like I’m not allowed to express anything without still being seen as a mouthy child disappointing the socially astute adults.

“I’m not, I just...”

“What?” My voice is level now. I’m calming down. The fight has left me and I’m suddenly exhausted.

“Can’t hurt to humour them. Just have some cake and they’ll go.”

“But she’s not dead!”

“I know that. But she’s not here, either.”

Uncle Frank walks down to the road and taps his pipe on the stone wall, emptying the contents onto the sidewalk. “Good for the birds,” he says. I want to laugh, but I’m afraid the people inside will hear, so I go to Daniel and wrap my arms around his waist. His hands are in his pockets and he looks down at me, his face in dappled shadow from the cherry tree.

“I just hate my sister sometimes, you know?”

Daniel nods and *cwtches* me tighter, then says very quietly, “I love you, you know.” My heart swells and constricts; how is it possible to feel so completely happy and totally wretched all at once? I want to say it back, but I can’t, not just now, so I nod and kiss him once and hope that he understands. He nudges me towards the house.

The assembled guests are talking quietly in small groups. They appear to have turned to the party food for comfort in our absence; the mini-sausage rolls and pickled onions are all but annihilated. To my surprise, no one looks angry with me, but instead, just terribly concerned. “How are you, dear?” an older lady in a blue and pink printed dress asks. I appreciate that she hasn’t worn black.

“Sorry about before,” I say, ready to launch into a more extensive apology, when Aunty Bethan stands up and walks over to me, taking both of my hands.

“Fancy a tippie, love?” she says, and at last I melt with the relief she’d sought with endless cups of tea.

“I know I do,” Mum says from the mantle, and we both look at her in surprise as she rises to join us and we walk into the kitchen. Daniel stays in the front room and on our way out I look back to him gratefully. He smiles softly and I feel it; this is love.

Aunty Bethan swings open the fridge and produces the cold bottle of wine, swiftly filling three waiting glasses. Mum rubs her cousin’s back as she pours, and Aunty Bethan leans towards her slightly, a gesture that’s so comfortable, so familiar, it makes me ache. I forgot that they spent so many summers together as children and teenagers that they’re much like sisters themselves. We stand by the counter, my mother, her cousin, and I all swirling the wine in our glasses. We all have identical noses, though Aunty Bethan is shorter than us and her hair darker. Mum doesn’t look so frightened or fragile now, but I’m not sure why. She’s taken off her scarf and I see she’s wearing Nan’s ruby necklace. When Jane and I were little girls she used to let us take turns wearing it on Saturday afternoons playing dress-up and sometimes she’d paint our nails, pink for me, red for Jane.

Just as I take a long gulp of wine, Mum says, “Lily...”

“Mum, please... I don’t want to hear it,” I’m weary now, but she doesn’t seem to be.

“No, listen... you were right, what you said.” She nods and lifts her glass to her lips. “Okay?”

“Okay.” I want to argue with her still, but I don’t know why.

“We just don’t know, is all...” Aunty Bethan says, and I can see that they’re worried, but I’m not sure if it’s about Jane or me.

“No, we don’t,” I say. “We don’t.” And looking at each other, we all drink just as the phone rings.

CHAPTER 13

Dawn

The white of the cockleshells crunching beneath my feet is like milk teeth, like bone. Everything is greener, colours brighter. What kind of flower is this? A shade of purple one expects to find dyed in silk, or in a pattern on a cheap dress. The daisies that dot the grass are so tiny – chamomile, I think, reminding me of tea, the warmth of it travelling down to my belly on cold afternoons in winter. A cool breeze ripples over me, or perhaps through me, and I touch my sides, conscious of how the cotton of my top touches my abdomen. The grey-blue sky seems to swirl above me, reaching down into the glittering sea and I'm aware of momentum, energy, and the dizzying lurch of nausea.

In the hedge row there is a rose bush and next to it, holly, berryless and petals fading. I prick the end of my finger first on a leaf and then, a thorn, waiting for the bead of red to appear, blooming, proof of life, then I smear it on the bell of a foxglove and watch myself become reabsorbed into the earth.

Sticking my finger in my mouth, I suck the wounded tip that tastes of salt and iron until it isn't sore. I press my other hand against my soft belly, smiling as I breathe in the thin, misty air. I love this path – it rises up a wild incline from the back of our little garden and from this spot I can see the estuary where the sheep graze between the tides. On the day we moved into the house, Daniel cooked a dinner of salt-marsh lamb, new potatoes, and sprigs of salty, bright green samphire that we ate from one plate on the grass in the back yard because we didn't have a table yet. We laid out a red plaid blanket and drank wine from mugs that we'd just unwrapped from old copies of the *Evening Post* and I swear I'd never been so happy that night, at least, until now.

The air is metallic and damp, but in the distance the sky is clearing and the summer day approaches; I can already feel the heat. Daniel was asleep when I slipped out to the pharmacy this morning. When I thanked the woman at the counter, she gave me a sparkling sort of smile that took me aback until I realised she was only answering my own. I walked home so quickly it was almost a run, but I didn't want to go inside yet, so I climbed up the path behind the house, as high as I could go, until my breath came in wisps and I felt perfectly alone, just me and the sheep in the distance. After

finding a suitable bush to pee in, I waited the requisite three minutes in peace, gazing out at the wispy clouds that brush across the sky, not really thinking, just letting my mind settle because really, I already knew the result. When I finally did look at the test, I let out a laugh so bright and so clear it seemed to chime in the air and I almost expected a swelling musical score and cartoon birds and bunnies to appear and eat from the palm of my hand.

I should really go inside now, wake Daniel, warm myself by the gas fire, but I'm relishing this solitude; being the keeper of secrets. I wonder how long our mother was alone with us, like this. Did they take tests then? Or did she have to go to the doctor? My hands rest on my abdomen and I take one more long look at the flowers and the distant, flowing sea before turning to head back down the hill.

Inside, the house is dim and silent – Daniel must still be sleeping. I check my phone, glance at the calendar on the kitchen wall, and though I try to force the feeling away from me, I'm nervous. I wish she wasn't coming today, and now I feel the irksome pangs of guilt. For almost a year and a half, my sister has existed to me as a bi-monthly phone call, an occasional email, and a growing stack of postcards. Now she's set to arrive on our doorstep today and it's as if the whole house is waiting with bated breath. All of a sudden I can hear the clock ticking on the mantelpiece and the tap dripping like a drumbeat on the kitchen sink and I wish that I could shut out the sound. Passing through the sun-dappled sitting room with the soft red sofa, the T.V. surrounded by DVDs and piles of books that won't fit on the shelf beside the fireplace, I peel my clothes off and walk upstairs to the washroom, my skin clammy and warm as I brush my fingers along the banister. Without turning on the light or the fan, I drop my clothes in a pile on the floor and step into the tub, turning on the shower. The water is lukewarm and I turn my face up to it; letting it roll down over my shoulders and my back, curling in rivulets around my arms and legs. Taking the bar of soap in my hands, I work up a lather and move it smoothly over my belly, feeling the slight protrusion and I think, how will I tell him? I'm mulling the words over in my mind, trying out sentences that I whisper into the steam until another thought strikes me – will I tell Jane? I'm breathing too deeply now and it's as if the fog has followed me inside, billowing in a haze around me. I reach for the latch on the window with my eyes squeezed shut, letting out the

humidity that surrounds me. A breeze from outside raises goosebumps on my damp skin and I wipe the water from my eyes and shake my head clear. It's going to be alright because it has to be alright, I think, turning off the tap. The water halts then trickles to a stop, spitting on my head. I stand in the tub dripping for a moment, thinking of how silly it is that I'm more nervous about seeing my sister than I am about becoming a mother, then step out onto the mat and pull a towel tight around me. Padding down the hall, I climb the steps to the loft where we sleep and lie down next to Daniel on the creaky old bed, my sopping hair bleeding into the pillow. I don't want to wake him, so I stare up at the skylight above me, the window a picture frame of blue sky and the fleeting wingspan of a bird. Kestrel, I think, and I could be right, but the truth is it's only a word I've heard – I've never seen that sort of bird before.

Daniel stirs next to me and gives me a sleepy, soft smile. He moves closer to me and kisses my shoulder. He smells of ash and yeast. Last night he was out in town, but I didn't go because I wasn't feeling well, surprise, surprise, and I wanted to get ready for Jane. I had grand plans to scour the house from top to bottom, fill the fridge with her favourite foods, place lavender in the spare bedroom to help her sleep; but instead, when I went shopping I just wandered around CK's for a while and came back with a packaged Battenburg cake, some bananas, and a net of onions and when Daniel left with our friends and I was alone in the quiet house, I didn't clean or tidy anything – I just lay on the couch and watched *Pretty in Pink* with Seraphina in my lap. The whole time I wanted to relax, to admire everyone's thick '80s hair and the irony of Andie's horrible clothes, but when Molly Ringwald fought with her father about her mother's abandonment, I found myself gripping the couch cushion, and when she shouted at Andrew McCarthy in the hallway at school, I shouted too – 'You're a filthy, fucking liar!' – and I wished I had a banner to run and jump at like Duckie does after he clocks James Spader in the face.

"What you thinking about?" Daniel says, stroking my arm.

My breath is shaky. "I've got some news."

His brows knit and he frowns. "'Bout Jane?"

"No, no..." and I smile and look at him, eyes glassy, and say in a soft voice, "Remember I wasn't feeling well? Like for a couple weeks now?"

“Yeah...”

“Well now I know why.”

“Okay... why?”

I’m still happy, but suddenly fearful, and I say on an outward breath, “I’m pregnant.”

He looks stunned, blinking slowly, his eyes cast down to his toes.

“Pregnant?” he says in a voice so soft, it’s less than a whisper. After a moment, Daniel reaches over to pull me close, pushes the damp towel away from me and moves down to kiss my soft stomach. When he looks up at me, he begins to laugh and says, “We’re having a baby?” and it sounds absurd, wonderfully absurd, and he moves up to *cwetch* me closer and we’re both laughing and can’t seem to stop. How weird, I think, I’m going to have a *baby*, I’m going to be a *mother*, and I glance down at my ever-so slightly rounded belly and shake my head in disbelief.

Daniel rolls onto his back, ruffles his hair and rubs his face, staring up at the swatch of sky. “Fuck me, I’m gonna have to get a proper job,” he says, and suddenly we’re both serious.

“Me too, I guess.”

“Yeah, eventually, like.”

“Yeah.”

I’ve been working part time at a pub and part time at the Taliesin theatre for two years, almost. Daniel has a regular gig DJing 1960s surf music, sells records online, and works at a print shop during the week. How would our child answer the question, ‘What do your parents do?’

“I could be a manager.”

“Of what?”

“I dunno, but being a manager of something at least sounds more legitimate.”

“Our baby is illegitimate,” I say and smile.

“Never – you’re carrying my bastard!” He says and we’re shaking with laughter again.

“What about your degree? Couldn’t you do something with that?”

“Daniel Evans, BA (Hons), Medieval and Early Modern History, Bangor

University.”

“Gosh, aren’t you fancy.”

“I know. And completely unemployable.”

We’re still laughing when I say, “So am I, Lily Sled, BA (Hons), Cinema Studies, University of Toronto.”

“You’re so posh.”

“We’re going to have such a clever, useless child!”

“Aw, bless,” Daniel says, leaning over to kiss me. He holds my face in his hands and I can see the faintest lines of crow’s feet at the edges of his eyes. I wonder what he’ll look like when he’s old, and again it’s hard to fathom; Daniel and I will still live together when we are old.

“Well, *Mummy*,” he says, and I cringe, “better get dressed then, innit. When’s your sister arriving again?”

“She said on the phone, ‘be there first thing’, so for Jane that could mean anytime between two hours ago and three in the afternoon.”

“Right, well, I’m hopping in the shower.”

“Okay.”

Daniel leaves the room and I stand up from the bed naked, leaving the damp towel amid the rumpled bedclothes, and move over to the wardrobe to find something soft and cool to wear. I pull on a long, ruffled chiffon dress printed with pastel flowers that blouses around my swollen, sensitive breasts while the lining slips smoothly over my skin and tickles the tops of my feet. Tying one of the straps in a bow on my shoulder, I catch sight of myself in the mirror and wonder what Jane looks like now. As I pull my damp hair up into a loose bun, I can’t seem to picture her at all in my mind – how can I forget what my own twin looks like? But hard as I try, I can’t seem to summon a clear image, so I guess I’ll just have to wait and see.

As I butter my toast, Daniel fills the French press with boiling water from the kettle, plunging the top down against the billowing grounds, the deep brown, brewing coffee bubbling up against the glass. The plastic timer in the shape of a chicken rings, vibrating across the counter, and I move over to the stove, dip a slotted spoon into the pot of boiling water and fish out my egg, placing it in the waiting blue enamel cup. I cut

the toast into strips, *soldiers*, they call them here, and take my breakfast to the table where Daniel joins me with his coffee. As I crack the egg shell with a spoon, tap the salt shaker over it and plunge a crummy, warm toast soldier into the hot yolk, Daniel says, “Can pregnant women eat soft boiled eggs?”

The toast is poised in front of my mouth, yellow yolk dripping once, twice, onto my plate. “I don’t know...can they?”

“You might as well eat it, but you should check, like.”

I drop the toast on the plate, lean back and cross my arms. “Great. What else can’t I eat?”

Daniel pours cream into his mug, swirling it in the hot coffee with the end of his finger. “All sorts. Pâté, blue cheese, sushi...”

“How do you know all this?”

“Dunno, just do.”

“Well, I don’t eat many pâté-blue cheese-sushi dinners, so I don’t think this egg will hurt me...”

Daniel sips his coffee and shrugs, but now I can’t eat my egg in peace, so I nibble dejectedly on a toast soldier, half burnt. The table is littered with newspapers and bills surrounding a sad-looking aloe vera plant in a terracotta pot and, beside it, a stack of postcards. I pick them up and look through them like they’re old photographs, gazing at the pictures as if looking for clues, but the only consistency about them is their inconsistency – *Edinburgh, Santiago de Compostela, Berlin, Blackpool...* The most recent card is the one that really irks me though. It arrived about two weeks ago. I’d been lying on the couch when I heard the post thud onto the floor after being shoved through the mail slot and I happened to think of Jane spitting through one at Paulette. My stomach gave a lurch then and I darted to the sink to barf for the second time that day and, wiping my mouth on a blue and white tea towel, I looked out at the rolling, retreating fog, wondering when I’d ever get over this pesky flu. Shuffling to the front door in my slippers, I picked up the pile of post and there it was, neatly tucked between the bills and pizza flyers: a postcard with a picture of Green Gables on it and above it, in old-timey writing, *Cavendish, Prince Edward Island*. I flipped it over and read the fine print first: *Green Gables House, Built 1830-1870, Home of Fictional Character*

Anne of Green Gables, Belonged to Cousin of L.M. Montgomery, David MacNeil..., then I read Jane's message, written in neat block letters—'*I FINALLY WENT TO ANNE SHIRLEY'S HOUSE! MAYBE I'LL MEET A GILBERT OF MY OWN. WISH YOU WERE HERE!*' and I flicked the card on the counter and ran to the sink because I thought I was going to barf again. I didn't though, so instead I lay back down on the comfortable couch and all I could think was, 'why would she wish that?'

There's a rising pain in my oesophagus and I rub my sternum, grimacing.

"She will come, you know, Lil."

I drop the postcards on the table haphazardly and say, "I know that. I just have heartburn."

"Have some milk."

"I don't like milk."

"Maybe it's a preggo thing."

I curl my lip at him and he smiles into his cup. Annoyed now, I seem to have lost my appetite. The acid flares higher in my chest.

It's afternoon and we're still waiting. Daniel pokes at the flower beds with a small spade, pretending he knows how to take care of a garden, while I sit on a patio chair with a book in my lap – *Little Women*, because I've never read it – though I keep re-reading the same sentence over and over again, never quite getting to the next page.

"What do you think of the name, 'Josephine'?" I ask Daniel, and he turns to me and squints, the sun in his eye.

"Bit masculine, innit?"

"Okay, how 'bout Meg? Beth? Marmie?"

"Marmite? Everyone will hate her!"

"Half would love her."

He turns back to the flowers and pulls out a handful of wispy weeds from the rich brown earth. "Might be a boy," he says and I'm genuinely struck. It never occurred to me that I might give birth to a boy. Suddenly the life inside me feels alien and I'm almost suspicious of it. We have girls in our family, always girls. I can barely imagine having a brother, let alone a son.

“A boy?”

“Yeah. You’d love it. Little boys adore their mothers.”

“They do?”

“Yeah, course,” Daniel says, smiling at the sweet peas, and my heart swells.

Maybe it would nice to have a boy after all. “Then again,” he says, “could be twins.”

“I hope not,” I say, too quickly, and Daniel looks up at me again, frowning.

“Really?”

“It’s just... twins are hard on the parents and it’s hard for the kids. There’s... competition and stuff. Plus, squeezing out two babies at once...”

Daniel stands up, dropping the spade in the grass and brushing dirt from his knees as he walks towards me. He sits down in the chair opposite and says, “Are you alright?”

“Yeah. I’m fine.”

“If you don’t want her to come, just ring her and tell her not to.”

“I never said I didn’t want her to come.”

“Well, what is it then? ’Cause you’re hardly excited.”

“Well, are you? She was your friend once.”

“Yeah, was. But I’m fucked off with her, like. I don’t care what she does.”

“She’s still my sister.”

“I know that, but I just don’t see why you want her here.”

“Because I haven’t seen her in a year and a half. Because we’ve been separated before and it was... it wasn’t right.”

“Those were different circumstances.”

“Well, anyway, she’s gonna be here any minute.”

“Fine. Do what you want.”

Daniel stands up from his chair to go inside and I shout after him, “Why are you pissed at me?”

He stops in the doorway and says, “I’m not. I just think you’re... better without her.”

“Better off?”

“I dunno, just... happier, like.”

Daniel disappears inside and I'm left examining the cover of my book, my heart beating too hard in my chest. It's an old paperback printed in the '90s when the movie version with Winona Ryder came out. The actresses – Ryder, Claire Danes, Kirsten Dunst, and that one who played Meg – are pictured together on the cover, sitting by a hearth in their full-skirted dresses, while Christian Bale lurks sexily in the background. I wish I hadn't seen the movie now, though, because it's all I can picture when I read the book. I think of Amy throwing Jo's manuscript in the fire, and how, when I saw it in the theatre with Jane and Mum, we all gasped together, outraged and heartbroken. And then I think of when Amy marries Laurie in France, or wherever they are, and how we're supposed to be satisfied by it, but it never sits right. Doesn't everyone want Jo and Laurie to be together? And do Jo and Amy ever really make up? I don't think they do, no matter what Louisa May Alcott says.

There's a step in the kitchen and I look up, expecting to see Daniel, when Jane appears in the doorway. We stare at each other too long, Jane hovering on the threshold, while I stay seated in my chair; it doesn't occur to me to stand.

"I didn't hear the door," I say and Jane steps out onto the flagstones.

"Dan was there when I knocked. He let me in."

"Oh. Where is he?"

"Um, upstairs, I guess? He said you were out here... I don't know if he was too happy to see me," she says with a laugh, cocking her head to the side, though her eyes look sad, or maybe tired. She rubs her palms against her hips. "Well... gonna give your sister a hug, or what?"

I stand and go to her and she clasps me close. Her belt digs into me and I flinch, thinking of the baby, but she draws back as if I've recoiled from her. We both get a good look at each other now. Her hair is dyed cherry red and cut into a short bob. She's wearing a loose black t-shirt with the name of a band on it that I've never heard of in bright yellow, with jeans rolled up her calves. I notice a new tattoo of a black bird on her shin. It reminds me of a grackle and I realise I haven't seen one in years, though it's probably a raven. I doubt common Canadian birds are particularly cool amongst tattooists.

Sitting back down, I wave a hand at the other chair and Jane sits down too. She

leans back and each of us crosses a leg, unwittingly angling our bodies away from each other. “I had to wait forever for a bus from Swansea. Where the heck are we anyway? Pen-something-or-other?”

“Penclawdd.”

“Right. Lived here long?”

“About four months.”

“So, why’d you move out here, anyways?”

“It’s cheap and pretty. We’re close to the beaches. We’ve started surfing and stuff.”

“Really? I can’t imagine you surfing.”

“Well I do.”

We both have our hands in our laps and I can’t seem to think of a single thing to say to her, at least, not anything that’s easy to say. Jane begins coiling her hair over her finger in a smooth, repetitive movement and I lean forwards, rubbing my aching back. We each seem to be chewing on words unspoken, the silence lingering a moment too long when Daniel appears again at the door.

“Think I might go for a swim down Llangennith,” he says, and I say quickly,

“Oh yeah? We’ll come too!”

“We will? I didn’t bring my bathing suit...” Jane shifts in her seat and looks down at her jeans.

“We don’t have to swim though,” I say, determined for us to leave the house, “we could bring a picnic.”

The suggestion of food perks her up though and she slaps her thighs. “Okay then,” she says, pressing her lips together tightly and we head inside.

In the kitchen, Jane sits at the table while I rummage through the cupboards for food to bring. Daniel digs out a bag-for-life from under the sink and finds the red plaid blanket we used on our first picnic here. The pantry is somewhat bare since my shopping trip yesterday was a bit of a bust, so I grab tiny bags of Mini-Cheddars, the Battenburg cake, and a package of salted sunflower seeds, dropping them in the waiting bag, then open the fridge and pull out a box of strawberries, some leftover chicken legs, a punnet of plums, and a cucumber. There are a couple of cans of beer in the fridge too,

as well a lone can of Orange Fanta that I shove into the bag with the food as Jane watches silently like a child waiting for their lunch.

When I stand up straight, the blood rushes from my head and I feel slightly woozy and grip the edge of the table to steady myself.

“You okay?” Daniel says, reaching out to hold my arm, and I nod and smile faintly at him as Jane watches, frowning.

“Yep. All set. Ready?” I look to both Daniel and Jane and they each nod with reluctant, or perhaps indifferent, assent.

On our way out the front door, Jane picks up her purse and I notice that’s all she’s brought with her – I guess she didn’t have big plans for this visit, either. Daniel jingles the keys in his hand as we walk to the car, carrying the heavy ‘picnic bag’ in his other hand and swinging it onto the hood before unlocking the driver’s side door. I go to pick it up, but he takes it from me quickly, shaking his head, and Jane curls her lip, watching.

“You can have shotgun,” she says, and climbs into the back of the tiny blue Polo. Without speaking, Daniel passes her the bag of food and pushes his seat back in place. As I walk around to the passenger side, avoiding the divots and potholes in the pressed earth and gravel, I glance at Daniel and my sister sitting stony-faced in the car, wondering if this trip to the beach is actually a sinister exercise in patience. But I swing open the door and flop down on the hot upholstery, slamming the door shut as Daniel turns the key in the ignition, and we’re off.

As we drive slowly down the lane and through the village, I roll down my window with the achingly stiff crank and a ruffle on my dress lifts and falls like a breath on my chest. Driving along Station Road and past the Railway Inn, I gaze out at the wide estuary, all swirling green marsh grasses, pale sand, and moving sea and I catch the nonplussed eye of a sheep. Are sheep really dumb? Or just content? I think of the smart matriarch sheep in the movie *Babe* and how I couldn’t remember once which actor played the farmer in it, so I ‘Googled’ “old man in babe” and it turned up some pretty disturbing search results, porn-wise. I consider relaying this to Jane and Daniel, but we’ve passed the sheep by now and I figure I’ve missed my moment. Again, there simply isn’t enough to say, so I just sink back into my seat and watch the countryside

roll by.

The car is hot after baking in the sun all day and Jane mumbles something about sweaty armpits, so Daniel opens his window too. In the front seat, the breeze is soft, but I glance back at Jane and she's grimacing faintly, the wind whipping her face. I'm waiting for her to ask one of us to close a window, but she doesn't, she just lets the warm wind batter her skin and knot her hair as it swirls through the car and we all squint into the sun. The rippling breeze is loud in our ears and I think perhaps Jane likes it for this – even if we wanted to talk, the wind insists on silence.

The car slows to a crawl when we reach the narrow lane that leads to the Llangennith campsite. Jane digs in the tight pocket of her dungarees and surprisingly passes us a pound coin when we get to the gate. After paying the parking fee, the car lumbers over the uneven, sandy tract and Daniel finds a wide parking space on the grass below the dunes. We all climb out of the car and stretch as though we'd been on a day-long road trip instead of a twenty-minute drive, and then Daniel adjusts his straw fedora and hipster shades and we survey the campsite. Tents are scattered on the flat land beside the rise of dunes, while dotted amongst them small barbecues billow plumes of smoke and surfboards are laid out drying in the sun. Rambunctious children run and weave through beach chairs filled with languid adults having afternoon drinks. Above us, the sky is pale blue with pillows of cumulus clouds moving slowly across it as the sun streams down – it's hot now, but those white clouds could easily turn grey. Rain is always on the precipice of weather in Swansea.

Carrying the picnic provisions, Daniel leads the way and we walk towards the wooden boardwalk nearly covered over with sand, that leads to the beach.

"Where'd you fancy sitting?" he says, and Jane and I look around. I'd prefer to sit on the soft dunes, but the quiet and solitude they afford makes me antsy today, so I point towards a clear spot amid the sunbathers on the beach. When we reach the spot, we smooth the sand with our toes and I shake out the blanket. It's windier here with the breeze off the sea and the blanket keeps getting caught up in the wind, as though trying to wrap itself around me or shroud my face. Jane and Daniel laugh as they each scramble to take a corner and we manage to lay it flat, weighing down the corners with flip flops and stones. We sit down on the blanket with the food in the middle and Daniel

facing out to sea. Jane hugs her knees to her chest and watches as I kneel, reaching into the deep bag and laying the food out by her toes.

“Did you bring any drinks?” Jane asks, and I fish out the beer by those plastic rings that strangle the birds, dangling the cans as I wait for her to take one. She yanks hers from the binding and I pass the other to Dan and take out the Fanta for myself, then crush the bag and shove it under one of Jane’s strewn shoes. We all crack open the cans at once and sip the froth from the tops, when Jane says, crinkling her nose, “Aren’t you drinking?”

“Nah.”

“Why not?”

“Just not in the mood.” I sip my pop and the fizz tickles my nose.

“Lame!”

“Dan’s having one.”

“One? Since when does Daniel drink just one beer?” She looks at me incredulously, as if she knows him better than I do, but I know she wasn’t talking to me.

Dan turns and looks at Jane over his shoulder. “I was out in town last night.”

“So? Not allowed more than one today?” Jane speaks as though she’s joking, but there’s a sharp edge to her words that makes me uneasy.

“What d’you mean ‘allowed’?” Daniel’s face is lined, his jaw twitching from grinding teeth.

Jane smirks. “Oh, nothing. You guys are just...different from the last time I saw you.”

“Well, the last time you saw *me* I was living with *you*,” I say, cracking a sunflower seed between my teeth. Jane turns away from me to watch a surfer walking past, his board under his arm. Sipping the Fanta again, the sound of bubbles popping against aluminum fills my ears.

“How are we different then?” Daniel asks, still not turning fully, his chin resting on his shoulder.

“Oh well, you know it’s just... you guys went from like, fooling around, to being practically married in a year.” Jane’s flicking the metal tab on her can and the pinging sound reverberates out towards the shore.

Daniel sips his beer. “It’s been longer than that,” he says, watching her carefully, “and besides, a lot can happen in a year.”

“No kidding,” she says, picking up a chicken leg and taking a bite.

We all eat then, filling our mouths so that we don’t have to speak. Pinching the green leaves, I bite a strawberry and the sweet pink juice glazes my lips. Daniel stuffs crackers in his mouth, crunching quickly, while Jane cleans the meat from the bone, leaving nothing for the birds.

When we’ve had our fill, we look at the mess and all that’s left is the Battenburg cake and the cucumber. Jane picks it up and pokes me in the shoulder with its green tip. “Nice cuke,” she says and Daniel turns to look at me.

“Yeah, dunno what you were thinking with that,” he says and I feel confused, because it made sense at the time. “Maybe if you’d brought a knife?”

But I forgot a knife too. “How will we cut the cake?” I say, close to tears.

Daniel leans over and rubs my back, smiling at me like he did the first day we met when I thought he had forehead cancer. “It’s alright, babes.”

I’m blinking away tears while Jane looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Lil, it’s only a cake.”

“Yeah, but... just forget it, okay?”

“Dude. Seriously? Get a grip.”

“Janey, just leave me alone, will you?”

“Woah, okay then.” She adjusts herself and lies back in the sand, closing her eyes.

“I’m gonna go in the water. You okay?” Daniel says, standing up and pulling off his shirt. I nod and he tosses me his hat, then jogs down to the surf. I wonder if I have ‘pregnancy brain’. I think that’s a thing, like being forgetful or something. I really do wish I could slice that cake, though, and somehow it feels like it’s all Jane’s fault.

Watching Daniel diving in and out of the low crashing waves makes me thirsty. I wish I had brought my suit now, but more so, I wish he’d come back to the blanket and be the buffer between Jane and me – not that he’s a very good one. He can’t forgive her for taking off like that, for making him keep it a secret and, he says, the way she treated me. I always thought he meant the way she treated me when she left, but now I’m not so

sure. I rub my arms and examine my skin for tan lines, hoping I'll brown without a burn. Jane lies with her forearm over her eyes, her skin whiter under the glare of the sun. She must be hot in her black t-shirt and jeans, but again she doesn't complain, which bothers me somehow. She's not the sort to not complain.

"So, I got your last postcard," I say into the wind.

"What?" she says, shielding her eyes.

"Your postcard. I got it." I'm baiting her, but I can't seem to stop myself.

"The Cavendish one?"

"Yeah... I hafta say, it surprised me – why'd you decide to go there?"

"Well, I've always loved *Anne of Green Gables* and I always said I wanted to go there."

"No, you didn't. I was the one who wanted to go P.E.I." I dig my toes into the sand until they touch the cool layer of grit beneath.

Jane pushes herself up, leaning back on her elbows. "Just because you wanted to go, doesn't mean I didn't want to."

"Yeah, but like, it was always my thing. You didn't even like *Anne of Green Gables* that much."

"Yes I did! I liked it enough to go to P.E.I., didn't I?"

"You never even read the books!"

Jane sits up all the way now. "So? What, you have a monopoly on all things good?"

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing."

I keep glancing out to sea, watching Daniel. I need him to come back here. The clouds have accumulated in the sky and the blue above has turned grey in the west. I look over at Rhossili, the other end of the beach, and imagine I'm atop Worm's Head, that strange, stark, snaking peninsula, though I know that truthfully, I'm too afraid to climb it. Jane's the one who'd do that. "What do you mean 'all things good'?"

Jane presses her lips hard together and I can see where her lipstick has faded. She's flicking the tab on her can again, her thumbnail moving rhythmically, tick, tick, tick, and I realise I'm holding my breath.

“You’re so *good*, aren’t you, Lily? Lily’s so perfect, Lily’s so sweet. You do every fucking thing right, don’t you?”

“Excuse me?” A wave crashes and white froth licks the sand. I look around us to see if anyone’s listening, but everyone else is happy in the sun. “Is that what you think of me?”

“That’s what everyone thinks! You’re everyone’s favourite. Lily can do no wrong.”

“That’s not true! I’m not everyone’s favourite. It’s not like I go around claiming to be perfect. I’m not perfect.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Are you kidding me? Do you know how jealous I was of you? You always did everything first! Things come so easily to you and you don’t even care. For so long I’ve wanted to know what that felt like, just once.”

“What, like with Sean?”

“Sean? What does this have to do with Sean? I haven’t even heard you mention his name in years.” I pick up another sunflower seed and crack the shell between my teeth. The salt makes my lip pucker and the shell is sharp, cutting my gum, but I keep crunching, trying to calm myself, my heart pounding hard in my chest.

“Well? Is that it?” I feel faint again, even though I’m sitting down and I put on Daniel’s hat to shield my face from the sun.

Jane shakes her head, as if she’s said something I’m too stupid to understand. “Gramps always doted on you, our teachers always liked you better, you never fought with any of our friends like *I* did, the one person that was mine, you had to have too...”

“That’s how you saw it?”

“That’s how it was! That’s how it still is. Daniel was my friend and now he hates me. Auntie Bethan and Uncle Frank look at you like a daughter... No matter what I do, I’m always the black sheep.” Jane takes a gulp of her warm beer and stares out at the ocean, refusing to meet my eye.

“You’re not a ‘black sheep’. You took off and your stupid church had a goddamn vigil for you. Mum and Dad flew to Wales for you and they don’t even like driving to Toronto at night. Do you know how worried everyone was?”

“I called, didn’t I?”

“A *month* after you left.”

“Well, it was nice to know how much people cared.”

“Jane, that’s fucked up!”

“Well it’s done now, isn’t it?”

I can’t see Daniel anymore, my eyes too blurry to make out faces in the sea. I turn to Jane and look hard at her, willing her to look me in the eye. “It’s not though, is it? Because I still don’t know why you left. And I don’t know why you’re so pissed at me, or why you even came to see me today. So please, tell me. I’d love to know.”

When she speaks next, her voice is lower, quieter. “I don’t know.”

“What? What do you mean you ‘don’t know’?”

She takes a deep breath and rubs the tops of her feet with her palms. “I was just sick of Swansea and I could see what was happening between you and Dan, and... I didn’t like church anymore and it was just time to go, so I left. Maybe I could’ve done it differently... but I honestly didn’t think it would matter.”

My eyes focus on a stone in the sand and a small, pale yellow butterfly floats past and settles on it, opening and closing its wings. “That still doesn’t answer my question, though. Because to me, it’s like you were trying to punish me for something.”

“Well, maybe I was.” Jane’s nostrils are flared and she’s gripping her shins. I think of her and Paulette and I wonder if she wants to strike me.

“So? What then? Say it.”

“You fucked my boyfriend, Lily!”

“Well, you were a bully! You bullied and abandoned me. You were supposed to be on my side, but you never really were, were you?!”

I’m shaking and my jaw aches, it feels like my teeth might start chattering, even as the sun warms my bare skin. Jane rubs her thumb over the black bird on her leg and lets out a ragged breath as Daniel jogs up to us, dripping and out of breath.

“Aw, never! Forgot my towel, didn’t I?” He picks up his t-shirt and dries his face before dropping down next to me in the sand. The clouds have gathered above us, some grey and weighty, threatening rain. Daniel looks up squinting and says, “Funny weather, innit?”

Neither of us answer him and he observes our tense shoulders and clenched jaws.
“What’s occurin’?”

“I never tried to bully you,” Jane says.

“Well, you did,” I say and we finally look at each other, at first fierce and reproachful, but then just weary and sad. A heavy raindrop falls on the plastic packaging of the cake and we all look up at the grey cloud covering the sun. It’s followed by a second splash and soon everyone on the beach is leaping up, gathering their things, ready to outrun the downpour. Jane and Daniel and I jump to our feet, snatch up shoes and bags and swoop up the picnic blanket with its pile of rubbish in the centre, Jane swinging it over her shoulder like a hobo’s sack, and we run together back through the dunes, hopping over stiff grasses and stones as we’re spattered by the deluge and whipped by the increasing wind. When we get to the car, Daniel unlocks it quickly and we all throw ourselves inside, slamming the doors and sitting with chests heaving, wet and out of breath, as we watch the grey sky churn and the rain fall down.

When we’ve caught our breath, Daniel turns to us and says, “What’s going on? Are you okay, Lil?” and Jane lets out an exasperated sigh.

“Seriously, what is up with you today, Dan? You’re treating Lily like she’s a china doll.”

“You didn’t tell her?” he says and I let out a heavy breath.

“No.”

“Tell me what?”

I shake my head again and my chin quivers, but I’m more surprised by Jane. Her brows are tightly knit and her eyes glassy. “Lily, tell me. You’re scaring me.”

“We’re having a baby.”

Jane swallows. “I’m gonna be an aunt?”

I shrug and let out a short laugh that lingers like a sob. I’m not sure what it was.

“Oh, Lily.” Her voice is soft now and she smiles sadly again. “Oh, Lil.” She reaches between the two front seats and I lean into her as we clasp each other tightly. The fight is over.

When we let go of each other, I look down at the soft curve of my belly, hold my hand there and quiet my breath.

“Well,” she says, clearing her throat, “Let’s celebrate and crack open this cake, eh? Unless you’d rather the cucumber?”

I smile and shake my head, words caught in my throat as I wipe my eye with the back of my wrist. Daniel reaches over and takes my hand in his as Jane tears open the plastic on the cake and lifts it up, taking a large bite of the pink and yellow checkerboard, the marzipan sticking to her teeth when she grins, holding it out to me. I lean forwards and take a bite and the rain hammers the windows of the car, reminding me of summer afternoons at the cottage when the thunderstorms rolled in. The truth is, I am happier when we’re apart; I am better, but I miss my sister, even now beside her.

“Jane, you gonna stay for tea?” Daniel asks, and I know he’s doing it for me. He’d rather she left now, I think, but he squeezes my hand and takes the cake from her, biting off a bit too.

“Stay,” I say, “just for supper.”

Jane looks out the rain-blurred window and we listen to the pattering on the roof for a moment before she says, “Okay, but just supper. Then I’ve gotta go.” And she looks me in the eye and nods, telepathic trust.

ESSAY

'Be There First Thing': A Novel of Identity

1. Introduction

There is a wooden shelf in my childhood bedroom that lines the periphery a foot below the ceiling. Made of mouldings and painted white, it was built when I was ten to hold the books and treasures I'd collected: seashells from Florida; a pair of wooden clogs; a ballerina music box that dances when it sings. As I write this essay, I am back in this room, a temporary resting place for me to work, and each day I gaze at this shelf, taking breaks to stand and run my fingers along the spines of books that have sat in the same order and the same place bringing comfort for years. Many of the childish trinkets that adorned the shelf once are gone, but there are certain books that remain and belong here like permanent fixtures: a row of *Nancy Drew* mystery stories with faded yellow spines, a stack of well-worn *Anne of Green Gables* paperbacks next to ancient copies of *Little Women* and *Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm*. While these relics of my girlhood have sat too long gathering dust, and I may not have thought of them for months or years at a time, they have indelibly marked me and my development and there is no greater proof of this than their presence in *Be There First Thing*. If we look at this bookshelf as a source, a starting point for my development as a reader, writer, and critical thinker, then *Be There First Thing* exists as the product of that source, the threads of its stories' roots, each chapter a branch, and the novel itself as the result of my growth from this humble starting point.

This essay will discuss the various roots and branches that form *Be There First Thing* in terms of its inception and construction, and ultimately its function as a novel of identity. Firstly, we will look at the roots of the project, from initial plans to form and language, with special emphasis on intertwined threads on the subject of Wales and Canada and the role of the foreigner. It will address the issues of home and place and how the examination of these (Canada, my homeland, and Wales, my adopted home) tie into the issue of identity.

Returning again to the first source described, my childhood bookshelf, this essay will move to the discussion of genre, specifically, *Be There First Thing* as a modern-day *Bildungsroman*. A novel of development is inherently a novel of identity. When comparing my early literary influences to the form and themes present in this novel, the importance of the *Bildungsroman* genre as both an influential learning tool and a hybrid

form of Composite Novel and novel of development, *Be There First Thing* emerges as a new example of a very old genre that seeks to bring the ordeals of development and the search for identity into a contemporary context. From the inference in the title of the book to Lily's trials and successes in each chapter, *Be There First Thing* is in every way a novel of 'firsts'. With the *Bildungsroman* genre's emphasis on development, life's 'firsts' are inherent to these stories, just as they are in Lily's journey of identity.

Finally, to expand upon the elements of the *Bildungsroman* genre as applied to *Be There First Thing*, this essay turns again to another source that is woven throughout the novel and rooted again in my childhood impressions, as I examine the recurrent themes, references, and motifs presented. As stated, *Be There First Thing* may be read as a contemporary *Bildungsroman*, thus it is very much a generationally specific work, employing references to popular film, television, and music of the 1980s and 1990s, as well as the root of the story, children's literature, which is returned to again and again by Lily as she develops and grows during her search for identity.

The title of this essay, '*Be There First Thing: A Novel of Identity*' is directly tied to the theme of growth and development, for what else does the growth and development of youth seek to attain but a clear identity within and of the self? Lily's journey of development from the last fringe of girlhood in *Grackles* to the cusp of motherhood in *Dawn* is at its heart a quest for identity. But this quest is not limited to Lily alone, for running parallel to her story is Jane, who equally seeks a clear identity on her own rocky path. If we look again at starting points and sources, just as this story grew from my own dusty, beloved bookshelf, so does Lily and Jane's—the twins' shared beginning being the root of their story and the point from which they each branch out on their intersecting, yet ultimately separate paths. Lily and Jane each attain a clear identity by the end of the book, yet they only attain it by separating themselves from each other in a bittersweet, but ultimately necessary conclusion.

2. Language, Construction, and Cultural Influence

On a cold night in January, sitting on a train between Ottawa and Toronto, I found the definition I had sought for so long:

In a way I cannot explain, it was speaking to a core of loneliness and deprivation in these Canadians of which they were only faintly aware. I think it was loneliness, not just for England, because so many of these people on the prairies were not of English origin, but for some faraway and long-lost Europe. The Canadians knew themselves to be strangers in their own land, without being at home anywhere else.¹

I was in Ontario for Christmas vacation, taking the train home before flying back to Wales, when I came across this passage in Robertson Davies' *World of Wonders*. It was incredibly striking for me, as it not only described the particular feeling I wished to convey in my writing, but also more significantly, something I had felt personally all my life and thus was so inherent in my experience, felt I *had* to convey it in my work.

My father was born in The Netherlands, where he lived until age six when his family immigrated to Canada in the early 1950s. Around the same time, my Hungarian maternal grandparents also immigrated to Canada and my mother was born a couple of years after their arrival. Although my father came to Canada at a very young age, and my mother was born in Canada, both of them had very similar 'immigrant' childhood experiences that influenced my own childhood in turn. My mother tells the story of being called 'foreign' at school and while not knowing what that word meant, she did know it was definitely supposed to be something bad. Although it seems laughable now that two white, European children with little to no memories of their ethnic origins were viewed as outsiders, they were perceived as suspicious foreigners in a rural town where the inhabitants were almost invariably of British descent. This aspect of 'foreignness' or difference filtered down to my own childhood experience, even though to all intents and purposes I am Canadian (as are my parents). There was always a feeling that the 'real' Canadians – those anglophiles with easy to pronounce surnames – knew something I did not. They said 'eh' naturally in their speech and had crackers at Christmas (whatever they were) and they seemed to have a natural ease with our culture (the only culture I knew) that my family inexplicably lacked. There was always an invisible periphery, a

¹ Robertson Davies. *World of Wonders* (London: Penguin, 2005), 254.

sense of distance that was only fully defined for me when I read Davies' words above. This feeling that there ought to be a place to return to, as Lily does when she goes to Wales, but finding that one does not belong in their 'motherland' either, comes from this disconnected loneliness that Davies describes.

In the initial stages of this PhD, I saw my research in a specific light: Canada and Wales sharing a sort of national identity complex comprising bilingualism, English rule, marginalisation, overbearing neighbours (the U.S.A. and England), fervent patriotism, geographical and linguistic divisions of identity, and a strong separatist movement. However, focusing on these observations as a form of 'legitimacy' in the PhD research ultimately felt forced when purposely inserted into the writing. Additionally, it was difficult to find literature or research on the rather marginal subject of Welsh-Canadian national identity comparisons. However, these early observations were not wasted, as what emerged instead was the equally poignant and better suited theme of the foreigner. Using this theme to illustrate the Canadian post-colonial experience (as an autonomous, yet still Commonwealth country), as well as the experience of the immigrant (via the role of the returning sojourner to Europe) reflected directly into the broader theme of the coming of age novel and the quest for identity.

When creating Lily Sled's background – a Welsh/French-Canadian mother and a father with presumably English ancestry – I wanted to convey the feelings and impressions of my own experience described above, as well as to employ the unique aspects of the two cultures where the stories are set, Canada and Wales. The most pertinent way to express the themes of the foreigner and the search for identity in these two countries was undoubtedly via language. The French Canadians and Welsh-speakers in Wales seemed to me to be ideological soul mates, for this aspect of separate languages within English-speaking countries (under the umbrella of distant, and not-so-distant, English monarchical rule) was too fascinating to ignore: both Wales and Canada comprise the characteristics of being separate, but together, different but one, nations within nations, with clashes of language and all that that implies. That said, *Be There First Thing* is very much an English-language novel. Canadian French flits through the text via Gramps' speech², and Welsh appears written on boxes³, signs⁴, and the backs of

² Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 11

photographs⁵, but these languages are secondary to the story because Lily's journey does not centre upon the linguistic battles of her elders' generations. She is from Anglophone Ontario and moves to a largely English-speaking area of south Wales. For Lily, French and Welsh exist on her periphery, affecting her in terms of how they mark her as different and how these languages define and inform her mother and grandparents, but serving instead as stumbling blocks and irritants in her immediate life. The more significant aspect of language that defines Lily's world and her senses of foreignness and belonging is that of dialect, and I employed it from the outset in *Grackles*:

“And we all paddled in the sea.” Mum's speech always changes when she tells the parts of the story that happened in Wales. She'll never, ever say we waded in the ocean, even though that's what we did. [...] Dad says anything to do with Wales makes Mum put on a fake accent. She always strongly denies it and says she's just talking the way Nan did, but she never turns Francophone like Gramps.⁶

In June 2009 I had an essay published in *The Globe and Mail* entitled, “I Used to Speak Canadian”. At the time, I was still working out how to include the politics of Canada and Wales in the story collection (as it was then) and kept coming back to the theme of language. In the essay, I described struggling with the sense that by immersing myself in a foreign, yet English-speaking culture, with the added confusion of Welsh, I feared losing my Canadian dialect and accent. I wrote of “how amazing it is that accent and small turns of phrase can be a comfort and a sign post for the mind,”⁷ and it was with this in mind that I chose to use dialect to demonstrate the experience of the foreigner and Lily's quest for identity.

In terms of using language to my advantage in the writing, listening was as much a part of my research as reading. My notebooks are filled with phrases overheard either in conversation with friends or from eavesdropping on the speech of strangers. Accuracy was of utmost importance and I tried different methods of expressing the language in dialogue, eventually settling on a balance of limited phonetic spellings and

³ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 8

⁴ Chapter 8, *Wedding*, 107

⁵ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 3, and Chapter 7, *Rescue*, 91

⁶ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 5

⁷ Emily Vanderploeg. “I Used to Speak Canadian” (*The Globe and Mail*, 24 June 2009), L6.

primarily distinct turns of phrase, (i.e. “ ‘Drive forgot about you lot!’ Someone shouts, and the driver returns, ‘Better I’d forgotten you, mun!’ ”⁸). In early drafts, the dialogue was admittedly very badly done, primarily because the Welsh characters’ speech was written with a wholly phonetic approach, while the Canadian characters were bestowed with little to no changes in spelling at all. At the time, I was deaf to my own accent – it existed in my head as a default of speech – while I was truly charmed by the Welsh voices around me. The inability to hear the Canadian accent was detrimental to the rendering of it in writing, as the speech of the Canadian characters often appeared wooden or uninteresting. Meanwhile, the sense of charm with the Welsh voices was problematic too, as it risked making the Welsh characters appear like caricatures of real people. Once my attention was turned to really learning and hearing the specific Swansea Welsh accent, I began to really *hear* my own accent and that of my family and Canadian friends and was soon equally charmed and amazed by it (i.e. “Yer a bit of a lightweight, eh?”⁹ and “There’s been a real problem with the foxes and coyotes this year”¹⁰). So, how best to represent these disparate, yet equally important and wonderful forms of English? By focusing on turns of phrase and limiting changes in spelling to a minimum, and additionally speaking the dialogue aloud while writing it, the voices of the characters emerged and melded. At the start of this project, I avoided dialogue, yet by the end I relished writing it, as though it had been a riddle that I had finally cracked.

This project was initially planned as a collection of short stories. The stories were always intended to be interlinked, though having a central character was not the main focus as the more political aspects of place were foremost in my mind. Lily’s role in the stories emerged gradually and somewhat unexpectedly, since I do not write chronologically. This a-linear way of thinking and writing does not only apply to the stories/chapters as a whole, but also within the stories themselves. A line or scene will form in my mind and insist to be written: sometimes it is the first paragraph of a story, more often it appears in the middle (and very rarely it is the end). Many fellow writers have told me that they believe this method is maddening and impossible, but it is not without strategy. If I try to force a story or scene to be written when another is more

⁸ Chapter 8, *Wedding*, 106

⁹ Chapter 3, *Bush X*, 39

¹⁰ Chapter 7, *Rescue*, 89

clearly illuminated in my mind, it is ultimately unproductive: I must write what wants to be written and trust what will ultimately materialise. It was through this process when writing the preliminary pieces that Lily emerged as a protagonist, making herself known by her voice. With Lily's voice as the signpost for the direction the project was to take, again language was paramount in the construction of *Be There First Thing*.

The following is a listing of the order in which the chapters were written in terms of first drafts:

- 4 – La Jolie
- 8 – Wedding
- 6 – Nuit Blanche
- 2 – Blue Suede Skates
- 9 – Kittens
- 10 – Bonfire Night
- 1 – Grackles
- 3 – Bush X
- 12 – “Funeral”
- 5 – Postcards
- 11 – Sin City
- 13 – Blackout (original ending)
- 7 – Rescue
- 13 – Dawn

‘First drafts’ here often refers to very different versions of some of these chapters, some of which have kept only the setting and a few paragraphs from their original versions. Additionally, later drafts were re-written in an entirely different (though no more chronological) order than the one above. Somewhat ironically, I made plans constantly throughout the process and the ultimate structure is the product of a need to keep things organised and balanced. It is not a coincidence that there are thirteen chapters, seven of which take place in Ontario and six in Wales, as it was important to me to have an almost equal balance between the two countries. Similarly, each chapter is approximately the same length, and other details such as season, setting,

and year were all meticulously planned. Lily and Jane's birthday is June 21st, 1983, a date that was chosen for three reasons: Firstly, this date falls in the astrological sign of Gemini – The Twins – to reflect Lily and Jane's literal identities as identical twins. Secondly, this date can also fall in Cancer – the emotional and sensitive crab, which is alluded to by Lily when she says “Jane told me once that because we were born at different times on a cusp or something, she's a Gemini and I'm actually a Cancer”¹¹ and is used to enforce the differences between Lily and Jane's personalities. Thirdly, I wanted Lily and Jane to be the same age as myself to imagine that we might have been living parallel lives and that all of our life-paths are possible (in fact, I appear more than once throughout the novel, if one cared to search!).

Appendices I-V demonstrate the planning, tracking, and organising process conducted throughout the writing and editing of *Be There First Thing*. Appendix I is particularly noteworthy as it describes several stories that have never been written nor even attempted, though perhaps will be in the future.

Since I initially set out to write a collection of short stories, much of the reading undertaken throughout the course of this PhD was of contemporary Welsh (writing in English) and Canadian short stories and Composite Novels. I have always loved short stories that demonstrate a mastery of restraint and brevity when portraying the nuances of character and place, suggesting a wider world unseen in the story. As *Grackles* was being written, that sense was often on my mind, though not intentionally introduced into the text. The story surprised me by the darkness and unease that emerged as I wrote, clinging to the words from the outset with the description of the birds at the feeder. Interestingly though, it was actually begun when, feeling homesick for Canada one dark night, I read the following poem by my former writing instructor at Queen's University, Carolyn Smart:

“The Place We Come to Call Home: August”

North of Elginburg,
the heavy Charolais steers
flick their tails in dry hot yards
and my heart turns

¹¹ Chapter 10, *Bonfire Night*, 136

The road from the ridge to the highway
is lined with magenta and violet wildflowers,
a carpet on the rocky waste:
Purple Loosetrife, St. John's Wort
In this same dusty spot bouquets of Feverfew
blossomed in June. Now Rod Wallace's dairy herd
moves slowly through the cedar

When was that day I knew I belonged here,
felt that familiar ache I once confused
with adolescent happiness, driving with my mother
years ago. 'Hey Jude' played for me alone
whenever we listened to radio

This land began to sing for me last summer
driving from the ridge where we raise our children
awkwardly in love with the space and violent weather,
marvelling at the political intentions of the neighbours
and the avarice of those who sell their front fields
and insularly complain about immigration

Here I take refuge in tree configurations,
the slow drift of withered leaves to soil,
the flocking of grackles sensing
summer's end, the speech of owls as I sit
with Daniel in a warm blue chair before dawn,
not quite awake, but listening, fully alive¹²

I had turned off the light and burrowed into my bed when within ten minutes I had sprung up again, grabbed a nearby pen and scrap of paper and scribbled out, "The grackles are nesting."¹³ In the morning, I wrote the rest of the opening scene of the book, describing in reality the view from my parents' kitchen window, yet discovering a far greater story lay within the collection of tales I had begun.

Here the construction of *Be There First Thing* returns again to the metaphor of roots, for in Smart's poem I sought a description of my old home in Ontario, which deeply informed the first seven chapters of this novel. Beyond the reading undertaken during my childhood and the writing of this dissertation, the influence of my homes – both Canada and Wales – is undeniable. The town of 'Dawn' is a reimagining of my own hometown, Aurora, Ontario, though it is in some ways a hybrid of towns in York

¹² Carolyn Smart. *The Way to Come Home* (London, Ontario: Brick Books, 1992), 74.

¹³ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 1

Region, Ontario, while it is also derived from memories of Aurora as it was twenty or more years ago, before urban sprawl extended its tentacles north from Toronto. This is not unintentional, however; disliking how Aurora is today is what made me rewrite Dawn into the past. Swansea too is nostalgically rendered, though in a different way, since the Swansea that appears in the novel exists very much in the present. I chose to portray Swansea with as much realism as possible, at least as seen by a partial outsider, because the city seemed to be such a naturally formed character that it need only play itself in fiction. The influence of ‘place’ upon *Be There First Thing* comes from the obvious – that these are my longest homes – but also from a desire for others to *see* these places that I know so well, whether a version of a town lost to time, or an adopted home that begs to be shared with the world at large. Writing the ‘Canadian Chapters’ in Wales allowed me to ‘go home’ for the hours that I was lost in constructing them, in getting the descriptions of landscape, time, taste, and smell just so. And conversely, editing the ‘Welsh Chapters’ while in Canada allowed me to do the same; to visit the place I had just left and felt equally homesick for.

In M.G. Vassanji’s introduction to the Penguin edition of *World of Wonders* he says of Davies, a Canadian writer and son of Welsh immigrants, that,

In his imaginative exploring of where he came from, he becomes remarkably contemporary, joining the company of many a writer who arrives at new shores (often from a colony) to dissect the life and place he or she has left behind.¹⁴

So it is with this in mind that language, place, and a deep desire to both dissect and realistically render Canada and Wales formed and informed the quest for identity that *Be There First Thing* continually explores.

3. Genre

As mentioned earlier, when I began this PhD I set out to write a collection of interrelated short stories. There were no plans for a single, central character, though recurring ones and the role of family seemed at that time integral, while the emphasis on the short story itself was paramount. I love the short story form – it is so intricate, so

¹⁴ M.G. Vassanji. Introduction. *World of Wonders* by Robertson Davies (London: Penguin, 2005), xiv.

precise in its construction as it may carry the weight of emotion and meaning present in even whole novels, while maintaining its structure as a mere glimpse of a life. The chapters in *Be There First Thing*, many having begun their lives as autonomous short stories, do follow the classic short story structure with clearly defined differences in time and setting and little explanation of what has come before or passed between instalments. By this description, *Be There First Thing* could be defined as a Composite Novel – that is, a novel consisting of interlinked short stories. However, in their book, *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*, Margaret M. Dunn and Ann R. Morris give the following definition: “The composite novel is a literary work composed of shorter texts that – though individually complete and autonomous – are interrelated in a coherent whole according to one or more organizing principles.”¹⁵

The original intention was for the stories to have the ability to stand alone and that one might read the book in whatever sequence one chose, thereby producing different effects of narration. Yet as the stories progressed and Lily Sled became further defined as a character, plots and deeper threads also emerged and the stories became more inextricably linked, which in turn made them more like chapters, and the collection of stories transformed first into a Composite Novel and then ultimately into a novel itself.

The decision to call the book a novel was not an easy one, as it felt disloyal to my beloved short story genre, while I also feared that these ‘chapter-stories’ were neither autonomous enough to be called short stories, nor fluid enough to constitute being called chapters in a novel. For some time I believed that *Be There First Thing* resisted definition by occupying a grey area of form and structure between the Composite Novel (such as Sherwood Anderson’s wonderful *Winesburg, Ohio*) and the classic novel (such as George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*). And yet, when considering novels classified as *Bildungsromane* such as Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* by Jeanette Winterson, and, perhaps most significantly, L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*, *Be There First Thing* fits clearly into that novelistic genre, as its structure transcends the typical (if there is such a thing) Composite Novel and is more in

¹⁵ Margaret M. Dunn and Ann R. Morris. *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition* (New York: Twayne Publishers Macmillan, 1995), xiii.

keeping with “...the female *Bildungsroman* – that is, the novel of a young woman’s development.”¹⁶

To return again to my adolescent bookshelf, it is unsurprising that the novel I eventually wrote is a *Bildungsroman*. Among my favourite books as a girl were *The Yearling*, by Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*, and, of course, L.M. Montgomery’s *Anne of Green Gables*, as well as other novels of their ilk that followed a familiar structure – the *Bildungsroman*. Set within vignette-like stories, each employs a central character who is invariably imaginative, sensitive, and often misunderstood with absent parents (whether by circumstance or feeling), stern but loving elderly guardians, an emphasis on home, the physical land and environment, and the blossoming of love as these characters mature. These novels drew me in again and again and these elements are all found in *Be There First Thing*.

I have called *Be There First Thing* a novel of ‘firsts’, and there is no better classification of this definition than the *Bildungsroman* genre. While amongst scholars of the genre there is some contention between the male and female *Bildungsroman* as being distinctly different – most notably in their treatments of sex and societal pressure – I argue that *Be There First Thing*, while being a female *Bildungsroman* in essence, has characteristics from both gendered traditions due to its time period and the changes in society since the term was coined, and thus transcends more outdated and gendered definitions of the *Bildungsroman* (novel). Earlier I described *Be There First Thing* as a modern-day *Bildungsroman*, yet the main tenets of the genre remain constant and are fulfilled:

The three issues that are most central...to the *Bildungsroman* are its emphases on 1) the protagonist’s agency, which shows that he or she is actively involved in his or her own development, 2) self-reflection, which shows the protagonist’s ability to learn and grow from his or her experiences, and 3) the protagonist’s eventual reintegration with society.¹⁷

Lily’s journey throughout the novel is one of introspection in action that we experience firsthand through the First Person, Present Tense narration. She lives very much in the internal world of the self, and the way in which her story is told reveals her inner

¹⁶ Lorna Ellis. *Appearing to Diminish: Female Development and the British Bildungsroman 1750-1850* (Mississauga: Associated University Presses, 1999), 15.

¹⁷ Ellis, 25.

development, growing maturity, and above all, the quest to define her own identity, and indeed, “Bildung, ‘implies introspectiveness,... consideration for the careful tending, the shaping...of one’s own personality.’”¹⁸ Lily also constantly compares herself to fictional characters, her peers, and most frequently to her twin sister, gradually realising by the end of the novel that her identity has always been intact and unique amid that which influences her, thereby demonstrating that “[t]he *Bildungsroman* heroine’s growth in self-reflection and her ability to consider her identity, key aspects of *Bildung*, force her to turn outward and consider how that identity is shaped by those around her.”¹⁹

Additionally, in terms of the gendered view of the female *Bildungsroman* protagonist described, we see that Lily’s development and growth also employs devices found in the male *Bildungsroman* tradition, most notably that “The hero’s experience involves at least two love affairs or sexual encounters, one debasing, one exalting, and demands that in this respect and others the hero reappraise his values.”²⁰ Lily’s sexual development is frequently her driving force throughout the book: we see her girlish innocence intruded upon in *Grackles* with the mention of both Jane’s wanting of a boyfriend²¹ (while Lily does not) and when Lily says, “once we found a condom wrapper in the grass by the bridge. It was after we told Mum that that she said she didn’t like us playing down here. We found instructions too though, and that’s how we learned what a penis looks like.”²²

From that point onwards until she goes to Wales, Lily also endures several debasing sexual experiences, first in *Blue Suede Skates* with her lack of a first kiss²³, and then in *Bush X* as Lily witnesses both her sister’s sexual maturity, wondering, “...how does that even happen? How do you get to that point at all?”²⁴ and her own struggle with desire and experience by the pond when she is

taken aback but can’t move, can’t speak because he’s kissing me hungrily and I like the feeling of being desired. He shoves a hand down into my underwear, fiddling roughly for a second until I pull away from his devouring

¹⁸ Ellis, 26.

¹⁹ Ellis, 35.

²⁰ Jerome Buckley. *Season of Youth: The Bildungsroman from Dickens to Golding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 17.

²¹ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 7

²² Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 8

²³ Chapter 2, *Blue Suede Skates*, 30

²⁴ Chapter 3, *Bush X*, 41

mouth and push him back, stumbling a bit and gripping onto a tree behind me.²⁵

Finally, of course, all of this culminates in her loss of virginity in *La Jolie* with Sean when “it’s unbearable and disgusting and yet I can’t help but want it.”²⁶ The masturbation scene²⁷ in *La Jolie* is also significant, however, as it is both positive and negative in terms of her development. While she struggles with her perverse attraction to Sean, Lily’s focus on her internal world always centres on the development of the self. Her feelings in that moment are less about Sean and more so about the apparent comfort she has with her own newly mature body and also jealousy of her sister’s “barely concealed rabid sexual activity”²⁸, so while at that point in the novel Lily is relatively inexperienced sexually, she is also more mature when in the space of the self, which is fully realised by her remorse following the events of the ghost town.

Conversely, it is important to note that Lily’s development is demonstrated by positive sexual and romantic experiences as well, beginning with the spark of love introduced between Lily and Daniel in *Wedding* and the description of, at least initially, a relatively healthy and enjoyable sexual relationship with Gareth in *Kittens* when she recalls, “For once, or perhaps for the first time, this felt like an equal act; desires and intentions matching, no feeling of disconnect, no wondering if this man truly wants me, just intrinsically knowing that we want each other”²⁹. Lily develops further with the increasing attraction to Daniel and their deeply loving sexual and romantic consummation in “*Funeral*”³⁰, and ultimately in their subsequent relationship and eventual happiness over a much-wanted pregnancy in *Dawn*³¹. Lily’s sexual development is paramount to her overall maturity, yet resists reducing her to being simply a sexual body, as all of these events are processed at an intellectually introspective level.

By calling *Be There First Thing* a contemporary *Bildungsroman*, I must draw attention to the work of Alice Munro, for the structure of her books greatly influenced

²⁵ Chapter 3, *Bush X*, 42-43

²⁶ Chapter 4, *La Jolie*, 56

²⁷ Chapter 4, *La Jolie*, 49-50

²⁸ Chapter 4, *La Jolie*, 47

²⁹ Chapter 9, *Kittens*, 125-126

³⁰ Chapter 12, “*Funeral*”, 173-174

³¹ Chapter 13, *Dawn*, 183

the structure of *Be There First Thing*. *The Lives of Girls and Women* and *Who Do You Think You Are?* are Composite Novels and although Munro's stories are autonomous, they exist within the *Bildungsroman* structure of stories relating the life of an adolescent girl as she grows to maturity. Yet, like the male *Bildungsroman*, Munro's protagonists are always conscious of sex and its function in their lives and the society that surrounds them. They are more serious, more knowing than the sweet heroines of the past (such as Anne of Green Gables), and they demonstrate a grittier, truer world that Lily also experiences. Therefore, when designating *Be There First Thing* as a modern-day *Bildungsroman*, it is important to note that Munro perfected the form and taught me much about how to execute it successfully.

"In female *Bildungsromane*, reintegration is achieved through a change in perspective, through learning to see oneself as others see one,"³² and Lily completes this stage in *Dawn* by airing grievances and reconciling, as well as separating, herself from Jane, and also by finding contentment in a home with Daniel. This example of reintegration does carry the problematic undertone of being based on her role as a romantic partner and hetero-normative heroine; however, much as her sexual development does not reduce her to a one-dimensional woman, as she always analyses her experiences introspectively, her external life does not define her emotional development. This brings us to the other potentially problematic, in terms of a feminist perspective, elements of the ending itself, as we see Lily effectively married and pregnant without a discernibly prosperous or ambitious career. Lorna Ellis writes that,

"[a]lthough most critics who focus on the female *Bildungsroman* suggest that the endings are primarily negative, while scholars of the traditional *Bildungsroman*, who occasionally consider *Jane Eyre* or *Emma*, focus only on the positive interpretation, I am arguing that the endings are ambiguous precisely because the female development portrayed is double-sided both conservative and subversive. The protagonists are reintegrated into society through traditional marriages, but their growing ability to manipulate societal expectations has subversive aspects and implications."³³

Again, Ellis is referring to much earlier female *Bildungsromane*; however, when looking at Lily's sexual and mental development as part of a search for identity through the

³² Ellis, 30.

³³ Ellis, 34.

experience of youth, we observe Lily's outcome in a different light. None of the young characters in *Be There First Thing* exhibit much ambition in terms of career: Lily does not appear to know how, or have much interest in using her university degree in cinema towards a viable career; Jane eschewed university to travel and frequently works at pubs while entertaining a variety of ever-changing interests (shown most clearly via her earlier interest in astrology and tarot, and later conversion to and abandonment of Evangelical Christianity); Daniel is educated, but mostly unconcerned with any permanent career until the end of the novel³⁴; and in the periphery, we see Lily's old friends attempting careers as comedians and other unspecified, and thereby presumably uninteresting, jobs. This is not to suggest that the youth of today lack ambition, or the anti-feminist notion that women should eschew careers for sole fulfilment in the home, but rather to show a kind of generational apathy caused by the vagaries of youth. In the perpetual quest for identity that is expressed not just by Lily, but by all of the characters and particularly the youth in *Be There First Thing*, we see a generation which has been presented with a myriad of options and a subsequent fear of what this abundance of choice might produce. Do we doubt that Lily and Daniel will make a good life for themselves and their family? No, because we have seen their development and emotional growth, which suggest they will continue to seek a better future and make better choices. Jane's future is perhaps more ambiguous, yet does not preclude her from having a fulfilling life. If the *Bildungsroman* is at its core a novel of development, then we must assume that development does not end with the final chapter: we have watched Lily grow to maturity, and thus a new phase of development is set to begin beyond the final sentence.

4. References, Themes, and Motifs

We have looked at the roots and growth of *Be There First Thing* from its earliest inception, and now it is necessary to examine how these roots extended themselves and branched out from my first bookshelf, through the construction of the novel, and how they are interwoven throughout the text. Earlier I described *Be There First Thing* as

³⁴ Chapter 13, *Dawn*, 183-184

being generationally specific and this assertion is bolstered by the numerous references to children's literature, film, television, and music throughout the novel.

Lily frequently looks to books and film for a code or a model of life to live by and both Anne of Green Gables and Nancy Drew recur throughout *Be There First Thing* as signposts for how Lily imagines life ought to be. By viewing her actions and experiences as a mirror of fictional representations of adolescence, she is often disappointed in both herself and the fictional worlds that she trusts. It is only when she begins separating herself from these illusions (and allusions) that Lily grows closer to realising her adult identity.

Anne Shirley, the protagonist of the *Anne of Green Gables* series, embodies all that Lily perceives to be good and safe. Anne is clever and romantic and has endured hardship and loss, but she is an idealist and a strong and stubborn girl who effortlessly earns the love of all who meet her. Avonlea, the fictional village on Prince Edward Island where Anne lives, is a place where people certainly experience the pains and losses of life, but where nothing truly terrible happens – orphans are adopted and loved, education and imagination are nurtured, and true love exists in its purest form. Of course all of these things are challenged throughout the novels, yet goodness always wins in the end. Anne is rewarded for her intelligence with scholarly achievements; she marries the ideal in the intelligent and supportive Gilbert Blythe, and her lifelong friendships with true 'kindred spirits' prevail.

Lily refers to both the series of books about Anne, as well as the CBC mini-series by the same name which aired in two initial installments in 1985 and 1987. The presence of this film version of her heroine is significant for a number of reasons: foremost is the mini-series' place in the Canadian girlhood of the 1980s/1990s because, along with the television series *Road to Avonlea*, it was hugely successful and well-loved, especially by girls of Lily's generation. Additionally, these mini-series were frequently repeated on Canadian television (and are to this day), so Lily and Jane would have watched both series so often that it is not unlikely that they were able to playact scenes from *Anne of Green Gables* and *Anne of Avonlea* verbatim. We know that Lily privileges the book version of *Anne of Green Gables* when she discusses Jane's role as Anne in their playacting:

Normally she says Diana's fat, so she doesn't want to be her, but I said she only was kind of fat in the movie and it's probably just the dresses they have to wear. The truth is Jane hasn't read the books, she only pretends she has. Otherwise she'd know Diana is considered the most beautiful and then she'd change her mind,³⁵

And also, significantly at the end of the novel Lily is unreasonably angry with Jane for going to P.E.I. and also possessive of the entire 'Anne' subject:

"Yeah, but like, it was always my thing. You didn't even like Anne of Green Gables that much."

"Yes I did! I liked it enough to go to P.E.I., didn't I?"

"You never even read the books!"³⁶

And yet it is the film version that she and Jane frequently re-enact, and it is ultimately the glossier view of life presented via film and television that most influence her worldview, as evidenced by her study of cinema at university.

In *Nuit Blanche*, Lily encounters an actress who played the lead character in *Road to Avonlea* (Sarah Polley, whose character's name is given in the text), which harkens back to Lily's idealisation of all things 'Anne', and additionally her disappointment with the realities of life when Sarah mildly shuns her.³⁷ In many ways, film and television represent an even glossier view of fiction than books, and yet it is that which draws Lily in most as she constructs her models of behaviour and of society. She is also less critical of the film medium than she is of books, perhaps preferring a fictional world that is plainly and succinctly presented to her with an even greater element of fantasy and idealism.

As Lily matures and grows into her own identity, the gloss of perfection that 'Anne' held for her cannot sustain itself, as evidenced by her reaction to Jane's postcard from P.E.I. and what comparisons of her life to Anne's ultimately reveal. In *Grackles*, playacting Anne and Gilbert leads Lily to view Jane in an entirely new and surprisingly

³⁵ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 7

³⁶ Chapter 13, *Dawn*, 194

³⁷ Chapter 6, *Nuit Blanche*, 82

sinister light³⁸ and later, in *Kittens*, when she re-reads *Anne of the Island* for a model of true love³⁹ and considers Gareth and her life with him –

Anne would never live in a place like this; Anne would never settle for a ‘Gareth Blythe’[...] I have the odd sense that if she were here, Anne Shirley would be disappointed in me. My heart sinks at the thought, as if somehow that’s even worse than the disappointment of my own mother, or my own sister⁴⁰

– she is forced to accept the reality of her life, which is in turn a realisation that she desires and deserves something better. Lily carries Anne with her to the very end of the novel when she is troubled by the P.E.I. postcard.⁴¹ Had she received this earlier in the novel, say in *Postcards*, it might have been a sign of purity and comfort to Lily due to its inherent nostalgia; however, by the time she receives it in *Dawn*, Lily’s maturity and self-realisation means she can only view it as something tainted by the memory of Jane’s mock drowning and adult disappearance, thus it rings false for Lily in terms of her relationship with her sister. As Lily matures and accepts her own disillusionment with the idyllic models of life that she formed in childhood, she begins to see her life, and that of Jane, with a more objective eye, ceasing to make excuses for Jane and choosing to pursue her own path without depending on the proximity or approval of her inevitably transient sister.

We see this disillusionment clearly in Nancy Drew’s impact on Lily, especially when compared to Anne Shirley. As Lily matures and approaches adulthood, Nancy Drew is an increasing source of disappointment that Lily ultimately resents. While she values Anne Shirley’s piety, Nancy Drew’s is excessive and irritating to Lily. Neither of these characters are from Lily’s own generation, and yet while Anne is a century older than Lily (which is so far removed from her reality it might excuse her innocence), Nancy is supposedly from a more modern time (the novels were adapted to the 1950s) and yet appears in many ways more repressed than Anne. As Lily explores her sexuality and comes to find it all-consuming in many ways, Nancy Drew’s chaste relationship

³⁸ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 13

³⁹ Chapter 9, *Kittens*, 128

⁴⁰ Chapter 9, *Kittens*, 130

⁴¹ Chapter 13, *Dawn*, 186

with the static and fundamentally dull Ned Nickerson leaves Lily feeling let down and lied to by her favourite girl sleuth, such as in *La Jolie* when she compares Ned to Sean:

Sometimes he reminds me of Ned Nickerson, only thinner and with lower moral standards. He's always looking at my boobs when we go swimming, as if Jane didn't have nearly the same ones. To be fair, mine are bigger, but still, what a perv. Ned Nickerson, on the other hand, would not perv on anything, because he's asexual. The way that Sean reminds me of Ned though, is his self-righteous, smug over protectiveness with Jane that she just eats right up.⁴²

Nancy Drew has characteristics that Lily admires greatly – she is daring and at times disobedient when a mystery demands it, she is beautiful and also loved by a surrogate parent (her maid) much like Anne Shirley and other *Bildungsroman* protagonists, and Nancy represents a world in which mysteries and the unknown lead to exciting, yet never truly perilous situations. And yet, Nancy is also supposed to be a teenager in a more recognizable world for Lily – her boyfriend is a football player at their school, she drives a car, gets her hair done, and so on – so for Nancy to take time out from sleuthing to go to a church service and to appear to have no interest in sex with her supposedly attractive boyfriend, when Lily begins to mature, she feels deceived by the model teenager she imagined as a girl. Due to this model she has constructed of teenaged life, Lily imagines Jane's experience of having a boyfriend must be like that of Ned and Nancy, which is enforced by the apparent similarities in appearance between Ned and Sean, and yet the flagrant evidence of sex that surrounds Jane and Sean leaves Lily both disappointed by her expectations and furiously jealous, a conflict that ultimately results in her great betrayal of Jane at the ghost town. It is fair to say that Lily, especially when compared to Jane, is often naïve, possibly in excess, and yet she is at once knowing and at times very wise in her observations. This dichotomy that exists in teenaged girls is hard to fathom in many ways: it is not an untruth to say that they are at once innocent children and sexually mature young women. Lily and Jane are capable and independent, but perhaps at times seek comfort in childish things and behaviour that they are not quite ready to let go of. Following the events at *La Jolie*, however, Nancy Drew and all that she embodies seem to drop from Lily's consciousness, both due to her disappointments, but also because of the inevitable loss that occurs as Lily matures into a woman where

⁴² Chapter 4, *La Jolie*, 47

Nancy Drew's false piety, and Anne Shirley's idealised perfection, no longer serve her.

Even as Lily abandons childhood models as she matures, the habit of defining her life via pop culture nostalgia persists in Lily's consciousness throughout the book. She has a penchant for film, television, and music that is generally from a decade or more in the past, with particular emphasis on the 1980s and 1990s. This is not a refusal to engage with her own generation, however; on the contrary, the present tense and immediacy of each chapter implies that she is fully immersed in her present. It is more so that she is looking back from her present vantage point to better understand her own life as viewed against a model of what has come before, such as in *Blue Suede Skates* when she thinks, "I've always imagined parties being like in *Teen Wolf* when Michael J. Fox turns all wolfy in the closet with that girl and then shreds the back of her blouse. He's Canadian, so I feel like it must be true."⁴³

As *Anne of Green Gables* and *Nancy Drew* informed her childhood, the film, television, and music of the 1980s and 1990s stay with Lily into adulthood and are appreciated more once they exist within a haze of nostalgia. In *Sin City* we find Lily, Jane, and Daniel at a 1980s dance party, with Jane calling attention to a Wham! song being Lily's "favourite"⁴⁴. Earlier, in *La Jolie*, Lily uses film to dissect the present state of her relationship with Jane when she observes that,

Sometimes it feels as though we're both on the same treasure hunt, like in the movie *Romancing the Stone*, only she's always one step ahead, the gorgeous Kathleen Turner smoking pot and having sexy times and jungle adventures with Michael Douglas, while I'm the sister who's held captive eating steak with bald men and crocodiles, or worse, I am Danny DeVito,⁴⁵

while later on in the same chapter, she turns again to film as a means for escapist revenge during her bout of teenage misery: "as Sean stuffs food into his mouth, I imagine him finding a ring in his hotdog bun, followed by a small finger, like Ricardo Montalbon in *The Naked Gun*."⁴⁶

As Lily matures though, her references change to reflect her self-awareness and

⁴³ Chapter 2, *Blue Suede Skates*, 23

⁴⁴ Chapter 11, *Sin City*, 153

⁴⁵ Chapter 4, *La Jolie*, 48

⁴⁶ Chapter 4, *La Jolie*, 50

better grasp of reality, such as in “*Funeral*” when in response to Daniel she thinks, “I want to stay here in this room with you, watching *Cool Runnings* and eating those little powdered mini-doughnuts and making love for eternity,”⁴⁷ yet she does not give in to the fantasy and promptly leaves the room to join those assembled for Jane’s vigil. Finally, when we see Lily at the end of the book in *Dawn*, she still uses film and literature as a mirror for her life, yet sees the cracks in its fiction and chooses to face reality directly instead when she examines her copy of *Little Women*:

It’s an old paperback printed in the ‘90s when the movie version with Winona Ryder came out. The actresses—Ryder, Claire Danes, Kirsten Dunst, and that one who played Meg—are pictured together on the cover, sitting by a hearth in their full skirted dresses, while Christian Bale lurks sexily in the background. I wish I hadn’t seen the movie now though, because it’s all I can picture when I read the book. I think of Amy throwing Jo’s manuscript in the fire and how when I saw it in the theatre with Jane and Mum, we all gasped together, outraged and heartbroken. And then I think of when Amy marries Laurie in France, or wherever they are, and how we’re supposed to be satisfied by it, but it never sits right. Doesn’t everyone want Jo and Laurie to be together? And do Jo and Amy ever really make up? I don’t think they do, no matter what Louisa May Alcott says.⁴⁸

Meanwhile, Jane seems to refuse to pander to the past, yet she too is held suspended in it, as it is the past that causes her to act out against Lily, whether by refusing to forgive her, having a deep reluctance to indulge in nostalgia with her sister, or by using that same nostalgia to reconnect with her later in *Wedding*⁴⁹ and *Bonfire Night* when she brings Lily the DVD of *Encino Man*⁵⁰ and plays Britney Spears at the flat.⁵¹

This propensity for nostalgia carries a heavy weight, however, as it may have been learned from Carole, their mother, who is crippled by the past. In *Grackles*, when Jane and Lily are on their mission to solve ‘The Mystery’, Carole’s mental state and reliance on nostalgia is hinted at when Lily tells the reader:

[...]Mum calls Wales, *home*, even though she’s always lived in Ontario. She likes to remind us that we’re Welsh, so sometimes we have to sing *Calon*

⁴⁷ Chapter 12, “*Funeral*”, 174-175

⁴⁸ Chapter 13, *Dawn*, 188

⁴⁹ Chapter 8, *Wedding*, 110

⁵⁰ Chapter 10, *Bonfire Night*, 138

⁵¹ Chapter 10, *Bonfire Night*, 141

Lân to her on Sunday afternoons. When we were two we went as a family to Wales—the only time we’ve ever left Canada. Jane and I don’t remember it, so we ask Mum about it to make her happy sometimes.⁵²

This of course relates back to Carole’s deep depression and attempted suicide in *Blue Suede Skates*, which again refers to her mother Gwyneth’s suicide and return to Wales due to nostalgia for a life left behind. I heard a saying once that “Anxiety lives in the future, while depression lives in the past” – a notion that is all too true for the women of Lily’s family, as it is this focus on the past that leads to their struggle and sometimes inability to live in the present (be it metaphorically or literally).

Depression haunts Lily and her female relatives, as evidenced with Carole’s position in bed in *Blue Suede Skates* and Lily’s observation that, “These spells happen every nine months, or so, but Mum doesn’t notice the pattern,”⁵³ and of course the end of that chapter when it is implied that Carole has attempted suicide. I have already touched on Gwyneth’s suicide, which hangs like a shadow over the text and the lives of the characters, yet the way depression affects Lily and Jane functions differently. We see Lily’s firsthand in *Nuit Blanche*, during a bout of extreme anxiety, and also in *Rescue, Kittens*, and *Bonfire Night*. Each of these instances hinges upon a combination of external factors (Jane’s estrangement, leaving university, and an abortion) and also the apathy that comes with disillusioned youth. Similarly, Jane’s depression is hinted at by the evidence of alcoholism and violence⁵⁴, and another sort of apathy that sees her frequently taking up new interests or styles of dress that she just as quickly abandons, choosing travel and, essentially, running away over accepting whatever it is that plagues her. Jane’s depressive actions and coping mechanisms, like Lily’s, are entwined with their respective searches for identity. It is significant to note that in *Dawn*, Jane appears with the same style of dress as she did in *Sin City* and additionally, while obviously carrying a good measure of resentment towards Lily, she does not appear to be mentally unstable or unwell. As each sister grapples with their internal and external selves, they undergo a long and arduous process that involves much uncertainty in combination with the pain of separation from each other. Each sister finds solace with the other amid

⁵² Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 4

⁵³ Chapter 2, *Blue Suede Skates*, 16

⁵⁴ Chapter 10, *Bonfire Night*, 147

these depressive episodes, yet it is only once they have fully realised their individual journeys that they appear to find a sense of peace with themselves.

Beyond the pattern of depression in Lily's family, however, anxiety also plagues her throughout the book. It is not clear whether Lily suffered from anxiety before Jane pretended to drown in *Grackles*, but whether she did, or whether that experience or her mother's bouts of depression are what spurred her later panic attacks, this sense of fear undoubtedly lives in Lily's mind just as prevalently as any depression. *Nuit Blanche* addresses this more than any other chapter, as it is in essence the description of a prolonged panic attack as illustrated in the following scene:

[...]the crushing crowd makes my heart pound in my chest. I'm taking deeper and deeper breaths, my eyes darting across the crowd searching for the others until before I know it, I'm pushing my way out towards the safety of the darkened path.

My chest feels tight. There are tingling pins and needles on my forehead and I'm dizzy. Just breathe, I think, these feelings aren't real, but I'm having trouble convincing myself. I feel better outside, at least. The tight indoor spaces with throngs of people and no visible toilets made me feel like I might faint-shit-vomit.⁵⁵

I toyed with including more of Lily's anxiety throughout the book, and indeed there are references to it throughout (Lily is frequently nervous), and yet decided not to overuse this theme for two reasons: there was the danger of the book becoming 'The Many Mental Illnesses of Lily Sled and Her Family', and I did not want this to be a book expressly about mental illness, and secondly, it felt like a falsehood to represent Lily as a perpetually anxious person. Each chapter is a snapshot of Lily's life, albeit of significant moments, but still it is unlikely that she would be struggling with anxiety in all chapters as she does in *Nuit Blanche*. That said, though, what is the cause of Lily's anxiety? Lily seeks comfort in fictional nostalgia, yet after the schism that occurs between her and Jane in *La Jolie*, the reality of the past becomes tainted by remorse. Furthermore, the future occupies a frightening space for Lily as well – what will she do without Jane after Chapter Four? What will she do after university? Where is her life headed? Uncertainty about the future and guilt about the past swirl in her mind to

⁵⁵ Chapter 6, *Nuit Blanche*, 78

produce a perfect storm of fear that may abate often, but also is unleashed via bouts of anxiety and depression. One could view this as a serious mental illness made worse by the apparent hereditary proclivity to it in the women of her family. However, I wanted to represent this as not so much a result of her genetics, but rather as a simple by-product of youth. As said, *Be There First Thing* is a novel of ‘firsts’ in so many ways and in nearly every chapter we see Lily plunge into the deep end of experience without a life preserver. Jane’s reaction to the shock of youth and new experience appears to be a combination of daring and anger – she may cope differently than Lily, but no less extremely, as evidenced from the outset in *Grackles* when she fakes her own death.

We know Lily to be extraordinarily sensitive, and perhaps it is that part of her nature that causes her to retreat into herself and her mind when faced with things that frighten her, though she rarely retreats permanently, which shows a different strength of character than Jane possesses. Lily admires and envies Jane’s apparent bravery in life, and while it is at times commendable – Jane travels and supports herself, exercises sexual fluidity, and seemingly does not worry about consequences of her actions or the future – it is not necessarily healthy or brave at all. We know that Jane runs away often, frequently changes her appearance, drinks to excess, and lashes out in anger and violence when faced with confrontation and her own pain and anxieties. Again, Jane may be viewed as a character study in other kinds of mental illness, and there is no doubt that her life experience has shaped her personality, but again I wished to represent this as another aspect of and reaction to the experience of youth. The novel ends when Lily and Jane are just shy of thirty-years-old, so we do not know how they will change from that point onwards, but it is to be hoped that they, like many other people, will grow out of certain behaviours that no longer serve them, just as Lily grows beyond her childhood-constructed models of how life is meant to be.

Although *Be There First Thing* is fundamentally ‘Lily’s’ story and her quest for a singular identity, the subject of her ‘twin-hood’ is inherently linked to this. I chose to make Lily and Jane identical twins because it automatically heightened the entire experience of youth and development and served as a fascinating reflector of that experience. In addition to speaking to friends who are twins (I know two sets of female identical twins) and family (my grandmother was a fraternal twin, as are two of my

cousins), I turned to literature to try to understand the innate bond these siblings can possess. Angela Carter's *Wise Children* and Lori Lansens' *The Girls* were immensely helpful reading when trying to decide how Lily and Jane's self-described 'twin-hood' would be rendered throughout *Be There First Thing*, as each novel showed extremely close and complex relationships between fundamentally different personalities. In the earlier chapters, when Lily and Jane are still in school, their twin-hood is more prevalent in the magnified environments of elementary and high school and their shared childhood bedroom. In *Grackles* and *Blue Suede Skates*, Lily and Jane variably clash in extremely hurtful ways (such as Jane's propensity to bully her sister), yet they also find incredible solace in each other. Despite this polarity, in these early chapters, their twin-hood is doubly significant: initially we see it as the source of an intense bond of safety and secrecy for Lily and Jane as they have created a world in which only they exist that offers them comfort within the wider world of adults who misunderstand them and children who can be needlessly cruel. And yet, Lily and Jane struggle with this when at one point Lily thinks to herself, "Maybe Jane can impersonate me and tell me how my first kiss goes,"⁵⁶ and yet later, when they play Spin the Bottle and their classmates replace the injured Jane with Lily, Lily says, "We're twins, you guys. We're not, like, the same person,"⁵⁷ and Jane is left hurt and jealous, believing Lily has kissed Mark Van Dijk.

In *Grackles*, Lily experiences her first moment of true separation from her sister when she watches her in the bathroom mirror:

She stares at me through the mirror and I stare back, really looking at her now. For the first time I see Jane as someone other than my twin sister. She is not my reflection. She looks nothing like me. At school most people can't tell us apart, but that makes no sense to me now. As I stare at her and look at her body and the features of her face, I recognise them as familiar, but not identical to my own. They are familiar because they belong to my sister, but they are not mine.⁵⁸

It is interesting to note that in order for Lily to view Jane objectively, she must look at

⁵⁶ Chapter 2, *Blue Suede Skates*, 18

⁵⁷ Chapter 2, *Blue Suede Skates*, 30

⁵⁸ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 13

her sister through the mirror's reflection, as though seeing her directly is too close to herself. Periodically we see Lily and Jane return to the mirror as if to check their progress. In *Bush X*, as Lily watches "Jane as she gets up to examine a tiny zit on her forehead in the mirror. She retraces black eyeliner around her hazel eyes, blinking slowly to reveal two harvest moons,"⁵⁹ Lily observes an essentially mundane task, yet significantly does not appear to see any similarity between her sister's reflection and herself. Later in *Bonfire Night*, the twins return again to the bathroom mirror:

[...]each wiping spots of tomato sauce off our faces with rough blue washcloths. It seems to me that Jane and I have never looked more alike than right now, even though her hair is short and half blue and mine is still long and blonde; her eyes rimmed in dark black liner, while my own soft brown pencil has nearly rubbed off over the course of the day. She wipes the cloth down the side of her face and I'm transfixed by the contrast between our lips; hers still stained from reddish lipstick, mine pale and chapped, but both still somehow entirely, exactly the same. I wanted so badly before to be free of our twin-hood, to be seen as unique; an individual, and now it doesn't seem to matter at all,⁶⁰

and Lily's self-reflection and developed individual identity allows her to see them as both the same and different with a newfound confidence and comfort in that fact.

By the end of the novel, in a sort of final checkpoint, the sisters view each other directly in *Dawn*:

We both get a good look at each other now. Her hair is dyed cherry red and cut into a short bob. She's wearing a loose black t-shirt with the name of a band on it that I've never heard of in bright yellow, with jeans rolled up her calves. I notice a new tattoo of a black bird on her shin. It reminds me of a grackle and I realise I haven't seen one in years, though it's probably a raven.⁶¹

Here, as their journeys of identity are complete, Lily and Jane have abandoned mirrors and reflectors and instead view each other directly and objectively, coming full circle with a reference to the grackles of Chapter One.

Cats and birds recur frequently throughout *Be There First Thing* and their juxtaposition is most apparent from the outset in *Grackles* when we see Georgina kill the

⁵⁹ Chapter 3, *Bush X*, 35

⁶⁰ Chapter 10, *Bonfire Night*, 142

⁶¹ Chapter 13, *Dawn*, 188

goldfinch in the first scene.⁶² These animals, despite being natural foes, are symbolically similar: each represents both vulnerability and fierceness, freedom and constraint, while they are also traditionally associated with femininity and variably presented as diminutive and sweet, or sensual, predatory, and aloof. These stereotypical and contradictory qualities attributed to these ‘feminine’ species are significant, for Lily identifies with both felines and birds, especially when they are negatively portrayed. In the opening scene of the novel, the grackles are described as “sinister” and “scrappy”⁶³, while Georgina, Lily’s orange tabby, enters the book as a cold-blooded huntress, trapping her prey. In both instances, Lily jumps to their defence when they are criticised by Gramps, suggesting from the outset of the novel that Lily’s personality has the potential for darkness. And yet, Lily also seeks to care for these animals – she admires the birds at the feeder, looking them up in her book, “*Birds of North America: Southern Ontario, Western Quebec, and Northern New York State*”⁶⁴, after all, and her interest remains in later chapters, when in “*Funeral*”, Lily notices “a bird twittering outside the window...” and thinks, “I don’t know what kind of bird it is, but I hope that it’s a lark. I don’t know that I’ve ever heard a lark sing. Gramps would know. He tried to teach Jane about birds, but she was never interested,”⁶⁵ and also in *Dawn* when she spies the “fleeting wingspan of a bird”⁶⁶ through the skylight. Similarly, while Georgina first appears to demonstrate that cats are hunters with sensual, hedonistic natures, Lily also views them as helpless, soft, and loving, when she enlists her housemates to save the homeless ‘Atticus’ in *Postcards* and also deals with her sense of loss following her abortion in *Kittens* by taking on a litter as her own. When related back to the *Bildungsroman* genre, both the cats and birds reflect the development of Lily and Jane as women – each sister seeks flight and autonomy from their home life, while also craving both comfort and sexual freedom. Like the wild birds that depend on the feeder for food, or the domesticated and stray cats, they are continually free and constricted, trapped by dependence and compelled by the will to seek freedom from these invisible constraints. We are reminded of the animalistic nature of development, in that it is first

⁶² Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 1-2

⁶³ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 1

⁶⁴ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 1

⁶⁵ Chapter 12, “*Funeral*”, 172-173

⁶⁶ Chapter 13, *Dawn*, 182

instinct and natural, physical phenomena that begin the process of maturity. The harbinger of Lily's quest for identity appears in the first scene of *Be There First Thing* when the grackles have had their fill, Georgina has caught the goldfinch and Lily says: "She can't help it. It's her nature."⁶⁷

Be There First Thing is a novel of 'firsts', which the title directly reflects, yet there is something else inherent in that phrase that is equally important: it implies waiting; it signals the passage of time and the feeling that one might be running late, or just behind schedule, but is desperately trying to get wherever they are going, and it also promises arrival and the dawning of a new day. 'Dawn' is a theme that runs throughout the novel and directly relates back to the 'firsts' and the quest for identity. For the reader, Lily's life begins in the town of Dawn, and it is there that she experiences her first moments of self-realisation. Literal dawn also appears throughout the novel, reflecting again Lily's progressing actualisation, such as in *Nuit Blanche*, when Lily literally craves the coming dawn as a metaphor for a deep desire for change, and in *Sin City* when they stroll home from the bar, preparing to usher in Jane's newfound faith and a turning point in love for Lily and Daniel.⁶⁸

All of the themes and recurrent motifs discussed share a common principle – they are all necessary to and symbolic of Lily's quest for identity because in many ways they *are* her identity: these are Lily's interests, her loves, the delightful quirks of her personality that make her who she is, and thus they are one and the same.

5. Conclusion

It is significant to me that I appear to have come full-circle, from reading a shelf-full of old books about sensitive, imaginative girls, to branching out into the world, forging my own writerly path, only to return here at its culmination, my own novel completed in the room where it all began.

I have spoken a lot about Lily's journey throughout *Be There First Thing*, which for her was one of development and identity, but the process of this PhD and writing this novel was also my own personal journey towards my writerly identity. As mentioned

⁶⁷ Chapter 1, *Grackles*, 2

⁶⁸ Chapter 11, *Sin City*, 154-157

earlier, I did not write this novel chronologically, so when I began editing the chapters in sequence I was surprised to discover that it was a much sadder, more heartbreaking book than I had intended. At a very early stage in the PhD process, I was intent on writing a comedy, compelled by the desire to make readers laugh and to bring another happy ending into the world. And while there is a lot of humour in this book, it appears more often than not in the tragi-comic sense – Lily’s observations and flights of fancy often tinged with irony and heavy with the weight of melancholy.

The first draft of *Be There First Thing* had a very different ending. Lily and Daniel did not have a house of their own, but instead were housesitting for his Nain in Llandudno, and on the day that Lily discovered she was pregnant, Daniel broke up with her and broke her heart. It was revealed that he had been in contact with Jane throughout their estrangement, while she had not, and when the novel ended, Lily was seen leaving Daniel behind without telling him of her pregnancy, and heading down the road to find her way to an airport, to Canada, and ultimately, Jane. When I finished the first edit of the manuscript and was struck by the sadness that Lily endures, I knew that this ending was too devastating and too unkind to Lily, and also, ultimately unsatisfying for the reader. I realised that I felt angry with Jane; that Lily was being untrue to herself to forgive her sister so easily and that it negated much of her development, and for Daniel to act in that way was inconsistent with both his character and what he represented for Lily in the novel: a safe and loving home. So, when I decided to re-write the ending, I went back to the roots of the story and the source of my inspiration – the novels of my youth.

I thought first of Anne of Green Gables and her true love, Gilbert Blythe. They are Lily’s ideals and for good reason – they are intelligent, high-spirited, ambitious, and kind – yet their love affair is not an easy one and they endure many heart-wrenching trials before they are permanently united. So how could Lily’s great love end so bitterly? I knew then that Daniel had to stay. Next I looked at *Little Women*, a story of sisters, and the first ‘real’ book I ever read. I remember I was about ten years old and I finished reading it on a Saturday morning, lying on my stomach at the foot of my bed and as I wept to myself I thought, ‘*This* is what a book is!’, and that feeling has never left me. How could I then end my own novel in such a way? I thought of the sisters in

that book, Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy, and how their lives did not turn out how they had planned (Beth dies before she is twenty, after all), and how Jo and Amy really do not recover from their own devastating adolescent rows, although they will forever love each other dearly. It was then that I knew that it was Jane that Lily needed to break up with, not Daniel, which was actually a much more heartbreaking, yet much more satisfying ending.

So, while *Be There First Thing* germinated from political research aspirations, grew into a modern model of the *Bildungsroman* form, and branched out to be a study of specific generational popular culture motifs, it is in essence a novel of my identity as a writer and a reader and I am thankful to Lily for running parallel to my own journey, side by side, existing on neighbouring paths that frequently intersect, yet must ultimately separate into their own singular identities and new stages ahead.

Appendix I.

Thesis Plan – September 2008

- 11 to 14 Stories, depending on length (likely between 5000-9000 words each).
- They will vary in time period from the early 1960s to the present.
- A collection of short fiction, stories drawn from my family history and from my own personal experiences, most notably things observed while living in Wales.
- The underlying theme is post-colonialism and parallels between Wales and Canada regarding their national identities. Research will be done on Welsh immigration to Canada during the 20th Century, and woven into the tales.
- The descriptions of the stories will unfold as they become clearer to me, as will their order of appearance, though they will likely be organised according to the order in which I write them, as some will be interlinked.

Rough Outline of Stories (written thematically):

1. Driving home on Valentine's Day in the snow. A near accident. Questions of minority – working at an Indian restaurant – an outsider/insider.
2. "Up North" – Welsh cousins visiting a Canadian cottage in Northern Ontario. Insects. Mystery. Sex and intrigue on the Canadian Shield. Theme of the outsider.
3. Wrestling the Bear – 1960s, Ontario. Wrestling league run by 'Cowboy Dave Morgan'. Dutchman wrestles a bear – the bear is owned by a man named Dubois who lives in a log cabin on the 18th Sideroad.
4. Walt Stickley, the Hermit. 1960s Ontario. Moss gardens. Two girls, adolescents, discover his shack in the forest, out by the lumber mill.
5. "The Shit King of Queensville" – 1960s Ontario. The Hungarians. Again, outsiders in an Anglo community; all Welsh, English, Irish, Scottish names. Mistaken for Germans. Sod Fields. Art and Buicks.
6. "We Own You" – Present day, Toronto. Squabble between a Welshman and Canadian over a \$20.00 bill, featuring the Queen. Hockey, botched trip to Niagara Falls.
7. Vancouver. Present Day. Teenager Geese, BC wine, and the coldest June in 75 yrs.
8. The Arena. 1980s. Queen Elizabeth presides over every game. Doughnuts and beer. Banners and the Zamboni. Races around the perimeter of the rink.
9. A Reverse Tale – a Canadian in Wales. Present Day. Taking the train.
10. Dinner Parties. 1989. Ontario. Smell of perfume. Jingle of a charm bracelet.
11. Catholicism and Photography. Back and Forth/ Wales – Canada. Flash Forwards and Flashbacks. A knack for finding 4-leaf clovers.
12. A Story of Suburbia. Late 1990s, Ontario.
13. Parallels between Quebecois French and Welsh. Bilingualism. Dichotomy.
14. Swansea, present day. Bewilderment. Wind Street. The Bay.

Appendix II.

Book Plan – June 2010

Story/Intervals	Year	Setting	Season	Country	Wife	Done
Interval 1	2010	In bed, Xmas dinner	Winter – Dec.	Canada	X	X
Grackles	1995	Dawn, bedroom, kitchen, creek	Spring – April	Canada	X	X
Interval 2	2010	In bed, snow angels	Winter – Dec.	Canada	X	X
Blue Suede Skates	1997	Dawn, Art's shoe repair, Arena, basement	Winter - February	Canada	X	X
Interval 3	2010	In bed, Xmas tree farm	Winter – Dec.	Canada	X	X
Bush X	1999	Dawn, bedroom, Forest, Taco Bell	Fall – October	Canada	X	X
Interval 4	2010	In bed, Dairy Queen	Winter – Dec.	Canada	X	X
Up North	2001	Cottage, Quebec, ghost town	Summer – July	Canada	X	X
Interval 5	2010	In bed, kitchen, living room	Winter – Dec.	Canada	X	X
Old Folks' Home?	2007	retirement home	Fall – Sept.	Canada	X	
Interval 6	2010		Winter	Canada	X	
The Wedding (adapt Jane's Wife)	2008	Wedding – Neath	Spring – May	Wales	X	X
Interval 7	2010		Winter	Canada	X	

Lily in Swansea	2008	Lily's job? Mozart's?	Summer – August	Wales	X	
Interval 8	2010		Winter	Canada	X	
Kittens	2008	Uplands, Sketty Rd.	Fall – October	Wales	X	X
Interval 9	2010		Winter	Canada	X	
Fancy Feast	2008	Gwydr Cres., Dream	Fall – Nov.	Wales	X	X
Interval 10	2010		Winter	Canada	X	
Bonfire Night	2008	Swansea Bay, beach, Uplands	Fall – Nov. 5 th	Wales	X	X
Interval 11	2010		Winter	Canada	X	
Jane's Funeral	2009	Swansea – Oyster- mouth Cemetery	Summer – June	Wales	X	
Interval 12	2010		Winter	Canada	X	
Blackout	2010	Swansea, new home, conception	Spring – March/ April	Wales	X	
Interval 13	2010		Winter	Canada	X	
Christmas Day	2010	Dawn	Winter – Dec.	Canada	X	
The End		Wherever	Jane is			

Appendix III.

Book Plan – April 2011

Story/ Chapter	Year	Setting	Season	Country	To Write	To Edit
Grackles	1995	Dawn, bedroom, kitchen, creek	Spring – April	Canada		X
Blue Suede Skates	1997	Dawn, shoe repair, Arena, basement	Winter – Feb.	Canada		X
Bush X	1999	Dawn, bedroom, Forest, Taco Bell	Fall – Oct.	Canada		X
Up North	2002	Cottage, Northern Quebec, ghost town	Summer – July	Canada		X
Postcards or Happiness	2005	Toronto, student house	Winter – January	Canada	x	
Nuit Blanche	2007	Toronto	Fall – Sept.	Canada		X
Cat Rescue	2008	Vandorf/ Scugog, field	Spring- March	Canada	X	
The Wedding	2008	Wedding – Neath/Swansea	Summer – June	Wales		X
Kittens	2008	Uplands, Sketty Rd. flat, Swansea	Fall Nov. flash-back summer	Wales		X
Bonfire Night	2008	Swansea, beach, Uplands	Fall – Nov.	Wales		X
Baptism	2009	Sin City, Kingsway , Caswell Bay	Summer	Wales	X	
“Funeral”	2010	Swansea/ Glanmor Rd.	Spring – Feb.	Wales		X
Blackout or Dawn (P.E.I. postcard)	2011	Swansea	Winter - Dec.	Wales	X	

Appendix IV.

Novel Arc – January 2012

Chapter	Year	Setting	Season	Country	1st Date	1st Date
1 Grackles	1995	Dawn, bedroom, kitchen, creek	Spring – April	Canada		X
2 Blue Suede Skates	1997	Dawn, Art's shoe repair, Arena, basement	Winter Dec.	Canada		X
3 Bush X	1999	Dawn, bedroom, Forest, Taco Bell	Fall – Oct.	Canada		X
4 La Jolie	2002	Cottage, Quebec	Summer - August	Canada		X
5 Postcards	2005	Toronto, student house	Winter January	Canada		X
6 Nuit Blanche	2007	Toronto	Fall – Sept.	Canada		X
7 Rescue	2008	Dawn bedroom, Queensville field	Spring- March	Canada		X
8 Wedding	2008	Swansea, bus, Neath	Summer – June	Wales		X
9 Kittens	2008	Uplands, Sketty Road flat	late Summer- Sept.	Wales		X
10 Bonfire Night	2008	Swansea Bay, Uplands	Fall – Nov.	Wales		X
11 Sin City	2009	Mozart's, Sketty Rd., Sandfields, Caswell	Summer – August	Wales		X
12 "Funeral"	2010	Swansea/ Glanmor Rd.	Spring/ Feb.	Wales		X
13 Blackout	2011	North Wales, outside Llandudno Junction	Summer – July	Wales		x

Appendix V.

Novel in Full – March 2012

Chapter	Year	Setting	Season	Country	Final
1 Grackles	1995	Dawn, bedroom, kitchen, creek	Spring – April	Canada	X
2 Blue Suede Skates	1996	Dawn, Art's shoe repair, Arena, basement	Winter – December	Canada	X
3 Bush X	1998	Dawn, bedroom, Forest, Taco Bell	Fall – October	Canada	X
4 La Jolie	2002	Cottage, Quebec	Summer – August	Canada	X
5 Postcards	2005	Toronto, student house	Winter – January	Canada	X
6 Nuit Blanche	2007	Toronto	Summer/Fall – September	Canada	X
7 Rescue	2008	Dawn bedroom, Queensville field	Spring- March	Canada	X
8 Wedding	2008	Swansea, bus, Neath	Summer – June	Wales	X
9 Kittens	2008	Uplands, Sketty Road flat	late Summer, September	Wales	X
10 Bonfire Night	2008	Swansea Bay, Uplands	Fall – November	Wales	X
11 Sin City	2009	Mozart's, Sketty Rd., Sandfields, Caswell Bay	Summer – August	Wales	X
12 "Funeral"	2010	Swansea/Glanmor Road house	Winter/Spring – February	Wales	X
13 Dawn	2012	Penclawdd, Gower	Summer - July	Wales	X

GLOSSARY

‘Astro Fruit Bottom’ – Canadian brand of yogurt.

‘Big Shiny Tunes’ – Compilation alternative rock/popular music CD produced by Canadian music channel MuchMusic in 1996.

‘The Boonies’ – From the term ‘Boondocks’, referring to a remote, usually rural place, often used with condescension, as a place that is unsophisticated or inaccessible.

‘Bush X’ – Canadian name of the British 1990s alternative rock band ‘Bush’. The band’s original name was already licensed in Canada by another group, thus they were required to change the name for Canadian media.

‘C*plus’ – Canadian brand of orange pop.

‘C-stroke’ – Canoe paddling manoeuvre comprised of a wide-arcing stroke in the shape of the letter ‘C’ used to turn the direction of the boat.

‘Canadian Heritage Minutes’ – Sixty-second short films that dramatically re-enact moments in Canadian history broadcast amid commercial breaks on Canadian television channels (1991 to present).

CBC – Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

‘CBC Sunday Night Family Hour’ – Family-centric television time on CBC, popular in the early 1990s.

‘Clue’ – North American name of ‘Cluedo’ board game, published by Waddingtons/Parker Brothers/Hasbro.

‘Coffee Crisp’ – Canadian Nestlé chocolate bar of coffee-flavoured wafers covered in milk chocolate.

‘Corey Hart’ – 1980s Canadian pop singer who had a 1983 Top-Ten hit with “Sunglasses at Night”.

‘Degrassi Junior High’ – CBC-produced Canadian teen television drama (1987-1989). Dealt with serious issues such as drugs, abuse, racism, teen pregnancy, etc. and used local children and teens as actors with realistic storylines.

‘deke’ – A hockey manoeuvre used to skate past an opponent, appropriated in Canadian English as a term to imply avoiding, or ducking under, around, or inside something.

‘The Friendly Giant’ – Canadian children’s television program that aired on CBC from 1958-1985 and involved a giant who lived in a castle with puppet friends.

‘Full House’ – American sitcom about a widower and his three daughters, aired from 1987-1995 on ABC.

‘The Group of Seven’ – Group of Canadian landscape painters (1920-1933).

‘IGA’ – (Independent Grocers Alliance) Brand of supermarkets in North America.

‘Isotoner slippers’ – Brand of velveteen slippers.

‘It’s worth the drive to Acton’ – Refers to a long-running Ontario television commercial for a leather goods outlet store in Acton, Ontario.

‘Jos. Louis’ – Processed round, chocolate covered, cream-filled cake confection produced by Vachon Canada.

‘Kraft Dinner’ – Iconic boxed macaroni and cheese considered a quintessentially ‘Canadian’ food, discussed in Canadian cultural theory.

‘Kurt Browning’ – Canadian figure skater, Olympian, and four-time World Champion, prominent in the 1990s.

‘Loverboy’ – Canadian rock band, formed in 1980.

‘Les Van Doos’ - Royal 22nd Regiment (*Royal 22^e Régiment*); the most prominent Francophone regiment in the Canadian Forces. The nickname comes from an Anglicized mispronunciation of *vingt-deuxième*, and their mascot is a goat named ‘Baptiste’. They are allied with The Royal Welsh (*Y Cymry Brenhinol*) regiment.

‘mickey’ – Canadian slang term for a 375ml bottle of liquor.

‘Mike’s Hard Lemonade’ – Brand of vodka coolers (alcopops).

‘poutine’ – Québécois dish comprised of French fries, cheese curds, and beef gravy.

‘The Price is Right’ – An American television game show broadcast 1956-present.

‘The Raccoons’ – Canadian animated television program broadcast on CBC (1985-1991), centring on a family of raccoons, their aardvark foe, and environmental issues.

‘Ready or Not’ – Canadian teen television drama, broadcast on Global TV (1993-1997) that dealt with puberty and adolescence.

‘Road to Avonlea’ – Canadian television series based on stories by L.M. Montgomery, broadcast on CBC from 1990-1996.

‘Roots’ – Clothing company known for appropriating Canadian imagery in its designs, such as the beaver.

‘sablé’ – Québécois French word for butter shortbread.

‘Saved by the Bell’ – American teen television sitcom that aired (1989-1993) on NBC.

‘Silver jeans’ – Brand of blue jeans popular amongst Canadian teenagers in the late 1990s/early 2000s.

‘Smokey the Bear’ – Mascot of Canadian Forestry Association used to educate about the dangers of forest fires.

'tabarnac' – Québécois *'sacre'* (profanity based on Catholic terminology, common in Québec) that refers to the tabernacle in the church.

'Taco Bell' – North American chain of Mexican fast food restaurants.

'Tim Hortons' – Ubiquitous Canadian chain of coffee/doughnut shops.

'Wheel of Fortune' – American game show broadcast from 1975 to present.

* It should be noted that the spelling throughout the text used is standard Canadian English. The combination of both British and American spellings may appear to be an inconsistency, but is in fact consistent with Canadian rules of English and has been used to reflect the origins of the text and protagonist.

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DEDICATION

For my parents, with love.