

No CHINOOK

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One section of *No Chinook* (the bit where Scott follows Kate to the river) appeared in a slightly different form in the short story collection *Everything We Haven't Lost*.

All of the characters in *No Chinook* are fictional, and the events that are taken from real life have had the names, dates, places, and context have been replaced with convincing lies.

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*This book is dedicated to
the lonely moments between lovers.*

ALSO BY K SAWYER PAUL

EVERYTHING WE HAVEN'T LOST

NO CHINOOK

K SAWYER PAUL

gredunza press



I met Kate Foley for the second time at a party I didn't want to attend. It had been a few months since I moved to Calgary, a tiny jump from the small suburban town a few hours away where my parents lived. I didn't know too many people, and I wasn't making any money. I spent most of my time watching Best Week Ever and throwing paper basketballs, and only ever went out for coffee and groceries. I was happy because I was finally living in a small, expensive apartment, with bad fixtures and a shitty refrigerator. It was a housewarming party, just after New Year's. Shawn had invited me, but I remember this party because of her.

Kate looked beautiful as ever, but I didn't recognize her at first. Her hair was down, something I had never been lucky enough to see before. But it was more than that. She was wearing a green dress over jeans and had bracelets on her arms. She had gained a little weight, and she looked taller than what could be attributed

to the heels. She also never used to wear heels. Kate was the kind of girl who wore running shoes and shorts and skirts and was focused. Here, she was laughing. I never saw her laugh this way before, more patronizing than genuine. It was as if someone had sent her back to the shop for remodelling.

At first, I thought she was just another beautiful girl on the other side of the living room, but she stopped laughing and began listening to someone I couldn't see clearly. She crossed her arms. As I watched her, she tapped her nails against her arm, and smiled—courteously, almost—at an interval. I knew it was really her at that moment. Kate was being patronizing in the prettiest way.

Other than Shawn, I didn't know anyone at that party. Still, I found myself in conversation with some guy. We were talking about music. I remember that he had a ponytail, and that I was bothered by it much more than by his obsession with Nick Cave. I yawned as I listened to him drone on about misrepresentation and getting breaks. I was in a bad mood that night. I don't know why I agreed to go. I think it had something to do with my leather jacket. I think Shawn told me that I had to come because I had a cool leather jacket. I don't want to say that this was the kind of person Shawn was—because he was so many different kinds of person—but at least a few of them were fashion victims.

I stopped him mid-sentence and told him that a friend of mine had just come in and I had to go say hello. Kate was in another room, but I could see her down a straight hallway. I walked right down the middle, breaking up everyone's conversations and trying not to knock over paintings and end-tables. I kept apolo-

gizing to people I bumped into. I was heading toward someone I hadn't seen in seven years. It was forever, and I had every reason to have forgotten her. But I hadn't, and I began to think why.

As I came into the room, I remembered about a dozen quick things about Kate Foley. This short-list scared me into the opposite corner. I remembered that Kate had started out wanting nothing to do with me. Then, suddenly and without any kind of fair warning, she began to pay attention to me. And then, with the dumbest amount of awkward propositioning, she stopped. I stood only a few feet from her, and I saw her clearly enough to know that this wasn't some stranger who just looked like a girl from seven years ago. I felt that familiar sense of panic. I wanted to be in Tibet, up on a mountain, praying with Buddhists, holding beads in my hands and wearing nothing under my ceremonial robes. I wanted that kind of ideal peace at this moment, when my memories were telling me to run away.

There was a girl right next to me who wasn't talking to anyone, so I introduced myself and turned my back to Kate. I needed more than a few seconds to think about what I was going to say. I shook her ringed hand in that half-flirtatious way that guys and girls shake hands, but this was completely instinctive. The plastic rings rubbed against my skin in a funny way, almost like a squeak. She had glasses and freckles and cute shoulders. We talked about Shawn just like I'd talked about Shawn to almost everyone in the house. He knew entire worlds of people. She went to school with him, and thought once that he was the cutest guy. What eventually turned her off was the realization that just about every girl thinks about Shawn in the same way at first. Still, the two of them work

together on art projects at the school where he taught, so they're the kind of friends where other colleagues would constantly wonder if they'll hook up. I gave the same kind of patronizing laugh that I had heard Kate give a moment before.

I looked over at Kate and wondered if this was all a big joke on me. Shawn had orchestrated this, and was doing this to test me. I'd figure out how he found her later. He was waiting for me to slip and make a mistake so some drunk ex-boyfriend would steer the crowd in my direction, and then it would all crash down like mid-afternoon hail from the west. The party would become a lesson in humiliation, culminating in my being thrown into the dirty pile of old snow on the front lawn. Almost every time I came to one of these kinds of parties, I envisioned something like this happening to me.

Suddenly, I felt like I absolutely had to leave. I excused myself from the conversation, walked away, and stuck my hands in my jacket pockets. I had no drink. I didn't fidget. I kept my head down and headed for the door. It wasn't that far. I just had to get by some people who wouldn't suspect a thing, because I didn't know any of them. I didn't have to grab my coat because it was still on my shoulders. If Shawn saw me, I would say I was just going for air or a smoke or something. I had been trying to quit, and he knew this, so maybe going out for air was a better excuse. Sure, it was probably eleven below, but it was crowded and he'd buy it because I'd made him believe that I'm shy. I could be out in the midnight winter chill and home within an hour. It would have been safe, and I would have been warm, and no Chinook would have hit me.

I was looking at my feet and trying to shuffle out of the room when Shawn grabbed my arm. “What’s up, buddy?” he asked. I smiled at him, one of those sober smiles that he did not appreciate. He didn’t show any awareness of my intentions of leaving, and it was too late for an excuse now. His eyes caught mine and I’d go where he took me. He said, “There’s someone I want you to meet.” Shawn held my arm and led me to the room I was last in and trying hardest to avoid.

She was turned away from us, but I could picture all the things that might happen once she turned around and saw us. I tugged away, and looked at him somewhat pleadingly. I knew what he was doing, and I’d seen him do this with impunity to others. He kept his grip on my bicep, because nothing was going to stop him from introducing us.

Shawn tapped Kate’s shoulder and she turned around. She had a drink in her hand, and she smiled at him. She didn’t even look at me, even though I was staring at her intently.

“Kate!” he exclaimed, forcing me to remember this name. “How are you doing tonight? Enjoying yourself?”

“Of course,” she said, the bottle of beer barely escaping her lips long enough for her to speak. “What’s up?”

Shawn, as only he could, said, “I’m making introductions. I’m going around and introducing people to other people, you know, people who don’t know each other and probably won’t get along.”

“Are you trying to start a fight?” She asked, and they both laughed.

“That’s exactly what I’m trying to do,” he said, too cocky for most people’s tastes, but not either of ours. “So, Kate Foley, this

is Scott Clarkson. Scott, this is the lovely Kate.”

She extended her hand and I gave her mine. “I’m sorry, Scott, but I don’t think I’m going to fight you tonight.”

She shook back as if she had no damned clue who I was.

“Well, you never know,” I said. “Fights tend to break out at the most inopportune moments.”

“Exactly,” she pointed out. “But in the middle of a party where the host is trying to pick fights to entertain himself, it wouldn’t be exceptionally inopportune, would it?”

Shawn looked pleased. He half-giggled, for Christ’s sake, and then he gave me that look he always gives when he runs off earlier than I want him to. He proceeded to take the arm of the girl that Kate was talking to and undoubtedly went to introduce her to some other crazy stranger who enjoys a misunderstood relationship with our host.

“You never used to talk like that,” I said.

Kate turned her head and looked at me cock-eyed. She took a swig of her beer and shrugged her shoulders. “Did we go out sometime or something?”

This only made me more uncomfortable.

“Yes, we did,” I said. Her face paled and she looked guilty. She let out a breath that let me know she was trying to remember me. She must have been scanning every face of every guy she’d ever come across, but still couldn’t quite place me. She didn’t remember my name. She didn’t remember anything. And her face, with all this written on it, instantly made me feel bad.

“No, we didn’t.” I smiled, alleviating the tension and returning us to proper strangers.

Her next breath expressed relief. “Okay,” she said. Another swig, and she punched my shoulder. “Don’t fuck with me like that, man.”

“I couldn’t help myself,” I said. “I pick fights, sometimes. You know how it is.”

“What do you mean?” She asked me, and it was at that moment I knew she had only changed in minor little ways. Years ago, when I had really wanted to know Kate, she asked me this exact same question. She was sitting across from me and I was doing my best to ignore the world. I was writing a story that I was, at the time, taking very seriously. Out of nowhere, she asked me what I was doing. When I told her I was writing a story, she asked me what I meant, as if she’d never seen anyone write a story in her life.

“Leaving,” I said. “I’ve got to go.”

“Why?” She asked. “Aren’t you having a good time?”

God, that question. It was miles away from the original context. It was in that moment that Kate showed me some truth. She was still the same girl that broke my heart. She looked different now, but the energy, the snappy lines and the wilder hair were all just extra.

I just looked at my shoes and said, “I don’t know,” which was exactly how I replied to this question seven years ago. I sort of laughed, but what else could I say?

I had killed the conversation with this, and Kate looked like she was reaching for small talk. Like everyone else at this party, she found it in him. “So, how do you know Shawn?”

I laughed and shrugged my shoulders. She tilted her head

again and smiled, looking torn; perhaps only half-interested in the answer and half-hoping it would always stay a mystery.

“How do *you* know Shawn?” I asked.

“It was a dare,” she said. “He was sitting across from this group of girls I used to hang out with, and one of them dared me to talk to him.”

“To talk to him, or to ask him out?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“I know those kind of dares,” I said. Someone once dared me to ask this girl out in junior high. He had no idea that it would be my first date, and I’d remember the entire debacle for that lone fact. I’d later forget all about my second date, with a less pretty but more interesting girl, because of this, and it would make me kind of angry.

“You know,” she said, changing the subject back to us. “You do look sort of familiar. Are you in film?”

“Not at the moment,” I said, wholly lying. It was lame and one of those bohemian answers that only frustrates people, but I wanted to keep this going long enough to give her a fighting chance of actually remembering. “You’ve probably seen me on the train or somewhere like that.”

“Maybe,” she said, as if it were the climatic line in an alternate universe Archie comic.

Her eyes were flirting. Was she drunk? She was smiling at me, not drinking too quickly. She wasn’t looking around for anything to use as an escape. Kate, for maybe the fourth or fifth time in my life, was actually paying close attention to me. The most recent time flashed in my head, but only for a moment. I was doing

my best to keep this new moment with Kate completely independent of outside influence.

Two thoughts brushed over my mind. The first thought was that this party and Kate were a dream. Not in a dream in the actual sense of the word; I knew I was awake and that it was happening. It was a dream in the way that talking to a stranger on a bus is, or dialling the wrong number and finding yourself in a conversation is, or buying groceries and hearing a pop song that you used to love is. It's real, but it isn't your real life. It's outside somehow, and it can't interfere with the regular goings-on. There are spiritual boundaries and rules for these sorts of things.

The other thought was that I should ask for her number and scratch it into my arm so that I wouldn't go seven more years without seeing her again.

"So are you studying anything right now?" she asked.

"I'm not at school, if that's what you mean," I said.

"I think that's what I meant," she said, "but now that you mention it, I'm not so sure."

"What do you mean?" I asked, trying the question out for myself.

"Well," she said, ready to get into a debate she'd clearly had before. "I guess I asked because, hey, that's what we do, right? What's your name? What school do you go to? Survey questions, you know? But the way you answered, it did something. Like, it flipped a switch or something. It made me think, why did I ask you that at all? What am I doing? What am I doing here, even?"

If it were anyone else, I have been surprised that she'd stumble over her own logic. She was only self-aware when she stum-

bled. I always wondered what her friends thought of her clumsy forays into questioning the entire universe.

“I’m sure you didn’t mean any harm by it,” I said, getting back on track about the whole thing. “You’re going to think I’m so boring. Um, I write up these weather reports.”

“You’re a meteorologist?”

This is how the conversation about my job always goes. “No, I work at a magazine; a weather magazine. I take charts and figures and reports and I turn them into something like an essay so that professors and, I guess, meteorologists can do research.”

“Cool,” she said, in the same inflection that I probably used when I said ‘cool’ to the guy with the Nick Cave obsession a few minutes ago.

I had a line in the back pocket of my mind that usually saved the conversation from falling into the “what was your major” realm. I said, “I’m working on a novel.”

“Really?” I nodded. “What’s the plot? You got a hero?”

“I guess he’s me, so far. Though I don’t know. It might be a girl.”

“You see yourself as a girl?”

“No, but I thought it might be more interesting to write a book using a girl’s perspective. I always thought so before, but now I’m not sure.”

“Before what?”

“Before now, actually. Right now.”

“Why’s that?”

“You,” I said. “You’re showing me that I have no idea and never did about any woman I’ve ever met.”

Kate choked on her drink. It was only for a second, but it was the first time we'd broken eye contact since we began. "You're definitely a writer."

"Trying to be," I said.

"Well, whatever. Scott, right? That's what Shawn said your name was?"

"Yeah," I said, knowing now that she was drunk and stumbling on something she wouldn't otherwise. She was great with names, with lyrics. It was one of those talents one has, but that one has no practical application. I don't remember Kate ever really liking music.

She surprised me again. "I want to go home," she said. She was drunk, but still in enough control to know she couldn't drive home. "And my boyfriend doesn't seem to be anywhere anymore. I mean, we came together, but who knows. He always leaves early when he's not having any fun, you know?"

"How could you not have fun here?" I said, "I mean, a party where nobody knows anyone but Shawn. Where's the lack of fun, right?"

She had a boyfriend. There was something else new.

She laughed again, "Exactly. It's a blast, and I just can't stand all the excitement. It's stunning, really. Would you mind?" She raised her arm, elbow-first to me.

"Not at all," I said, knowing the question before she could say it.

"I'd really appreciate it. This city, you know? It's dangerous at night."

"All cities are," I said.

Looking at this so far, it was clear that Kate didn't remember me at all. Still, there must have been something, because we had been together for three minutes and she was asking me to escort her home. There must have been a register in her head of people who were, among other things, completely safe.

"I'm not far from here. Won't put you out of your way much, and you can come back and soak in all the fun if you so desire." She put down her drink on a table, and wobbled only slightly. Kate rambled like an honest girl from Alberta, the kind that could keep you up on the phone until four in the morning in a conversation neither of you remember until two years down the road.

"Sure, no problem," I said. I followed her to the closet. She grabbed her coat.

"Nice jacket," She said. I'd had it on the whole time.

"Thanks." I grabbed the door. I'd wanted to say goodbye to Shawn, but he wouldn't have any right to care if anything happened anyway. Not that I was really thinking about it at this point. It wasn't completely out of the question to hook up with someone you fell in love with years ago on some random drunken excursion. It didn't matter if she had a boyfriend, or that she was half-unconscious and completely trusting her well-being to a veritable stranger who had somehow gained trustworthy status because he's claiming to be working on a novel. But nothing was going to happen because nothing between Kate and me was ever supposed to happen.

I would saunter back and tell Shawn everything while helping him clean up, because doing so always purged me and brought us closer as friends. I wouldn't tell him about Kate in any context he

didn't already know, because lying was something that needed to be done every now and then to save ourselves from referring to each other in terms not altogether comforting or complimentary.

We stepped out into the biting January weather. It wasn't snowing. In fact, there was no snow in the sky and nothing had come in the past few days, so what was on the ground had long been properly shovelled, sectioned off, and used primarily as a place to pick up and drop young children. There were lots of dog prints showing where they'd leapt. It was a well-lived snowfall and one of the few things in the city that reminded me of home. As we walked I mentioned this, and she agreed.

"Wait," she said, "What nice, tiny little hovel of a town did you say you were from?"

"Strathmore," I said, knowing exactly what was coming.

"Oh my God, me too! What school did you go to? We're about the same age, right?"

I stopped, "You really don't remember me, do you?"

"I thought you said you were joking. Shit, you weren't joking?" She was worried that she might actually have to feel bad if I turned out to be a past lover, but she had no responsibility to feel anything if I was nobody.

"The name Scott Clarkson means nothing to you, does it?" It was fair for me to say that, at least. I wouldn't push it. I'd do my best not to be completely pathetic and mean.

The thing was, she looked like she was really trying. She looked up and I could tell she was reaching deep into her memory. She spun around. She held my shoulders and looked deep into my eyes. God, she was pretty. I'd never seen her hair down

before; it was long, wavy and nice. Everything about her was so nice, even her drunkenness.

“I’m sorry, Scott. I don’t remember you.”

I’d like to say that this pierced me in some way, but it was exactly what I would have expected, and knowing I was right all along actually hurt more.

“That’s okay,” I said. “What’s important is that we get you home safe. Are you far from here?”

She pointed, and said, “That way, just another block or so. I live with my boyfriend. But it’s my place.” My time with Kate hadn’t been nearly long enough. From the second I saw her, I’d had a thousand questions to ask but no pretext to inquire. They didn’t matter now. If she didn’t remember me, if I had absolutely no place in her memory, then any question, anything at all, was pointless. I was a stranger and had no right to ask her how she was, what she had been doing all these years, why she broke my heart, why I have no confidence when it comes to women, how to solve that, if she’d love me now, if she’d give up everything to run rampant with me through every romantic setting we could muster, or if everything was exactly as it was supposed to be. She’d had such a great idea of most of that before. I wanted to know what her thoughts on these things were now. But I had no foothold and was lost in a sea of anonymity.

“This is me,” she said, finally stopping at a homely-looking porch. There were leaves where the snow had rescinded.

And that was it. She said thank you, gave me a wave, and went inside. I was so afraid I’d never see her again that I quivered. It might have just been the cold, but I couldn’t be sure.

The walk back to Shawn's was fast. It didn't give me enough time to work up a proper sadness. What did I care, anyway? This was happenstance. It was nothing material in the giant schism of whatever it was I was doing here.

As I came in, nobody turned around to say hi. There was a group of people all leaving together, and my arrival did nothing to evoke a reaction. It was a quarter to three. Between now and sunrise everyone would eventually bustle out.

I needed Shawn like I needed warm blankets all over. I had this idea once —after having moved out of my parents' place, of course— that I'd cover every single wall of whatever kind of house I lived in with blankets. They would be so warm that when I needed to, I could throw myself into any of them and be instantly comforted. The walls wouldn't hurt because the blankets would be so thick. They would catch me, like giant furry Muppets, whose only purpose was to keep me warm, alive and comforted. I needed Shawn on every wall. I wanted to throw myself at him and tell him this stupid little fantasy of mine and have him laugh it off as childish. Shawn never really thought highly about any of my ideas, but this never bothered me. I wasn't here to seek acceptance or mutual respect. I scanned the first floor and the living room and the kitchen, but I couldn't find him.

Shawn had just moved here from his last place, where we first met, and I had no idea how massive it was until I found myself searching all these hallways. He couldn't afford a place like this by himself. He lived with other people but I had no idea how many. It had to be seven, at least. This place was a mansion. It was only two floors and from the front looked like any other flat, but it ran

so damn deep. I found the kitchen, but its only occupants were a couple, younger than me, and better looking, knocking fridge magnets onto the ground with their clumsy kissing. The dining room was empty. The living room had half a dozen people inside, but none that I recognized.

A girl was sitting on the stairs, reading a book. She read with a focus so unnatural to the setting that I wondered if she was an illusion. I passed beyond her, and at the top of the stairs I saw some doors on both sides of the hallway. I envisioned people running from one door to another with no justification for coming out of a door they hadn't entered. This was my first time here. I had no idea where Shawn's room was. He hadn't had a chance to give me the grand tour. I was home visiting my parents when he moved, and I couldn't help. It was getting late; there were only a handful of people left downstairs. All the doors were closed. This was hopeless. Even if I found the right door on the first try, Mark might be in there and I was not prepared to handle anything that serious or that heartbreaking tonight. This was already a night to forget.

I sat on the stairs next to the girl. She was dressed like someone who lived here. She had giant, comfortable slippers on. She wore a robe, but the black t-shirt and jeans she had underneath were hardly hidden. She looked like she was waiting for everyone to leave.

"Hey," she said. "I'm Alice."

"Scott," I said. "I'm Shawn's friend. What are you reading?"

"It's for class, but I kind of like it," She said. "And isn't everyone one of Shawn's friends?"

I ignored her comment about Shawn and focused on the book. “Whose book?” I asked. I studied quite a bit of poetry in school and wondered if she could’ve been in one of my classes.

“Anne Sexton,” she said. “You know her?”

I nodded. I liked her. Generally, I was a fan of artists whose negative aspects became the inspiration for their art. It worked with my spectrum, verified it in every way. And I kind of liked the idea that if things ever got really bad for me, then at least my writing would soar.

“Can I see it?” I asked. She handed me the book, and I flipped through until I found my favourite.

“You like that one most?” She asked.

I nodded. I skimmed parts of it, lines that I liked:

For My Lover, Returning To His Wife

Lets face it, I have been momentary—

This is not an experiment. She is all harmony—

I give you back your heart—

I give you permission—

She is the sum of yourself and your dream—

She is solid—

As for me, I am watercolour—

I wash off—

“Which one do you like best?” I asked. She shrugged.

“Probably the one about Snow White,” she said. I smiled. She was studying in the middle of the night in the twilight of a housewarming party. She did not have time to care about favourites. I

had never studied this late. Maybe that was why my grades stunk.

I heard a door open upstairs and footsteps slowly heading our way. Shawn's house creaked like something haunted, and I wondered how anyone could have any privacy here.

"Hey man," I heard from behind and above. Shawn. Sanctuary. "I looked around for you a little while ago. I thought you left?"

"I came back," I said.

Shawn looked tired, spent. This was the end of the party, even for the host. I wasn't tired, though. Perhaps it was the walk in the fresh air. Or perhaps it was the strange combination of seeing a former crush in the house of my current one. The whole strangeness of tonight had been a little dizzying.

He came and sat down above Alice and me, and now there was no room to pass on the stairs. People would have to climb over us or find another way.

"Did I introduce you two?" He asked.

"Did you want us to fight?" Alice asked, without looking away from the poetry.

"If you want," he said, "but do it down there. You can't really get into a good scrap halfway up a staircase." Alice laughed a bit, but I just looked at Shawn pleadingly. I needed him now. I needed his abilities to fix anything that was ever wrong. He noticed the look I was giving him, and signalled me to follow him upstairs. I waved goodbye to Alice. She waved back, glancing upwards for just a second.

Shawn's room was off-white and all I could think of was how much he must hate it.

"You're probably itching to paint this room," I said.

“It’s hideous, isn’t it? Next week, how about it? You and me?”

“You’re on,” I said, plopping down on his bed. It wasn’t made. It smelled of new sex, but there was nobody else there. Perhaps they’d left before I returned? Perhaps they were hiding behind the curtains? Nothing would have surprised me. I hoped I wasn’t breaking anybody’s ribs by sitting on the mattress.

“Mark?” I suggested, motioning to the strewn pillows.

He nodded, looking both ashamed and affirming, “But not since before the party.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” I said, and the look I gave him let him know which was the correct path to take.

“So,” he said, “Where did you go? You were gone just long enough for everyone to get sick of the place.”

“I walked Kate home,” I said.

“Where was her boyfriend?” Shawn placed a hand on the terrible paint and looked like he was trying to remember the lyrics to an old favourite. “She has one, doesn’t she?”

“Somewhere, apparently,” I said. I felt at least partial satisfaction that absence was Kate’s boyfriend’s only known characteristic. He existed, but nowhere tangible and always on the move.

Shawn knew immediately. “You have a thing for her.”

I tried to dodge it: “I barely know her.” But he was unrelenting.

“And somebody blonde, too. Well, you are full of surprises.”

“It’s not that she’s blonde.”

“Still,” he said, “It’s clear.”

“Nothing’s clear. Not about this one.”

“You walked a girl with a perfectly good boyfriend home from the party. Or, at least the boyfriend she claims to have.” Shawn lay

down on the bed next to me, stretching out like a cat. It was then I realized he was barefoot. “You think she lied about the boyfriend? Maybe to you, but why me?”

“I used to know her,” I said, ending his lame conspiracy. “Back in high school.”

“Fuck her?” he asked, hoisting himself up onto his elbows, enjoying every second he got to be frank as much as possible.

“Barely spoke. We were on opposite ends of the spectrum.”

“Ah, the spectrum,” he said, realizing we’d had this discussion before.

I ignored him. “We did speak a few times though, and when we did it was like...I don’t know, like she was interested or something. It was like I represented something curious to her, unique, you know? Maybe she was like that with everyone.”

“That sort of blows your whole spectrum philosophy out the window then, doesn’t it? I mean, how could she be interested in you if she was on one end and you were on the other?”

“Exactly,” I blurted. “If she was interested in me then my theory was completely off. But that’s the thing. Even back then, when she talked to me, I felt it was throwing off every idea I’d ever had about that spectrum. She did that. Kate threw everything off.”

“That’s very sweet,” he said, cracking his neck and falling back down. “I hope I find someone who changes my view of the world.”

I stood, knowing what was coming. “Shawn, don’t.”

“Oh wait...” he said.

“Don’t.”

“...I already did.”

Whenever he brought it up, I cringed. I got that he was trying to be romantic, but very few of his come-ons rang true with his charm. Lots of people thought that Shawn was charming, but only people who'd slept with him recognized his insecurity and sleaze. Still, the uneasy feeling of having this twisted compliment flow through me was nothing like his guilt trips. Still, I knew the amount it hurt me meant nothing compared to how much he was hurting himself.

"Mark still doesn't know," I retorted, knowing it would piss him off but unable to leave it alone. "Does he?"

"Don't be cute," he said.

"This is getting fucking stupid," I said, knowing now that the subject was cracked open, realizing that since he took the first shot that everything was fair. "If you tell him, we can stop fucking around and..."

"And what," he said. "Start fucking around?"

"Without the around," I said. "Maybe."

Shawn knew that telling Mark the truth would crush him and end whatever it was they had going. It wasn't love, no matter what either of them would say about it. It couldn't be love with me in the picture.

"Just for the record," I said. "I'd like to be without the around for once with you."

Shawn looked like a boy about to break apart, held together only by his ego and his ability to grab unforeseen toeholds. I knew that face and knew that nothing would happen with this subject tonight. It was still at last in Shawn's house. Everyone else had begun their journey home or fallen asleep elsewhere. I could feel

that Shawn and I were the only two left awake.

It was at this time I lay down beside him and nestled my head under his arm. The bed creaked slightly under our weight, and by the silence I finally knew that no one was hiding underneath. He returned my little cuddle and before too long our breathing synced. We both knew that what we were doing was wrong but weren't bothered by it. I could smell Mark, but it was just a ghost of a presence and didn't matter. Shawn's smell, although present, was more subtle; I focused on him.

Being held by Shawn reminded me that I was okay and safe and fine, regardless of what happened.

"Good housewarming," I told him, whispering next to him, barely awake. He shifted to face me, and I could feel his breath just above my mouth.

"Thanks," he said. His eyes were half open and his gaze fixed on me through the slivers.

"Mark went home, right?" I asked in a last gasp of jealousy.

"What a stupid question," he whispered. He was asleep within seconds.

I drifted in and out, thinking about Mark and Shawn and myself, finally settling on a renewed image of Kate. First, I thought that how she looked tonight was a figure completely separate from my previous memories. Her dress and her hair and that little bit of extra weight tricked me into thinking I'd found a different person altogether, but her retorts brought me back to my reality. Her interest in me was just as much of a hallucination as it always had been. Surely she was just drunk, eager to have anyone remotely available help her home. I was harmless and it was precisely that

simple. In her eyes I was something to fall back on if the situation required it. In her eyes, I was little.

Still, I couldn't help but dwell on the precious seconds I had with her, both now and before. Shawn's arms held me tight, as though by unconscious instinct. I thought back to how Kate walked around in high school. She always wore black athletic shorts or pants and grey t-shirts or sweaters. Her ponytail was a fixture, as permanent as her eyes or lips. She only wore running shoes, and walked with an even pace, strutted without vanity. Her backpack was from a camping store, and that implied trips up north or out west, weekends with friends, drinking, fucking; experiences in which I hadn't yet had my turn. I didn't invest as much time memorizing her friends, but they were similar, though never quite as perfect. From an outsider's view, Kate was always happy.

I slept beside Shawn until morning. We ate grapefruit for breakfast while he complained about his hangover, and talked about the coming few days. It was one of those mornings that I felt married to him, and I treasured the chance to be involved in his daily routine. The house was sweaty with slowly stretching bodies and left-over liquor. Sometime after breakfast and before Mark came back to grab his forgotten wallet, I found an exit in the excuse of having to finish a column I hadn't yet begun. Shawn only hugged me goodbye, but I knew it was because of the audience that knew only half the truth.

Outside, the day was bright and the sunshine hit me through cracks in tree branches and rooftop spaces. This morning, I was happy to be walking down city streets, to have a convoluted social

life, to finally be away from my parents. I had seen Kate Foley in the present tense, and it didn't break me in any way. Cars steadily drove through the streets across which I jaywalked, and the people of this bright city were out enjoying the hint of warmth in winter. The air and the people I passed had a briskness to them, and I felt separate, like a tourist without his camera. The lack of sleep gave me a distance from those shopping or chatting on patios, and a refreshed eye for every reason I came here in the first place.

2

In the short amount of time I had after returning home from Shawn's party, but before I finished writing my article, the phone interrupted everything. It was Shawn and he had news.

"Guess who gave me a call?" he said, playfully. I could see him lying upside down on his couch, wrapping the cord around his fingers, managing to also fill out a personality quiz in some pulp magazine. It was something I'd seen Veronica from the Archie comics do, and for some reason I associated her personality with Shawn's whenever I could.

"Was it Jesus?" I asked.

"You're horrible," he said, pausing for drama that didn't need to be there. "It was Kate. She called me not long after you left. Apparently, something jogged her memory and she feels absolutely horrible about how she treated you last night."

"It's not that she was rude or anything." She hadn't been. She had been perfect.

“Well, whatever,” he said, eager to get his point across. “The point is, she’s sorry and wants to get together.”

“With you? I don’t think you’re her type.” I said, turning a possibly horrible situation into a joke so I wouldn’t freak the fuck out.

“Actually, she said she wanted to take me to Edmonton and turn me straight,” he said, trying his best to add value to my sad joke. “No, stupid. She wants to see you. Tonight, if it’s possible.”

“It’s possible,” I said.

“I know it is. You weren’t seeing me tonight, so I knew you’d be free.”

“I have other friends,” I said, half-lying.

“Well, I would certainly hope so,” he said, “I’d hate to be your only avenue of getting out of that hen’s den you call an apartment.”

“Henhouse,”

“What?”

“It’s called a henhouse. You’ve never been to a farm, have you?”

He snickered in his particular scheming way. “Anyways, be there at seven. I set it all up for you.”

“Where?” I asked. “At her place?”

“If you can remember where it is.”

“It’s just a few blocks from yours,” I said. “Do you want me to come by beforehand?”

“Sure,” he said, “I’d like to see you. Mark’s coming over a little after that, but the timing should work out just fine.” I could see him jotting all of this down in his planner. He was meticulous with his organization. It was why he was able to get away with all the things he did.

“Okay, I’ll be there,” I said, and hung up. She remembered and knew who I was, and this might be the worst possible thing to happen to me.

I had no idea what to wear. This was a stupid conundrum, but really, I had to think about it for a few minutes. I was seeing two very different people from very different lives. I’d have to wear something other than that jacket, but what?

Last night was perfect. I saw her, and there was no registration. That worked with the spectrum. She wasn’t supposed to remember who I was. The whole evening fit, right down to her slightly using me. And then this! Now she knows who I am? She remembers me as I was in high school? And worse, she wants to see me again? This could only lead to horrible things. She’s going to invite me to a party where everyone’s only purpose is to point and laugh.

I figured out that I would wear a plain brown t-shirt and jeans, not because it was easy, but because I’d been given a chance to make a new first-second impression. I’d wear nice shoes, though.

I also had to consider Shawn’s encouragement for this to take place. He had sensed that I had feelings for Kate last night as we lay in bed. Although he had little right to be jealous of anyone I was interested in, it seemed strange that he would aid in any romantic endeavour not including himself. Perhaps this was his way of showing that he was casual, and that until he sorted himself out with Mark I was just a proximity infatuation, or at best a future investment put on hold by an insecure situation. But perhaps he didn’t read into Kate as much as I did, and to be fair and honest I would need to put it all out on the table and make sure

that he was okay with this happening, if anything at all were to happen.

I held both of my jackets up to the window, trying to breathe the outside air into this decision. She saw me last night in my leather jacket, but she was drunk, so I could wear it twice and, oh, hell, who am I kidding? I wear this damn thing everywhere.

I knew the fantasy of this entire situation was approaching ridiculous heights. Shawn knew of Kate's boyfriend, knew she was currently off limits, and knew that I had no chance with those odds. He knew that Kate was no threat to whatever plans he might have for me. Surely he thought that he would break up with Mark, and hopefully soon, either by telling him the truth about me or because of some other circumstance that would prompt serious relationship discussions. Shawn had to have it in his head to set everything right, and this situation with Kate didn't swerve his intentions from the desire to finally be with me. His casual behaviour towards her meant nothing, just as her sincere behaviour around me meant nothing.

I walked down to the subway, catching people's eyes as they looked through me, trying to see if anyone was impressed with my choices. I expected and noticed nothing.

It occurred to me not too long ago that I thought about Shawn more than he thought about me, and that I put more effort into thinking about our situation than he did. Perhaps I did have a chance with Kate and this thing with Shawn would end up being only a fling with someone unavailable; maybe Kate and I were the real thing and were meant to be. Still, it was best to expect nothing more than an afternoon of humiliation and heartbreak. I

would leave scarred, crying, and seeking comfort in sad pop songs while not answering my phone.

All afternoon, I rehearsed what to say to Shawn when I saw him, but when I knocked on his door and he hugged me and offered me a beer, I'd half forgotten my spiel. He'd cleaned up from the morning and was wearing a blue tshirt and that grey ball cap that drove me crazy. We clinked bottles and sat down on his couch; he reminded me about painting his place next week.

"How about Monday?" he asked. We both agreed that Monday was best.

"What colour?" I asked.

"I'm thinking fluorescent green."

"Or perhaps a lovely shade of puce."

"I think instead of painting it I'll just put up a bunch of pictures of Tom Cruise."

I said, "If you do, I'm not helping."

"You don't like the Cruise?"

"Didn't I ever tell you? I'm always the third opinion on Tom Cruise."

Shawn looked confused, as if he'd never seen this scenario take place.

"The Tom Cruise scenario goes like this," I explained. "There are two girls talking about absolutely nothing. They're anywhere, at any time. The conversation shifts slowly to movies and naturally movie hunks, and Tom Cruise comes up. The first girl says how much she just adores him, and the second girl agrees, although her descriptions of what she'd do to him are always slightly more perverse than the first girl's, because girl number two is always

hornier than girl number one. Then, another girl comes over and those first two ask her her thoughts on the matter. But in a shocking twist and in total rebellion to the clearly established preference, the third girl chokes on whatever she's drinking and says 'Are you kidding? Tom Cruise is such a fucking creep.'

"You know," he said, "I think I've been there before."

"Everyone has," I said. "And I'm guessing you're the second girl."

"You probably don't want to hear what I'd do to that man," he said, swigging his beer.

"So what did you mean by 'her memory got jogged?'" I asked, regaining my footing and moving ahead to the truth about Kate.

Shawn didn't know, however, or he knew and was holding back secrets. "She didn't tell me," he said. "She just said that it hit her sometime after you dropped her off. She said she felt horrible about not remembering, and wanted to make things right."

"Things were right," I said. "Everything was exactly as it should have been."

Shawn gave me a look. It spelled out that he had no idea what I was talking about.

"She was a lot more popular than I was in high school," I continued. "Actually, I wasn't very popular at all. I only had a couple of friends, and none of them were qualified to be valedictorian, or even spend more than a few hours out in the sun. But you know that part. Kate didn't notice me most of the time, you know? I saw her every day, and I'm sure that sometimes, she saw me too. Most of the time, there was this wall between us that I didn't have the courage or nerve to break through, and eventually I forgot to try."

“So what are you getting at?” he asked.

I said, “So last night, when she didn’t remember me, it made all the sense in the world. Who would remember someone they barely had any contact with?”

I guess at that point Shawn picked up on the subtleties in my vocabulary because he began questioning them. “What do you mean about the ‘barely?’”

“Huh?” I muttered, not terribly eager to get into the whole thing, but at the same time needing to know he was okay with any prospective scenario.

“You said ‘barely’ and ‘most of the time.’ You’re playing coy, Scotty boy. Did you two ever...?”

“No,” I interrupted. “I mean, I wanted to, but I was too afraid. Like I said, there was this barrier, this wall that I...”

“I know that one,” he said, brazen and clearly over whatever pitfall he’d encountered. “It’s that desire to go get something you completely fear, because it might screw up every belief you’ve ever had about anything.”

“Yeah, that’s sort of exactly it.”

The spectrum of popularity and happiness was a theory I scrambled together in high school as a way to get over the sense that the universe was terribly unfair. My idea was that the more beautiful or smart or popular someone was, the less happy they’d be. The uglier, dumber, and more lonely people were compromised by having an excessive amount of happiness. Even if they were depressed, they’d still be generally happier than that smart, pretty girl or boy you might come to be jealous of. To me, this levelled everything out. By judging people not just on their exterior

features but also on their thoughts and feelings, everyone was measured against a ruler of equality.

“The reason I say ‘most of the time,’” I continued, “Was because there were a few moments in our last year that Kate and I shared. It almost ruined everything I had ever believed in. It almost ruined my spectrum.”

“What kind of moments?” he asked.

I should have had to stretch my imagination to fill in the hazy memories, but like anything to do with Kate, they were fresh and complete from too many painful nights spent awake thinking about how things always go wrong. “I was in a class with her, and that one particular day she was sitting right beside me. We were writing a test, and I finished early. I reached into my bag and got out my notebook where I wrote my ideas and poems and short stories and began jotting some things down. I was halfway through a story about an actor moonlighting as a boxer, and I was concentrating on his taxing relationship with his father. I was getting really into it, too. I’d probably written three pages in twenty minutes. Ideas were coming left and right. It was probably the most inspiring writing moment I’d experienced so far, but then she ruined it by saying hello.”

Shawn nodded, “I suppose it would be strange for someone who’d never spoken to you before to start all of a sudden.”

“And it sort of pissed me off in hindsight, because it would take me months to finish that damn story and I think I could have put it all down that afternoon if nobody had got in my way. At that moment though, all I could think was that Kate Foley acknowledged my presence and that there was no God. My idea of the

world was in place, and my lowly position in it was set and I was happy to know where I stood in relation to everyone else. My philosophy put everyone on an equal footing, I found so much comfort in that. But Kate, man, for a time there she forced me to question the nature of the entire universe. After I said ‘hey’ back, she went one further and asked me what I was writing. I explained it to her, you know, in that way you’d tell someone the description of your job if you had a feeling that they just didn’t give a shit. I downplayed everything and made myself sound like I wasn’t doing anything important. I used to be kind of shy.”

“You’re still shy,” he said. “But that’s half of what makes you so cute.”

“What’s the other half?” I asked, deviating from my point.

“Well, that would be your fleeting attempts to make everything whole.”

I had to kiss him at that moment. That line was one of the things that made me forgive Shawn for being a cheating asshole. I was a sucker, and I knew it, but I couldn’t help myself. He always seemed to know just what to say.

When I stopped and smiled, he looked instantly worried.

“What is it?” I asked.

“So what’s going to happen tonight between you and her?” he asked, trying the role of bullet to the chest in a dark murder mystery.

I didn’t know what he meant. I thought back to my previous neurotic ideas about Kate, but couldn’t see how they applied to Shawn in any way.

“Remember what I asked you last night?” he reminded me. “I asked you if you liked her.”

“You didn’t ask, Shawn. You insinuated.”

“Was I wrong?” he asked. I couldn’t tell if he was hopeful.

I kissed him again, only this time he didn’t reciprocate. Shawn was nervous, maybe jealous, and I didn’t want him to feel that way about me. I wanted security and would say anything.

“There’s nostalgia there,” I went on, finding a valid point in my otherwise meandering bullshit. “Have you ever wanted to view parts of your life through the eyes of your old friends, or even just innocent spectators? I’ve always loved the idea of that. You get your eyes, sure, but what about everyone else’s? What do they see? Do I look different to them? Do I sound different? I’m a little curious, I guess, to know what she thought of the whole thing now that it’s all over.”

“The whole thing between you and her?” he asked, not sure what I meant.

“Sure, that,” I said, “but more than just that month when we were sort of friends. I want to know what she thought of our high school, and if she keeps in touch with her old friends. You know, things like that. I think it would give me a different outlook on what happened.”

“You mean between you and her?” he asked, now clearly being an ass.

“Stop it,” I said. “Nothing happened between you and her. I mean, her and me. Kate and me.”

“You promise?” he asked.

“What do I promise?” I had no idea what he was talking about.

Shawn spoke more languages than I did. Every word he spoke was aimed at uncloaking whatever I was hiding. Sadly, Shawn knew everything there was to know about me and whatever I meant to conceal. I made myself completely open to him. More and more, I wished he would do the same.

“Just promise that you’re not trying to screw this up,” he said, his hand flirting with mine on the couch. I was surrounded by his sense of ideas and style, but I still held small things over him, if only because I was something he couldn’t resist.

“You’re the one with the boyfriend,” I said.

Shawn laughed and said, “You can be such a bitch sometimes.”

“You can match me,” I said, not letting win.

“You have to get going,” he said, mockingly tapping my watch.

“Well, I wouldn’t want to ruin your date.”

First Shawn feigned anger, then disgust, and finally pangs of guilt. Then he showed me the door. He knew I had the upper hand in any dirty tiffs we would have so long as I was the honest one and he wasn’t. He kept me away from Mark so that I would never get the chance to come forward. I didn’t see the point to this game, but knew that if I became too honest, I’d ruin my chances of being with him. I felt trapped and typical in the same way the lesser half in an undisclosed number of other relationships with dishonest origins had to have felt. Still, I was in his house and he could kick me out if he liked. His shift in attitude, from completely open to defensive and ready-to-attack, had forced me to alter my plans for him. If he was going to be jealous of some old crush I’d had, then I wasn’t going to stop him.

I said, just before leaving and without a kiss goodbye: “I honestly don’t know what to expect when I get there.”

It felt satisfying to be catty with Shawn. It was the first hint of something more between us than just easy attraction. We’d almost had a fight there, cut short by Shawn’s restraint. He had to realize it too. From what little he told me of their deal, Mark and Shawn fought incessantly, and I felt jealous of that particular aspect of their relationship the most. A fight always signified the presence of additional emotions at play. It represented our feelings for each other being strong enough to make it worthwhile to quarrel.

The same leather jacket Kate saw me in the night before kept me as warm as possible. Carly, my girlfriend from high school, called me “Linus” the winter we hooked up because of that thing, but it didn’t stop her from stealing it at every opportunity.

I don’t know what made me think of Carly as I headed down to Kate’s place. Perhaps it was the warmth in the wind. Carly loved this strange time of year. She thought of it as this beautiful little vacation in hell.

Kate’s townhouse was painted a wretched shade of rain-torn white and more vines sprouted around it than other houses in the area. It was about a quarter of the size of Shawn’s house. A yellow house was to the left and a pink house to the right. These colours were a strange characteristic of Calgarian suburbs that I’d never seen in the few other places I’d visited. It was like this in most places here. The houses surrounding Shawn’s, however, were the same tan colour as his. I didn’t notice this last night, but she had a small dead garden, tucked away on the left side of her door, with

plant markers in the hard dirt probably appearing there by accident. I knocked on the door, and at that moment a bird flew down to the garden and stayed there with its little head tilted to the side, trying to fight the beginning gust of wind.

Kate opened the door and smiled, but looked exhausted. “Scott,” she said. “I’m so sorry. I must have come off as the biggest bitch in the whole world last night.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “And you were fine.”

“I’m sure I wasn’t, but whatever. Come in.” She took my coat and led me through. Her place was nicer than I’d imagined. She was such a jock in high school that I would have assumed hardwood flooring, but instead there was beige carpeting. On the walls I expected beer mirrors, but several framed paintings and old photographs hung sporadically along the hallway. She led me to her living room and we sat on her aged-green sofa. Perhaps it was her parents’ or a garage-sale bargain. It smelled old, and it didn’t fit with the rest of the place. The coffee table looked much newer; but even it was dusty. It was obvious that somebody in here had serious money.

“I’ve been cleaning all day,” she told me, “but this place is so huge that it takes a weekend. I haven’t even begun the upstairs yet.”

“I can see that,” I said. “This is the upstairs, then?”

“I know,” she said, feigning defeat. “I’m horrible at the domestic thing. If all of us didn’t rotate on the cleaning, and if it was all up to me, we’d be living under a growing mountain of garbage. You remember that Simpsons episode where...” she stopped, and placed her hands on her hips, as if examining me again for the first time.

“What?” I asked.

“You really put yourself together,” she said, looking me over. I felt immediately intimidated, but she went on. “I mean, I looked at your yearbook photo today, and I have to say that you have come a long way. I mean, I didn’t remember you last night, but afterwards, when it hit me that I’d been talking like an ass to someone too polite to let me have it, I had to see you again. I had to make sure it was you.”

“Is this why you invited me? To check me out?”

“Sort of,” she said, but then broke into that laughter she had.

I went with it. “So, how many goats am I worth?”

She put her finger to her lips and gave me a more thorough up and down. “You look taller than before, but maybe you’re just not hunching. I like your hair more now that you look like you’re seeing a barber. Your clothes are definitely more fashionable, even if you’re still wearing that same jacket. I’d go with twenty.”

“Sorry,” I said. “Daddy says if I can’t net thirty goats I have to join the convent.”

“Damn,” she said, “And just when I was thinking I could score some free labour.”

“Well, you could certainly use some,” I said, wiping my finger across the table to pick up the dust. As I pushed through, I hit a stack of books. I recognized the one on top immediately.

“So you have been looking through the yearbook,” I said.

“There’s this one picture of you in there, where you’re standing alone against some lockers, looking away. That’s the shot that did it for me, when I knew that it was you I’d talked to last night.”

I flipped to the picture, about halfway through. My right hand was clutching my left elbow, and I stared pitifully at something off in the distance. Wesley had taken it. She was the yearbook editor, so she would always be around trying to snapshot group photos with everyone smiling, everyone loving high school so much. Sometimes, though, she'd find people alone and shoot them differently. My picture showed longing, she told me afterwards, but she never explained what she meant. I didn't long for anything then. At that time, all I really cared about was smoking.

"You just happened to be looking through your yearbook and recognized me?"

She sat a little closer and looked at my picture. "Okay, little confession. Ray remembered you. I came in last night, and he was home already."

"Ray's the boyfriend?" I asked.

"Yeah. We had a fight last night, because he bailed and went home without saying goodbye. He didn't even give a good excuse, you know? It was really rude and put me in this awful mood all night. During the fight, though, I mentioned you, because you were there to take me home when he wasn't, and out of nowhere he blurts out 'that punk from high school?' Can you believe that?"

"Wait," I said, "Ray went to school with us, too?"

"Ray Salinger," she said, and then we mouthed, "Captain of the football team" together, both sarcastic. Of course she was dating Ray. Everything about that made sense.

"Anyways," she continued. "After he went to bed I rummaged through my old boxes and found our graduating yearbook, there we were, wearing bad clothes and looking all cheery. I mean,

everyone except you. You just looked like you wanted to get out of there.” She looked up at me. “Kind of like you do now. Is something wrong?”

I thought I might start crying. I wanted to be home and hold on to something soft and warm and inanimate. “Nothing,” I said, “This is just coming as sort of a shock, you know?”

“What, someone from high school remembering who you are? It was only a few years ago.”

“I suppose it’s good,” I said, retracting my point. I didn’t want to insult her by telling her about just how right it was that she didn’t remember me the night before. “I’m sorry,” I said, “Can I use your washroom for a second?”

She pointed me down the hall and I shut the door, sat on the can and held my face in my hands. This should have been nostalgic and nice, but instead it was terrifying. Suddenly, I was glad to have known Kate for only a few scattered hours in high school. If she had ever invited me to her house or out on a date, it would have been so much worse.

“Sorry,” I said, returning after a minute, “Asthma, I think.”

“That’s right, you had asthma,” she said. “See? It’s all slowly coming back.”

While in the bathroom, I figured I could handle this situation in two ways. I could act as if I was still interested in Kate Foley, still woozy when thinking about how beyond me she was, or I could treat this as an occurrence outside of my reality. It didn’t take long to figure out which option to choose. My life revolved around Shawn/was directed by Shawn. Kate was someone I once fell for in impossible conditions, but she was now someone with the in-

sight to perhaps let me in on some things I'd done wrong. The situation was not really so much bigger than I felt I could handle; I didn't need a panic attack. I looked at my face in the mirror, and watched my eyes scanning the reflection. And then I went back.

"What was high school like for you?" I asked, "You know, now that it's all over and you can look back at all of it."

She closed the yearbook and got up from the couch. "Come with me," she said. She stepped into her brown winter boots and threw on a coat. She was much faster than I was. I left with my shoes untied.

Down the street was this tiny convenience store selling dirty magazines and chewing gum. She asked, "Do you remember those old Fizz candies?"

"Yeah, I loved those."

"Me too, they were my favourite." She knelt down by the candy wall and picked up a string of them. "Remember when you were ten and they used to stick in your teeth and it would take half the afternoon to suck them clean? I loved doing that so much."

She bought the string. It cost a quarter, which seemed to be about the exact same amount I paid for them as a kid. We left the store and she handed me the string after popping one herself.

"See, the sucking part is the same as I remember," she said, exaggerating the whole process more so than any commercial actress. "And when it breaks and all the fizz comes out, that's still really cool."

I popped the candy in my mouth and chomped down immediately in order to catch up with Kate.

“But then, when all the liquid is gone and all there is left are the tiny little rock parts, they get stuck in your teeth.”

“Yeah,” I said, feeling something surely not intended by whatever factory produced this stuff. “Jesus, that’s annoying.”

“I know!” she said, excited to share her annoyance. “You can’t get it out of your teeth right away. It’ll still take all day, and now that we’re older, it’s so fucking awful. How did we ever like this feeling, right?”

I thought for a second about prying two fingers into my molars and scratching at the stuck debris, but that that would be way too gross for Kate to watch.

“This,” she said, opening her mouth wide to sell the effect, “Is how I feel about high school.

“See, I’m surprised,” I said. “From where I stood, you were having a great time. You were always laughing or gossiping, always focused on whatever it was you were doing at that moment.”

“Well, sure,” she said, tossing the wrapper into the trash. “While I was there, it was my whole world. I did everything I could do. But you didn’t ask me if I liked high school while I was in high school. Opinions change. I mean, look at you. You probably hated the whole institution, but now you’re curious about it, wondering if I had just as awful a time as you did. That would be a nice picture, right? Acting happy but really decomposing inside? I liked it while I was there, but what else do you do? I didn’t want to spend four years wishing I was somewhere else. I mean, I’m sure you regret doing that, right?”

“I’m not sure my opinion has changed all that much,” I said.

“Well,” she said, “at least one of us is full of surprises.”

“This shit is still really annoying. Is there nothing we can do to get it out?”

Kate smiled. “There’s only one way,” she said. “We have to get really drunk.”

This made absolutely no sense to me. I said, “I’m never going to get your way of thinking, am I?”

“Just shut up, will you?” Kate took hold of my hand and didn’t let go for a few minutes. I was surprised until I realized that this is what she’d done with her girlfriends. Still, this was only the second time we’d ever touched.

The first time, she hugged me in the hallway of our high school, beside my locker. I’d stopped her to wish her a happy birthday. She smiled, but there was more to her smile than just appreciation. It felt like disclosed information. Other than that first time she’d talked to me, every other meeting had been semi-private. On her birthday, she looked around quickly, and I later assumed she must have been checking to see if any of her friends had seen her with me. This cloaked me in shameful self-consciousness which would take years to shed. After she’d looked around, I grabbed my backpack from the floor and took out the story I’d been writing; the one she had interrupted. It was done, and at the time I thought I’d finished it because of her. It was signed ‘For Kate’ on the front cover of all the loose-leaf. It had cost six dollars to do the binding at Kinko’s, but it was always about the thought, anyway. She read the signature and smiled a little longer than she was used to, and then hugged me. I remembered everything about it. Kate didn’t throw herself at me like some girls did when they hugged boys. She took a step forward, placed her arms

around my shoulders slowly, and held me really tight. I didn't know what to do, so I kept my hands at my sides. I tried to hug back, but before I could completely do it, she was finished. "Thank you for this," she said. I don't know if she ever read it, but I hope she didn't.

She let go of my hand after a moment, and then we walked three blocks in a direction Shawn had never taken.

"The thing is," she said, trying to sound like she'd been talking about her life this whole time, when really for the last three blocks we agreed that at some point in time we should trick Shawn into chewing some Fizz. "I wanted to ask you the same thing. I mean, I haven't really talked to anyone I went to high school with but Ray in almost a year, and even then it was just at parties and when I ran into them at the pet store."

"All your friends work at a pet store?"

"Just Rachel," she said. I didn't recall Rachel. "But there is that curiosity you get, right? When you experience all the same things with a bunch of people, you have to know how everyone else felt?"

"Like when we got math tests back and, even if we didn't know the person next to us, we'd ask what they got, right?"

"Yeah," she said, "Same thing, just on a bigger level. Man, all of a sudden you've got me wondering if everyone hated it as much as you did."

"In general, I've found that nobody admits to liking high school after the fact," I said. "It's like a social standard, like pretending that we care about movie stars. I mean, unless they're the ones planning the reunion, I can't imagine a single person who lives in that kind of past."

She asked, “Celebrities are planning our reunion?”

“No, I’m not sure who’ll be doing it, but they’ve got to be .”
And then, quickly, “You’re not planning the reunion, are you?”

She said, trying her best to pose like a pirate, “I was thinking about buying a parrot and an eye patch and telling everyone I spent every year since graduation thieving the high seas.”

“Only if it doesn’t get in the way of me convincing everyone that this is, in fact,” I paused, thinking of a way to play along. I shaped my hands into a gun and pointed at her freckles, “A stickup.”

And right then she laughed like someone who’d just fallen head over heels, which was the way she’d always laughed. I remembered that about her best, and I loved that bit of her. I’ve found that not every girl can fall down laughing at some stupid joke and make it sexy. Kate’s laugh never wavered. She must have spent thirty years in some past life as a lounge singer. She had it down.

“Come on,” she said, “My favourite place in the world to get completely fucked up is right over here.

The bar was a converted corner-house. As we came up to it, I noticed the forgotten backyard, and the white plaster adorning the side. It had one of those flat roofs, and two unassuming doors at the top of a few steps. It was called “Pete’s,” possibly the most harmless name a place like this could have. Inside, the bar was littered with foreign beer posters and TSN on the TV above the booze. She’d taken me to a sports bar. It’s not that I hated them, but I never liked to surround myself with a male crowd dedicated to spending every Friday night indulging a passion towards sport

scores. The Hip were playing, and as soon as we entered, Kate shook her fist in the air and yelled “Thirty eight years old, never kissed a girl!” The bartender gave her a wave. The few people over in the corner paid no attention to her.

“My dad made me listen to these guys for ten years straight,” she said, sitting down in a booth and talking with her hands as if she were explaining some great war. “Whenever we’d get into his Thunderbird, they’d be cranked the whole way. He always told me that each piece of music is written for a certain place, a certain time, and a certain person. He said The Hip wrote their songs for when he and I were in the car going one-forty down the highway.” She saw the bartender coming around and hollered, “Two Koka-nee’s, please.”

About a minute later she asked, “You like Kokanee, right?”

“Sure,” I said. “Whatever’s good.”

“So what do you do?” she asked. I could have sworn she’d asked that same question the night before.

“I write a column for a weather magazine,” I said.

“Is that fun for you?” she asked. I didn’t know if she heard me, or if any answer I gave would have been reciprocated. She always had a gun loaded up with responses before I even had a chance to speak.

“It gets me by. It’s interesting doing it in Calgary, because the weather is kind of insane here. I’m also working on a novel.” This was half true. I’d been working on a novel for about two years. It was nowhere near done and I had no intention of finishing it anytime soon.

“So you actually ended up being a writer? That’s fucking

crazy.” Our beer arrived and she clinked hers with mine. “Congratulations. That’s great.”

“Thank you,” I said. She was right. The beer helped with the shit stuck in my teeth. “It’s hardly earning me Pulitzers. I’m a total nobody right now.”

“Nobody is anybody at first, right? What are you working on now?” she asked.

“I’ve got an interview with some guy who tracks tornados in two weeks.”

“That’s kind of cool. Like that movie…”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’ll come up at some point.”

“So you think it’ll be a fun interview?”

“Um, I don’t know. I guess. I mean, it’ll be as fun as you’d figure talking to a guy about the language of tornados would be.”

“The language of tornadoes?” she said, mocking me.

“Yeah,” I shrugged it off. “The language of tornadoes. It’s this book he published. That’s why we’re interviewing him. I read it, and it was kind of philosophical. The idea was that everything’s got a language if you get deep enough into it.”

“Huh. Interesting, ” she said, likely regretting having gone down this road in the first place.

“Yeah, it’s like when two totally different civilizations come across one another, like the Indians and the Europeans. They couldn’t understand anything of what the other was saying, but there were some simple actions each understood, denoting universally shared ideas or vocabulary, you know: hunger, food, bed, water, women, king, queen, love, gold. They’d take that and eventually go deeper, and that’s when they’d kidnap a tribe member

and teach him English or French or Spanish, take him back and figure the rest of the stuff out.”

“So this book he wrote is like his version of the kidnapped little indian?”

“I guess so,” I said, realizing how ridiculous that sounded. “Still, I guess it’s better than telemarketing or standing outside a flower shop in a bear costume.”

“I think you’d definitely look cute in a bear costume,” she said. I couldn’t begin to fathom what she meant by that.

“Anyways,” I said. “It pays the cable bill, though I don’t ever seem to watch TV.”

“You’re not missing anything on TV,” she said. “My mother is addicted to all those reality shows. I swear — that’s half the reason I moved out.”

“The other half was Ray?” I asked, finally getting to the issue foremost on my mind. I wasn’t here to tell her stories about my life. I wanted to dig through hers.

“It was his idea, he’ll always say. But I totally used him to get out of there. It’s the whole ideal of stability. But lately, I don’t know; I’m not comfortable talking about it, really.”

“Well, what do you do?” I steered the conversation off Ray, finding more comfortable ground. I was doing my best not to piss her off now that we were enjoying a fun conversation settled in the comfortable present. “I’m assuming you don’t interpret foreign languages or work in telemarketing.”

“Nope,” she said, as if I’d offered her gum.

“Nope what?” I asked.

“I’m not telling you what I do,” she said.

“Why not?”

“Because I can’t tell you,” she said. “It’s just something that people have to accept about me.” She quickly added, “It’s nothing lewd. I’m not a prostitute or a loan shark. It’s legal and some people have no problem with it, but it’s just something I can’t get into, all right?”

I knew I wanted to say something in the vein of “that’s ridiculous” or accuse her of working at Wal-Mart, but she told me I had to accept this about her. If there was something to accept, it meant I had to accept her, and this offered more than a good chance that she wanted to see me again. “Sure,” I said, “If it means that much to you.”

“Good, I’m glad you understand that secrets are important.”

“What happened to honesty being the best policy?” I asked.

Kate leaned in and said something so very characteristic to herself, “Clichés are only true because everyone believes in them.”

Afterwards, when she was home and I was walking the streets alone at one in the morning, I felt like sprinting down the middle of the road. She had a boyfriend and I practically did as well, but we were both in strange situations; I was pretty much in love, and this fuelled a run all the way to the C-train. I jumped every third stair and when I got to the top and grabbed my ticket, the train came, wind hitting me hard. I was almost knocked over, but I kept my footing.

On the LRT, the girl across from me had her headphones on and the music was cranked loud enough for half the car to hear. It was just Kate and me; every beat was clear. It was a pop song that was big when I was in junior high. I remembered it from my

first dance, when I kissed Jordan, my first crush, in front of everybody. Instead of thinking about how wet that kiss was, I remembered about a point earlier tonight when Kate told me that music was made for people in specific times and places. I was simultaneously flushed with nostalgia while yearning to be part of the future in which Kate seemed to exist.

3

Carly, the high-school sweetheart I took to the prom, rode a motorcycle. It was a classic number her dad left behind when he split town, and she was riding it the second she got her license. By the time I came around, it was an extension of her; part of her personality. I never really understood why someone would own a bike in a city with so much gravel on the roads and with an average snowfall of a hundred-and-twenty-five centimetres a year. But some of the best high-school moments were when our leather jackets were pressed up against each other as we roared down some black street with the autumn wind rewarding us for getting through the day. There was always this little spot between her helmet and jacket I could kiss and would; I'd kiss it every chance I got. She usually shrugged me off: "I'm driving here," she'd say,

but I knew she loved it.

I'd been in a fair number of relationships for a guy on my side of the spectrum. My father always told me that I needed to find a better group of losers to hang out with, seeing as I'd always date odd girls and hang out with guys my dad found unsettling in ways he would never explain. My father and I didn't talk too much, but something about what he said stuck with me. As much as I liked my friends in high school, I knew they weren't exactly the best choice, and while I was really no different, there always happened to be this wall that kept me from being too intimate with anyone I didn't sleep with.

Anyways, the thing with Carly was that I was in love with her and she was in love with me. We were going to get married and live somewhere together and be really fucking happy. Neither of us had a clue as to what to do with our lives, but we had at least one constant thing that grounded us into thinking about thinking about the future in a way that was more playful than responsible. Maybe we'd go to college or maybe we'd open up a diner in Alaska and serve the folks up there. It was a nice image, solidified in drifting snow squalls and in our bonding together against this world. It's not even that we hated the world, really. We just liked each other more outside of it.

Carly introduced me to every rock band I love. She showed me that greater thinking happened at four in the morning than at any other time of day. I drank my first beer with her, three blocks away from her place in an abandoned house the cops never seemed to pay attention to. I'd be such a fucking mess right now

without Carly; before her, I didn't think I could make a living writing anything. She taught me to stop chewing my nails. It was one of those formative relationships: she remoulded me into something so much better than I was before.

*

It was two weeks later; Kate finally called. After the first few days had gone by, I had convinced myself that our meeting was a fluke, that all she'd wanted was a trip down memory lane; perhaps something more sinister. I went to work on the LRT and I told some people there that I'd caught up with an old friend, and I helped Shawn paint his room. Well, re-apply paint, really. All that arguing about what to do, and finally he just decided to paint it the same damn colour. I lived completely ordinarily, almost oblivious to any crazy ideas about Kate.

I could tell she was crying, but at the same time trying to hold it back as much as she could. I asked her the obvious: "What's wrong?"

"He fucking left me. That fucking prick." She embellished the Fs with spit and contempt. She sounded like she had a lisp. I could tell she was pacing around.

"When?" I asked.

"This morning," she said. "I wake up alone in our bed, and when I come downstairs he's packing a bag. I ask him where he's going. He dodges the subject. I follow him around, and he tries to avoid all my questions. He heads for the door, and I block him. Finally, he breaks down and says that he's been seeing this girl. Some fucking girl. Can you believe that?"

I was crushed right along with her. Everything she said broke my heart.

I couldn't help but envision the dumbest guy in the world as she kept going: "He's been seeing her for like, a year, for fuck-sakes, and she was out in his car, waiting to take him up to her cabin where I'm sure they fucked whenever I thought he was off doing business trips. Jesus Christ. I am so fucking angry right now. I trusted him with everything."

Immediately, I thought: he knows what she does for a living.

For a second, Kate sounded like she had more to say, but she just fell apart mid-breath. I held the phone close and tried to hold her up with imaginative will. Any remnants of the Kate Foley living in my memories were shattered now. Kate would have never let a guy walk over her like that. She'd never fall to the floor because the tears came too fast and too hard. The Kate I thought I knew was brutally strong, even if I had her completely made up.

It was around this time that I began to wonder how much about Kate Foley I really did know. She never talked about her parents or life outside school. I didn't know if she had any siblings, or if she had asthma like me, or if she'd had an imaginary friend. It was so hard to picture her as a kid. All I had seen was this woman so capable of affecting my stupid, self-centred feelings. And then I saw it. Something about the way she was breathing into the phone told me she was close to the ground. She'd collapsed, but kept hold of the phone. Finally, I said, "I'll be right over."

Kate took a couple of breaths to slow down, and said "Thank you," in a mothy, desperate way that really meant she needed me.

Finally, when she needed me, everything was in my way. I couldn't find the sleeve in my jacket for my arm to go through. I couldn't find my keys. I couldn't tie my shoes right. I missed the train. Waiting for a train that comes every four minutes is so excruciating. All I wanted to do was run. For a moment, I considered outrunning the train.

When the train finally reached Kate's stop, I bolted out the doors and downstairs. It was seventeen below, but my focus kept me warm. I was so preoccupied that I almost missed the car in front of Shawn's house as I ran right by. But I didn't.

Mark's blue Caravan was parked on the asphalt driveway of my lovers' house. I couldn't help but stop for a second, immediately feeling sick. That particular car in that driveway meant that Shawn was with him; deceiving Mark and possibly me. I wavered between the two options, trying to decide which was true. Something about Shawn, perhaps his charm, forced me to think that it was simple cowardice, that he'd have loved nothing better than to dump that jerk and rush to my place. But it was four months since I met him and two and a half since we'd kissed, and there was Mark's stupid childless minivan parked right in front of me. The one time I met Mark was at a party very similar to the one where I met Kate, only it was in someone else's house and there was much more alcohol. It was a week after Shawn and I had kissed for the first time, and we'd gotten our signals crossed. When he saw me, he flinched. Shawn froze completely, as if fully aware of the fact that his world might come apart right then, in the middle of some guy's living room.

"I didn't think you were coming," he said, in the coldest tone,

and I immediately sensed that he was hiding something. Before he got another word in, this guy Mark, Mark with the minivan, came over to us, wrapped his thin arms around Shawn and kissed him in the way a teenaged girl would. Somewhere behind me, a beer bottle shattered into dozens of sharp pieces, and people jumped. Unable to say anything, I just turned and walked through the front door, cutting my foot open in the process. I limped home, sobbing. Shawn always added far too much drama to my life.

The only thing that kept me from crying was the cold; I kept running. I couldn't linger outside Shawn's house while his other boyfriend was there. What choices did I have? Causing a scene would jeopardize everything, even if this meant matching Shawn's flair for drama. I knocked on Kate's door, panting, doubled over. She answered, crying, though still standing tall. She bent over and touched her face to mine, smiling. We were both spent.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

"Are you OK?" I asked, and she grabbed me by the shoulders, hugging me very tight, I could barely breathe, but I felt I needed to be strong for her. I came to help; she drew strength from my will.

"I'm glad you're here," she said, holding me, holding back tears and keeping my shoulder dry for the time being. She let go and said, "Come in. I'm a fucking mess."

"It's okay," I said. "I understand, totally."

We sat down on her couch. The yearbook was still on the coffee table.

"So that was it?" I asked. "He just walked out?"

"Pretty much," she said. "He said that most of his stuff was

packed up, and he was sorry, fucking sorry that he couldn't explain it better, but he had to leave."

"Did you see this coming?"

"I mean, we'd been fighting for weeks now. He's been away more and more; I guess I know where now. He's been avoiding me. He's been eating at weird hours to make sure we never spend any actual time together awake. It's all so damn clear now. I'm such a goddamned idiot."

"You're not an idiot," I said, feeling like I was reading lines from a book. Everything I said was a cliché. "We all do this," I said. "We let ourselves believe in everything working perfectly, you know? We let ourselves fall in love. Even if all the signs are there that we maybe shouldn't."

"But it doesn't exist," she said. "It doesn't. It can't. I loved him so fucking much, and I thought he loved me. It doesn't exist. It's a fabrication we feed ourselves to feel better about giving everything we've got to a guy who sneaks behind your back and gets it on with some slut."

She got up off the couch and picked up the chair in the corner. She was stronger than I thought. The chair was huge and looked like it weighed sixty pounds, but she lifted it up to her waist, swivelling it. She let go in mid-turn, and the chair's bottom-right corner hit the wall. As it landed, I could hear the wood creak. It finally rested sideways, slightly more crooked than before. Kate moved closer, sliding her hand across the top. Then, in an act empty of any grace, she kicked the chair with everything she had, turning it into a wrecked heap of wood and upholstery.

"That was his, huh?"

“No,” she said. “We bought it together.” She looked around. “We bought all of this together. And while the logical side of my brain is telling me that the receipts are in my name and that means he doesn’t actually get to call shotgun on anything here, it was still an us thing.”

“So you’re going to kick every piece of furniture in here to death?”

“No,” she said. “Just that one. That one was his favourite.”

I smirked, supposing that was fair enough.

“You want to get out of here? I want to get out of here.” She tucked her hair behind her ears and grabbed her coat. She didn’t wait for me as she left, but I followed close.

With her arms crossed and her pace controlling mine down the increasingly dark and cold street, she asked me if I’d ever dumped a girl. I knew what she was doing and I didn’t like it. I didn’t come here to have her anger toward Ray transferred and flung at me. In these instances it was easy to hate every member of the opposite sex. I began to wonder why I came, but while worrying, I also answered her.

“The only time I’ve ever dumped a girl was in the fifth grade. Her name was Dorothy Myers, and she was my first girlfriend. We were together for six months, from September to February. I mean, we never went out on a date, unless you count watching cartoons together, and we never kissed, unless you count that time during her mom’s second wedding when she hugged me and kissed me on the cheek, but the whole thing was really innocent and nice. Then, around Valentine’s day, this other girl, Nikki-something-or-other, gave me a card a few days before the big day,

saying she wanted to be my valentine. This was the only time in my entire life that a girl just came up to me and told me she liked me, and it threw me off so much that I just went with it. The next day, I told Dorothy that I was with Nikki, and she cried, right there in the hallway before home room.”

“Wow,” she said, “You’re a real bastard.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I learned my lesson pretty quick. See, Nikki and I were together a total of two days. The day before Valentine’s Day, I saw her ask Dean Walters to be her valentine, leaving me valentine-less and single, officially, until grade 10.”

“I hope you learned your lesson,” she said, understanding that this was a child’s mistake but still digging at me for it. “Don’t drop one girl until you’ve picked up another.”

“Hey, sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean to bring that up.”

“But that’s it, right? That’s the only time?”

Carly dumped me in a way I found disparaging and sick. The entire affair reminded me of an angry mother punishing a child. I nodded, and Kate looked pleased. I think she was happy to be with a guy who appeared to have finished making the classic mistakes at this point.

And with that, I found that I did have it together well enough. I wasn’t with the boy, but I wasn’t sacrificing whatever happiness he must have with Mark in order to achieve my own. I was the nice guy. I knew the consequences of my naivety, knew that I needed to be strong alone before I could stand to be with others. Carly’s way of breaking up with me was cruel, but at the same time, it forced me to become comfortable in my own skin. I gained a few abilities that helped me through what I would face

now and later, standing here with what I couldn't even call an old friend.

"I mean, you think you figure out love," she began, talking mostly to herself. I knew that the best thing to do now was to simply let her talk, allow her this time to vent, and when it was over, say something sentimental and cheesy though ultimately comforting. Words like these never did a damn thing for me, but most people I've known ate them up with giant spoons of eager need.

The path we took held seemingly no purpose. I followed Kate without checking what road we happened to be on. We were in the suburbs, and the houses were old and painted funny colours like all the older neighbourhoods in Calgary. The streets wound in semi-circles, inviting people to wander the city. The sky was dark grey save the horizon. A ring of bright sunlight was visible from all directions between the mountains, plains, and the cloud that blanketed the city in a temporary warmth.

Kate appeared to be wandering, but only because there were no other options. She took her time, but when an intersection presented itself, she didn't think before choosing a path. All the while, I thought of Shawn and Mark, and she spoke of Ray and love. "You think you've got it. That's what it is, right? The house, the guy, and the job. It's all there, and it all fits in a package that defines you. It's as if I've shrunk and been placed into plastic boxes, to be sold in the children's department as a set. Collect the Kate. Collect the Ray. Collect the car and play, you know?"

I did understand, and I knew that what she was saying was coming from a deep place in the spot one keeps leftover epiphanies, but I couldn't fully focus on her. Seeing that van struck me

as something I needed to fantasize out of my mind. I thought that someday soon, a friend of Mark's would have to saunter in with him down a street he'd never seen before, listening to his laments about Shawn, just the way Kate did it with me. Mark would wonder if Shawn ever really loved him, and his friend would agree with everything and buy him a pitcher of his favourite beer. He would languish in his heartbreak until the enjoyment of his own sadness had worn off. And then he would move on.

Kate continued on without my constant agreeable nods. She exclaimed, "And my mother, Jesus, my mother loved him! She's going to be so heartbroken about this. I probably would be too if I wasn't so goddamn pissed off."

I hoped Mark would get over this terrible break up quickly, but I knew this was wishful thinking. I doubt he would take it lightly. Shawn would be leaving him for another guy. The fact that Shawn had found someone better was not the typical lame excuse for this kind of thing. It wasn't something benign; it would cause wounds.

"You get what I'm saying though, right?" Kate asked. Appearing to comprehend, I agreed without trying to interrupt. "The whole idea that there is one guy out there for you, well, I liked that idea. Maybe it's immature to believe in something most people don't, but hey, if it gets you by, why not? That's what it was for me. No matter what happened in my life, I thought I'd always have him, and that was really nice."

I found myself in a curious position. I empathized with Kate, and this was largely because I knew what it was like to be crushed. It was strange hearing very similar words from her. It was like

watching my heart break in someone else's body.

I thought about the violence that might happen in between Mark and me. I'd pictured the fight before, almost as if my jealousy toward him provoked an interpretative dance. In my fantasy fight, there was broken glass and fire. Shawn wasn't there, but it happened in his house. We'd break most of the objects in the living room, and knock down all the art. It would be the kind of fight where people cheered, only the house would be empty. I don't know how it ended, but it wasn't about winning. My fantasies that included Mark were only ever about confrontation.

Kate's tone seemed to match what was going on in my head. Her thoughts were also turning to more sinister ground. "I want to burn everything he owns," she said. "I want to torch it. You remember what I did with the chair back there? Triple that. I'll hire thugs to beat the piss out of his car. Oh, and the girl? She's dead meat. I'll obliterate everything she ever loved about life, man. I'll do it."

I knew it was pointless to actually pay attention to Kate right now. Her current hate of Ray overshadowed all the good things he probably had. These feelings just don't go away. She was full of fire. In two weeks, she'd feel differently. Two weeks is all it ever takes to turn your feelings right around, if you know how to do it right. Still, I knew what she was doing and why she was doing it, so I let her release it all into the open air.

"I just don't get how he could love me so much if he was capable of this particular sort of lying. I get the regular lying, you know? I get how someone can lie about how much they love

everything but country music, especially in this town. I get it if your hair colour is different and you say it's natural. I get how you can say that at one point, you were in a rock band that would have made it had the guitarist not been such a dick. All that stuff makes sense."

"It's all kind of forgivable in the end, right?" I said, knowing exactly what to say in the right moment. I always found it easy to ride someone else's rant. The difficult thing was always reigning it in.

"Exactly. But it's lying about your intentions, you know? I don't get that," Kate cried. She sat down, and dropped her head into her curled-up knees. I lowered myself to match. She wiped her eyes, striving to break through her blanketing sadness with as much anger and sweat as she could. She said, "That's when it becomes criminal. That's when there's no grace left in your love." Kate paused for a moment to let some air space out her words. "And when there's no grace, there's just need, and there's no beauty in need."

There was some beauty in need, but I was not going to bring this up. The sun was going down fast, but you couldn't say it was evening yet, and when you can't yet say it's evening, it's impossible to speak about evening things. Saying "I love you" at five thirty just doesn't have the same levity it does at nine-thirty, but even that pales to identical words in the morning. This was drunken, easy wisdom, but it seemed to work when applied to Shawn, to Kate, and ultimately to myself.

What I didn't get about both Kate and Mark was their apparent inability to discern what was going on in their relationships.

I could tell—at least I think I could tell—when Carly began cheating on me. I didn't do anything about it, but I felt this interfering presence and slowly realized that it was only a matter of time before I lost her. When you're in love with someone who's cheating on you, you've got to feel it, at least just a little bit. There has to be at least a minimal knowledge that something very wrong is happening, even if the particulars are muddy. It's in movies all the time, and if something's cliché enough to be in a movie, it has to be at least half-true. There's always that scene where the lovers are in bed together or eating breakfast, and you can tell something's off much sooner than they do. That's why I couldn't completely hate Mark. Like Kate, he's being victimized. He's about to lose someone he loves, and it's because of me, and there has to be a feeling of imbalance hinting to a looming, sad end.

"You're a good listener," she said, finally finished. I'd thought this would've gone on much longer. It certainly had when I did it.

"You're a good venter," I replied. "You're not torching his clothes. You're not slicing car tires. You're not shaving your head."

"Who shaves their head after someone dumps them?"

"Don't you remember Amanda Winters?" I said, knowing she wouldn't. Kate shook her head right on cue.

"Yeah, I didn't think you would. She mostly just smoked her way through high school. Anyways, Amanda went out with Josh Randle, this biker who rode around with Carly and me sometimes."

"Oh yeah," she said, "I remember you two were together throughout high school."

"Yeah, and Carly and Josh were friends, so this is how I know

Amanda,” I said, avoiding any conversation-starter about Carly. I wasn’t ready to deal with that particular skeleton-in-the-closet. “Josh and Amanda fought all the time, like, every single day. They’d fight, then go somewhere and make up. They were, you know, fight-fuckers.”

“Fight-fuckers?” she said, not quite getting the gist of it.

“Yeah, that’s what you call those thermal relationships, you know? One minute they’re ripping each other apart with words, and the next they’re tearing off their clothes. There’s never a boring moment around those relationships. These are the best kinds of relationships to watch.”

“I can’t imagine that working,” she said.

“Well, it’s like any kind of relationship. Some work out and some don’t.

“Did they?”

“No,” I said. “But people were surprised that they didn’t. Especially because when Josh eventually got fed up with her, he just took off without telling anybody where he was going.”

“He dropped out of school just because he didn’t want to see her anymore?”

“Nah,” I said. “He’d graduated like four years earlier. There was a huge age gap there, but the maturity level was the same. But yeah, he just split, and after it finally hit her that he wasn’t coming back, she disappeared for about a week too. When she came back, she had no hair and three new piercings.”

“I’m almost afraid to ask, but where were they?”

“One was in her tongue, and the other two were on her tits.”

“For real?” she asked, not fully believing me. “How do you

know?”

“She showed us,” I said.

“Us? How many people did she show her tits to?”

“Anyone who wanted to see,” I said. “She felt like it was a great revenge, because Josh had been this really protective boyfriend—who never let her hang out with any other guys unless he was around.”

It was silent for a minute, and that was nice. The sun was finally going down.

Then Kate said, “Are you suggesting I pierce my tits?”

“I’m not sure you’re the sort.” I wondered then what Mark would do to himself once everything unfolded and he was left with nothing. What section of his body would he disfigure?

“You’re right,” Kate said. “He’s not worth anything so drastic. The broken chair will have to symbolize all of my violence.”

As Kate and I sat on the grass, I fantasized about how Shawn would break up with Mark. He’d invite us both to his place and sit us down, laying out the whole truth. Mark would weep like a schoolgirl, Shawn and I would achieve an honest embrace amidst the tears. If this were a movie, it would happen like that.

In reality, I knew the whole situation would be a little more awkward. Mark would find out through cheaper means, then accuse Shawn of sleeping around, and make him promise to never see me again. What would Shawn do then? He wouldn’t promise anything. He wouldn’t apologize. He’d tell Mark to leave, and then Mark would leave.

“I’ve got to think,” she said. “about how much I really loved him. Was it just safety? Was it just that he was my first big rela-

tionship? Was I just afraid to branch out and try other things?”

At someone’s party in the near future, the three of us would be there; Shawn and I there together, Mark with someone unimportant. We’d bump into one another, and immediately, Mark would know how it was between us. He would see how happy Shawn and I were, concluding that it was best this way, that he never should have been with Shawn in the first place, that the best place for him to be was far away. We would be happy, and Mark would have the common sense to leave it be.

Kate was wearing a bracelet on I hadn’t really noticed until she started playing with it, passing it between her fingers, like a rosary.

“We’re pretty close to the river,” she said, getting up. “Come on, there’s this little spot I love going to.”

We dusted off our butts and I followed her. I thought about the things Mark would have to give back to Shawn. They’d have to spend an hour or two a week after their big fight exchanging everything they’d ever left with one another. Maybe it would be ugly enough to involve gifts: old Christmas cards, photographs. Nevertheless, wouldn’t it say so much if there were nothing? I knew they had been together a long time, but it was so telling to know that in all that time Shawn never felt comfortable enough to leave a comb or a CD, and because of that, he wouldn’t allow Mark to do the same. It would make the break-up so much smoother, sure, but what it really stood for was a stance against being together. It would be as if Shawn were simply waiting for someone better to come along.

“Ray gave this bracelet to me on our first-year anniversary,” Kate said. “Except that he didn’t actually present it to me or anything. It was waiting for me on my dresser. He couldn’t be there because he was out of town for an away game with another school. There was a little note: I love you. I guess it was nice, but the gesture itself was sort of empty. Like, he couldn’t skip one damned game to spend our one-year anniversary with me? That wasn’t important enough? It’s not like he was going to marry hockey or anything.”

“We’re you two getting married?” I asked.

“Maybe someday,” she said. “Not anytime soon. But, I don’t know, it was in the cards, I thought.”

We walked down a small path between two identical houses. The fence on both sides was wire and busted through, as if dogs had chewed it to escape. The path was narrow, and I had to walk behind her. When we reached the end, I saw a field that stretched forever. A row of energy towers stretched up above us, reaching as far as we could see in both directions. On the far side, near another set of trees hiding fences and suburbs, there was a drop. “There’s a small river right here,” she said.

The field was calm. It was this little patch of nature where nothing could be built. Because of the power lines, nobody could ever live here except squirrels.

“I don’t want you to think this is sad, because it’s actually really important to me.

Kate and I crossed the field and came to the river. The pond was only a few feet across, but it was oddly deep and swift for a half-frozen current. I couldn’t tell if it was coming from or was

going to the Elbow. “I’ve seen fish in here,” she told me, but she had to be lying. We sat down a few feet from the current. I began to play with the patchy, thawing grass. A Chinook was coming, and would be a a sad little tease for all of us, nature included. Kate kept twirling the bracelet between her fingers.

“Tell me something, Scott,” Kate smiled, hopeful, “Am I crazy? Am I overreacting?”

“Not even close,” I said. “I’ve seen a few crazy break-ups. Hell, I’ve been in a few. This is not one of them. At least, not on your end.”

Kate smiled like she used to, when you knew she only had happiness in there. Seeing her frustrated all night showed me that there was so much more to her, but I was happy to see her like I remembered her, even if her hair was longer and she wore skirts.

“I’m sorry if I was mean to you, ever,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I said, and it was. Back when it happened, I was a little hurt, but really, she wasn’t in any way responsible for my feelings.

Kate began to cry. “I won’t regret this, because I feel strongly about it. I can say that I’m sorry. I know that I hate him, now. I know that I can’t forgive him or let him back into my life; I can’t ever let him trick me into loving him, so I have to do something permanent. It was good for a while, and even if that was just in my head, it’s still real to me.”

As she went on about Ray, it all sounded a little rehearsed, as if she knew some bad break-up song really well and wanted to use the words for her big moment. While she went through it, I looked into the tiny river and pictured getting my own toothbrush

for Shawn's place, keeping a stick of deodorant there, maybe leaving an extra change of clothes. All this fantasizing about a great, brand-new relationship while Kate waxed on about hating her last. I didn't know which one of us was being more selfish.

"Eventually, it all means nothing," she continued. "It's all just dust. And this, this bracelet, it's the worst reminder. So here," she said, tossing the bracelet into the river. Instantly it was swept up, and in a few scant seconds it was gone. Ever since we'd got here, I'd been waiting for her to do that. Did she expect me to stop her? Ever since I first saw her playing with the thing, I knew the entire journey was meant to dispose of the ugly little chain. I just didn't expect it to be so pedestrian.

I wanted to tell Kate that in ninth grade, Linda Jacobson did the same thing to her boyfriends' necklace. I wasn't there back then, but she told me the day after. I thought it was a pretty immature thing to do then, and I felt the same now. But she was sad enough without the knowledge there was no originality in what she'd done.

The thing was, I imagined people like Kate were everywhere. The popular girl with the popular boyfriend blazed forward out of college, and a couple years later, she'd be miserable. Meanwhile, all the people who couldn't have cared less about popularity (or couldn't seemingly do anything about it) ended up striking it rich or having the time of their life when the pressure was off. The spectrum promised that everything would even out, and seeing Kate here all heartbroken in ways others had been before made me more comfortable in my own skin.

"It doesn't matter if you're right or wrong about any of this,

Kate,” I said. “Because you’re going to be right in your own mind no matter what you do. Even if other people think you’re wrong. But you know what? Other people’s opinions only get you in trouble.”

And then, Kate did the one thing that made her unique. At any moment, Kate had the power to destroy my entire reality, every philosophy I had ever thought of, and every truth I had believed in, Kate had the ability to crush my world, and when she did, all I could do was hold on to the tiny fragments as best as I could, hoping to have time to super-glue them back together.

Right at that moment, when Ray’s bracelet was lost in the water and Mark’s car still sat in Shawn’s driveway, Kate did the last thing I ever expected: she fucking kissed me. It was sudden, more akin to a snakebite than anything human. I recoiled, instinctively.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I just didn’t see that coming at all.”

“Don’t reject me,” she said, suddenly not sounding all that depressed. “Not right now. I need someone right now.”

I inched forward, knowing precisely what I was doing, what it meant, and who it would eventually hurt. Still, I couldn’t stop. It was everything one version of me had ever wanted. She touched my cheek, and we kissed along the river, below the over-reaching clouds. She was an inexperienced kisser; rough, trying to consume me rather than play the situation. Not a minute had gone by before she was on top of me, thrusting her tongue into my mouth. It hurt. It wasn’t special, but she was right: you don’t reject someone who’d just had her world shattered. Sometimes

you have to kiss people to let them know that everything is going to be all right.

After a few minutes, I calmed her down and she began kissing me with recovered feminine grace, though she still kissed like a rookie. I wanted to ask her if Ray was her first boyfriend, but her hair was all over my face and her lips were all over my lips and her breasts touched my chest and her hand was on my hand. I couldn't think of anything I didn't daydream about when I was eighteen.

4

This one night in July, back when I was with Carly, she drove twenty minutes west, outside of town on the Trans-Canada. She killed the power on her bike and we snuck into a wheat field. We had to walk sideways through the first section because the lanes were so thin, but when we got to a clearing in between lanes: she motioned me to lie down. I'd ask all these questions, bullshit teenager questions about life and the universe. She had answers to all of them.

To Carly, the sky was a prison door, keeping us all in. We were all here because at some point in time, each and every one of us had done something wrong somewhere else. Like in Dante's hell, she'd say, some of us suffered more than others, but we all hurt in some way. The point of life, according to Carly, was to snatch

the moments that didn't hurt and hold on to them no matter what the cost. To her, the stars were always teasing.

Carly would fill my head with all these negative ideas about the world and then light some wheat on fire. We would both stare silently into the crimson flames until she said, "See? Suffering. Even a kiss can hurt. Even sex can be deadly. Even paying your taxes can sponsor terrorism. All the great and wonderful feelings we're promised in this world can hurt us more than a shark or gun or tsunami." Even then, I knew these were messy philosophies, and if left unchecked would result in a bitter collapse of truth and beauty. I wondered if she said all that stuff so that kissing her would be the only thing that brought me any real joy.

Carly drifted off in a fog as I came back to the present. It was the next morning, and there was dried blood on my lips. I was in a bed I'd only met the night before. The sheets on top of me were purple, making it hard to figure out exactly where the bruises were. I had a cramp in my left leg. My chest felt collapsed. My wrists felt as if I'd written six novels. Even the roots of my hair hurt. As I opened my eyes, I winced. My wide-open eyes triggered each of these individual pains instantly.

Kate must have been downstairs or gone. It took me a minute to sit up, and a few more to get my pants on. I took the stairs one at a time, down to the living room with the busted chair and the yearbook on the table, through the narrow hallway to the kitchen, where I found Kate reading an old issue of Maxim.

"I got muffins," she said, smiling but not getting up. On the table, there was a box from the coffee shop. I reached in and grabbed something resembling a blueberry muffin, sitting down

on the other chair.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Better,” she said, as if her confidence had a voice of its own. And, as if her ego had its own voice, she asked, “How are *you* feeling?”

“It was the least I could do,” I said. “I mean, I think this makes me a pretty good friend. I haven’t held your hair while you puked after a keg party or anything.”

“I’ll have you know, I’ve never done a keg stand.” I laughed, but she was dead serious on this keg stand issue. She put her magazine down and bent over, her elbows touching her knees. “Don’t write this off as a bullet in the line of duty, punk. You wanted it just as much as I needed it.”

I didn’t know how to answer her, so I just tore some muffin off and chewed. The thing was, I was always conflicted when it came to the right way to go. It didn’t know whether to accept this recent stroke of luck and go with the girl I had pined over for a few weeks at the end of high school, or to see it as some kind of a sick test.

Sex changes things in ways it always shouldn’t. Last night, I felt so much longing for Shawn; he was never out of my head until Kate kissed me. This morning, all I could think about was this woman reading a boys’ magazine and eating cheap muffins in her pink housecoat and ponytail.

“You’ve finally got a ponytail,” I said. “That’s the first time I’ve seen you with one since high school. You remember back when that’s all you did with your hair?”

“Please don’t remind me,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “And don’t change the subject.”

“What were we talking about?”

“Let’s get this out in the open right away,” she said, kissing me quickly. We both tasted like blueberries. “I didn’t want you to leave today without me talking to you about this.”

“About what, Kate? Last night? I understand the whole thing. You don’t have to spell it out for me.”

“Not last night,” she said. “Tonight. I want you to stay tonight, too.”

This was the moment when it all changed between Kate and me. More importantly, though, it changed how I had to think about Shawn. Having re-met Kate, reminisced with her about our lives, consoled her failed relationship, and even having sex with her hadn’t change the course, really. In my head, I had cheated on Shawn with Kate, but all that it had done was make us even. I had still felt I belonged to him. But now I wasn’t so sure.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’ll be here tonight.”

Kate smiled and stood up. “I’ve got to run,” she said, “But I couldn’t go until I was sure.”

“Work?” I said.

“Something like that,” and she kissed me again.

“I don’t have an extra key,” she said, suggesting that I should leave with her. In a moment, I was standing on her doorstep kissing her goodbye, wishing her a good day, and watching her drive off. She offered me a ride to the LRT, but I told her I liked taking the long way.

I thought about finding a way around Shawn’s place. I really had nothing to do today other than start the newest column, but I didn’t want to see him. I could simply walk north a block and

turn back at the main street where the LRT was. Going south would be just as easy. But, as I walked towards his place, I neglected to turn. I didn't avoid his street. I was no longer just the guy Shawn was seeing. I was the guy who was seeing a girl living near Shawn. It was all in my mind, but as Kate said, why not?

Whatever I had been worrying about vanished the second I noticed that Mark's stupid van wasn't in the driveway. As soon as I was close enough to see its absence, I felt happier. Even after thinking through so many scenarios last night, I still had no practical idea as to how the confrontation would happen. But maybe it wouldn't happen at all, now that I was sort of with someone else. Maybe it would be fine.

In fact, no cars were in the driveway, which was strange for a house full of people in this city. Sometimes it seemed like everyone had one. I couldn't tell if there were any lights on, so it was possible that nothing would come from knocking. Still, I knew I had to. I had to be honest with Shawn if there was any chance of it working. I knew, as I had known since Carly, that it was always best not to make the same mistake twice in the same night. It took about a dozen knocks before Shawn came to the door. We hugged and I came in. He was wearing his blue robe; it made him look posh, even though he hadn't shaved in a few days and had bed-head. He was still sexy in a gruff way, and I followed him into his bedroom and plopped onto his bed.

"Good morning," he said, kissing me and touching my hair. "No gel today?" I shook my head. "Well, aren't we daring? I thought I told you that you always needed something in your hair?"

“You know, I’m not about to obey everything everyone tells me,” I said, trying my best to sound defiant.

“Sure,” he said, “Whatever you say. Still, your hair is a mess without something governing up there.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “And compared to yours? Can you really say anything?”

“The difference is that you’ve been out of the house and I haven’t. I’ve had no audience to make up for.”

“Like the guy walking his dogs down the road over there?”

he kissed me to get me to shut up. I rolled onto him and began kissing his neck when he pushed me off and said, “Shit. Shit! I forgot to call the model.”

“What model?”

“The guy who was supposed to come into the class today. It was cancelled, but I never called him.”

“Is he cute?”

As he rummaged through his clothes on the floor in search of his phone, he said, “And what does that have to do with anything?”

“If he his, maybe I’ll sit in on it,” I said. “Or sit on it.”

“Don’t be cute,” he said. “This is serious. If I don’t call him at least a few hours before the class, he’s going to be pissed, and we need him.” Shawn jumped up as he found the phone, dialling. I plopped down on his bed and waited.

“Hey, Damien? Yeah, sorry man. Fumigating. Yes. They’ve got to do it every now and then. Low ceilings, yes, exactly. Can you make it in next week though? Same time?”

It's not like Shawn's bed was ever really made, but it seemed to be more and more unmade after Mark every time I came over. The sheets felt rough and dirty, and none of the filth was mine to take credit for.

"Great. You're my favourite guy, Damien. You know it. Thanks," Shawn said, hanging up and tossing the phone back into the pile of clothes. He came back to the bed and kissed my nose. "So," he said. "What brings you to my neck of the woods?"

"Well, it's a really funny story, actually," I began, but right then Shawn's phone rang and he excused himself to the other side of the room to talk business with someone wanting to do something complicated and long-winded with a tuba.

Shawn usually wasn't this busy around me, but then again, when I'm around the lights are off and the moon is out. I didn't usually see him like this, with a phone glued to his ear, checking off errands.

In a few minutes he came back and said, "Sorry, that should be it for a while, anyway."

"It's no problem," I said, "I like seeing you work."

"You like seeing me work on you," he said, looking around, noticing how dirty the place was, and deciding that instead of sitting with me he should tidy up a little.

"That too," I said.

"What were you saying before? About why you were close to my place?"

He was only half-focusing on me, concentrating on cleaning.

"I'm sorry," I said, "Are you expecting company? I can come back some other time."

“No, just, I guess I feel like I need something to do, right now.”

“You were with him last night,” I said, playing with the bed sheet. He threw some clothes into the hamper halfway across the room, and tried not to look too guilty.

“Is that why you came?” he asked. “I told you before. You can’t push me.”

“No, that’s not it.” Maybe half of it was to do some fighting, even though I had a smaller box of ammunition than before. I was stupid, I knew it, and it had to be best to drop everything and not press on. “I’m sorry, I guess I just get jealous. Forget it.”

“I can’t forget it,” he said, sitting next to me and touching my shoulder. “I have to deal with this every time I see either of you, and it hurts. It hurts because I don’t know what to do. I thought I did, but I don’t. I’m sorry.”

He had never told me this before. I thought of collapsing, ripping off all my fingernails, exsanguinating. I put serious thought into how deep the glass would tear into my skin if I were to lunge at the second-story window. I had made horrible mistakes in life, and all of them had to do with trusting my own assumptions. They were never right.

Had he ever told me he preferred me? Had he told me he was leaving Mark? Had he told me anything I could use as a factual basis to our future? I wanted my eyeballs ripped from my sockets to prevent me having to see him in this moment of uncertainty. Having him right in front of me, inches from my nose, made uncertainty much more inescapable, and much more painful.

I used to think that all of my rage stayed inside, bubbling up to reach a point when I could not take anything else. I used to think I was one of those people who was like a giant black pot above an ancient fireplace, cooking stew. That stew was everything I harboured inside, feeling I was unable to communicate like a mature adult. I pictured an old hag there, stirring the stewing hatred until she lost control and it boiled over, covering the creaking wooden floors with a sticky mess that would take her all night to rub clean.

And while this was true to an extent, I knew my stew pot wasn't full. I had taken my entire relationship with Shawn in stride and never once showed a lack of trust in his word. Someone else had filled it once before, back in high school before I met Kate, and I could feel there was still plenty of room in me for understanding and compassion and understanding. That's why, when I began to scream and shout and run around Shawn's room, offering an ultimatum I never really considered giving, I realized I was not the kind of person that had a giant black pot inside them.

"I can't believe you don't know yet," I said, pacing in a fit. "How long have I been here, in your room? How many times have we been together, huh? How many times have we fucking made love, you asshole?"

"Calm down," he said, getting up and trying to hold me. I was having none of it. I continued to point and pace and wreck myself.

"Fuck, man. In my head I've been with you for months, and now you just lay it out there casually that you don't have a clue what you're doing? Like *I* knew what you were doing? I didn't know for five minutes what you were doing! You were with Mark, then I came along, and you liked me better, right? If you hadn't

liked me better, there was no fucking reason for you to waste your time with me. I thought you hadn't broken up with Mark yet because you lack fucking confidence or timing or strength or someone else to do it or what the fuck ever. I could never figure that out, before, but I guess now I know, right? You haven't broken up with him yet because you just don't want to. Is that about right?"

"It's not that simple," he said.

"Isn't it?" I asked. "I realize this whole thing is complicated. But my question is easy. Unless you really do know nothing at all, but then all those fucking brilliant things that come out of you are just recycled pieces of garbage you get from lectures. Is that how it is?"

"No, not exactly," he said, tugging at my shirt. "Let me explain."

"No," I screamed, shrugging him off. "I'm really getting sick of your bullshit explanations, Shawn. So I'm going to say something I should have made clear at the beginning. I really fucking like you, and I thought we could work, but there is this one thing about you I just can't stand. And you know who that is."

He paused, and then, as dramatically as he could, said, "I know who that is."

"Good," I said. "Then you know what I want."

I hadn't come to do this, but there it was, anyway. The culmination of my frustrations with this stupid boy.

Shawn stopped trying to hold me and sat down to think. He did this sometimes, when something heavy hit him like a truck. He would just shut down and withdraw for a while. It was something I really liked about him, because I knew he was really lis-

tening and would take as long as he needed to figure something out. He wouldn't ever give me the brush-off with anything this serious.

At that moment I felt terrible, knowing that I was putting this lover of mine in a difficult position, but it was absolutely the right thing to do. Facing the problem head-on, as fast as I could get it together enough to do so, always beat the idea of just letting things continue on as they were. Being with Kate the night before had given me a freedom I hadn't felt in forever, and with that came the strength to do the obvious and the righteous.

I looked at my shoes and my hair fell over my eyes, and no amount of sighing or shifting seemed to hasten the process. Shawn just sat there, almost motionless, for what seemed like forever. I went back and forth wondering if he was spinning bullshit or fighting the truth. But the truth was simple, wasn't it? Shouldn't it be?

Finally, I had to interrupt. "This should be an easy answer."

"Well," he muttered. "It isn't."

"Why the fuck not?" I screamed, not a foot away from him. "What kind of fucked up math are you figuring out? You've already made your decision, haven't you? Didn't you make it that first night we kissed?"

"I thought I did," he said flatly, and I looked at him with the kind of vulnerability I don't believe I ever felt possible.

He said, "But now, I don't know."

This is when I stormed out. There was nothing else to do in that room.

5

I had learnt I'd been accepted to the University of Calgary almost a month before I told Carly. I'd have to move, and in that, I saw the collapse of our relationship. For not one moment did I understand why Carly was with me to begin with; I'd figured it was proximity luck. To put myself at any distance would challenge Carly to sacrifice something, and she was not the type to do so for other people. Anyways, she found the letter, stashed underneath some papers, and was the first to congratulate me. Carly knew it was the best thing that could ever happen to me, and there was no way that I should think of anything other than attending. She said not to worry about her. She said she'd be fine.

For the first hundred feet past Shawn's front door, I thought he might be following me. I didn't look back because I would feel weak, but after three blocks I couldn't stop myself. Behind me was an empty sidewalk with lazy shovel marks.

It was after I started walking again that I began to cry. Eventually, I got on the LRT and broke down. The last time I'd done this, I promised myself it wouldn't happen again, but I was never any good at New Years' resolutions. I was pretty pathetic when it came down to it. There, in the spaces between thinking about how much of a bastard he was, I imagined all the times the magic had gone out of my life. There were so many momentous deflations, though I'd always attributed them to my spectrum. As long as I could punch a life experience into one end of the dial, I could fragment and control it. It happened for a reason, and things would even out. Even in my sad little state of bawling my eyes out on public transit, I knew that what had just happened made all the sense in the world.

I missed my stop and decided to keep going. I got off on 17th street and found a corner store. I had nothing to do at home but cry into a pillow, so I decided to go buy some cigarettes instead.

The place looked like it had been broken into three times in the last week, but then again most mom and pop places in Calgary looked like this since they'd stuck a 7-11 on every other corner.

"Can I get some cigarettes?" I sounded so fucking lame. It had been a while since I'd done this. I'd forgotten what kind I liked.

The small old woman across the counter just smiled like a grandmother who'd just caught her granddaughter stealing a dollar from her purse. I figured she'd inadvertently embarrass me by asking which brand I'd prefer, but instead she simply reached behind her and grabbed a small red and white pack labelled extra, extra light.

I gave her a ten, and she gave me my change and said “thank you” in the sweetest tone. Then I asked for a lighter, and she almost laughed.

“You’ve never done this before, have you?” she said. “And don’t say ‘it’s for a friend’, because I can tell it’s for you.”

“Yeah,” I said, “First time.” It was half true, anyway.

This old lady opened the pack, and put one in her mouth. “Do what I’m doing,” she said through her teeth. I grabbed one and held it in my lips. “Hold the lighter like this,” she said. “So that you don’t burn yourself.”

We both had tiny blue lighters and I imitated her as best as I could, but I dropped the smoke. It landed on the glass counter. I was glad there weren’t any junior high kids watching this.

“You’re really no good at this,” she said. “Maybe you should try quitting.”

“Nah,” I said, smirking for the first time since this morning with the muffins. “I’m being bullied at school and if I smoke, people will think I’m cool.”

“I’ve been there,” she said. She couldn’t have been less than sixty. “So just make sure you practice at home. And don’t let your parents catch you.”

After a second of wondering just how serious the other was, I thanked her and walked around to the side of the building. I leaned against the fake plastic siding, and re-lit the smoke I’d dropped at the store. For a moment, I looked at the end of the cigarette, trying to see some truth. I focused so hard on the small flicks of bright red because I thought I’d see some image of Shawn as he should be, or a glimpse into Kate’s mystery, or Carly

being less of an uncontrollable fireball, or me being someday capable of getting through a situation without crying on the subway. I concentrated so hard on every hope I had and made a series of stupid wishes.

I thought about kids from school with scars on their forearms, and how stupid it seemed back then. I thought it was a cry for attention. Maybe it was, but I wished so much to be away from my thoughts that I pulled back my sleeve, turned the cigarette upside down, and cringed as the tip came into contact with the back of my bare forearm. I collapsed and sat against the store wall, wallowing in my self-inflicted pain. I was not made for this sort of abuse. The spot I had stabbed was a lesion of burned flesh, a stabbing reminder that I'd learned nothing.

The burn hurt longer than I thought it would, but it did the job. The only thing I could think of at the time was how empty I felt, how drained of power. I came to the conclusion that I really was weaker than most people. As I saw the last speck of red drop off the burn, I knew I had spent too long on one end of the spectrum, and it was time to cross over.

If I wallowed a little while longer, it might guarantee a level of happiness later that I might not otherwise achieve. Something had to happen to even all this out. I knew I couldn't feel like this forever, because all misery had to be paid off.

My phone rang. I thought it might be Shawn, but it wasn't.

As soon as I answered and heard Kate's voice, half the pain went away. But I wasn't really sure at that point what took its place.

"I got off work early," she began, sounding like she was walking down the same street whose wall I was backed up against.

“Where are you?” I asked. I almost asked ‘who is this,’ but I didn’t think she’d appreciate it.

“I’m just coming from work. I couldn’t wait to call you.”

After what happened today, it felt really good to hear that someone couldn’t wait to call me.

“Do you want me to meet you at your house?” I asked.

“No, I’ll pick you up. I’m driving,” she said, sounding great. “So the question is, where are you?”

“I’m on seventeenth,” I said. “Just outside of the LRT there.”

“That’s scarily close to where I’m at,” she said. “What are you doing there?”

“I missed my stop,” I said. “I was going to get back on, but you called.”

“Good thing I did,” she said. “I’ll be there in like, three seconds.”

She hung up. I wondered what to do with the smokes. I saw a guy coming toward me with a cigarette in his hand and I tried to give them to him, but he waved me off without even looking. A second guy did the same. They must have thought I was homeless. My hair was a wreck. My jacket was dirty. I threw the pack of smokes in the trash. I didn’t smoke, and maybe with Kate I would have no reason to use them for any other misguided purpose.

As soon as I hung up, the burn began to hurt again, so I tried to keep my mind on Kate and all the unanswered questions surrounding her. Kate pulled up and smiled as I got in. Then she kissed me and we drove off. She looked refreshed, whereas I could still feel all my new wounds.

She didn't immediately notice the raw circle on my forearm because I hid it from her.

"You want to go out somewhere? I know a few places," she said. I didn't know if that meant food, dancing, or something sinister.

6

“Can you get me a beer?” Kate asked. I could barely hear her. With all the people around us, and the electro blaring out from every angle, I had to wonder why people bothered to open their mouths. But people were yelling all around us. Conversations seemed to swell in every direction, indecipherable because of the noise, but not far enough to be ignored. Kate drank Kokanee before, so I figured she’d like that again.

“I can’t believe you remembered!” she said when I got back from the bar. She swigged and clinked me. “Thanks, man!”

After we’d got back to her place, had sex and were laying there, cuddling, she said she wanted to dance. This came out of nowhere, but I went along with it. She got dressed in a low cut t-shirt, black jeans, slip-on black shoes, and off we went. She said she loved this place, how busy it was.

“What kind of music do you like?” she asked as we drove.

“Oh,” I said, lying. “nothing really specific. I like whatever.”

“Good,” she said. “This place specializes in whatever.”

Kate had dragged me out onto the dance floor, her beer playing the part of the naked mermaid on the front of ships. I followed Kate following her drink.

“You’re really good,” I think she said, after a few songs.

“Thanks,” I mouthed, but she wasn’t paying attention to my lips. There was no use actually saying anything with the blanket of volume around us. “You’re beautiful,” I mouthed.

She smiled, but I’m not sure she understood. Her hair was down again and she flung it in every direction. She danced with a freedom I never really thought she had to show. Whatever it was she was doing, it gave us some room.

In no time, we were both sweating. We were at a club that was a flea-market during the day, so the walls had signs advertising used clothing and bargains. Strobe lights and foggy smoke were above us, and we danced surrounded with people wearing an assortment of dress shirts and other club gear, hammered, high, or both, yelling and moving with the music.

“Are you all right?” Kate might have said. She noticed me looking around, looking uncomfortable. I didn’t come out to clubs that often, especially the underground converted warehouses like this one. “Who are you looking for? I’m right here!”

“What?” I yelled.

“I’m right here!” she screamed, and finally I heard her voice. I don’t really know why I was looking around. I guess I was just taking it in, but her insistency forced me to kiss her. It’s not like I needed an excuse at this point, but some things she did

prompted me to kiss her more than others. We kept dancing. It was all there was to do.

My phone kept ringing. It rang just about all night. I let it ring because I wanted Shawn to know that I knew he was calling. I didn't want him to think I left the phone at home or had turned it off for the night. Every now and then I'd open it up, let him hear a second of music, and then hang up. Kate never seemed particularly interested as to why I was doing this. Mostly her eyes were closed or focused on her beer or on my chest.

She pulled my shirt and drew me in closer as we danced. Her crotch rubbed up against my leg. No eye contact. As the phone vibrated in my pocket, she cupped it and smiled.

"Don't get it," she said. She said this in my ear so loud it hurt. She could have whispered.

I couldn't have known what Kate was generally like after sex, but I figured that if she stayed awake, all she'd want to do was have more sex. Her hands dangled from my neck and she stared right at me, but even then I knew she wasn't looking at me as a person; there was no intimacy there. Even then, I knew deep down that I was only her means to some end. But wrapped in that moment, she made feel like I had a place. The objectification was nice, actually, because at least it was honest.

Shawn had used me. Before I'd finally figured it out, I thought it was love. It wasn't love, this thing between Kate and me. It was carnal, and that was fine.

Way back in high school, the first thing Carly told me to do was to shut up so that she could kiss me. She knew it was lame, but it still worked. I shut up. This was before I quit smoking; we

were smoking outside the school and I mentioned something about wanting to burn the entire place down. I was just shooting the shit out there, but I imagined exactly how I'd do it. Halfway through it she told me to shut up, and that was the beginning of me and her. The entire week after that, all we did was make out under a tree near the parking lot where she kept her bike.

The first thing Shawn did was kiss me, too. I met Shawn in this bar I wasn't even supposed to be at. It was late and I was going home, but I didn't have any change for the subway. I ducked into this bar to break a twenty, and Shawn came up and ordered a few beers. "And one more for this guy," he said, and before I could refuse, he kissed me on the cheek in his joking, frat-boy imitation, and before I knew it, I was sitting beside him and three other guys, arguing about art I'd never see.

But Kate was different, because the first thing Kate did was show interest in my writing. Even that slight interest made mountains of difference. She wouldn't kiss me for almost six years. I knew it was no coincidence that she was the one I thought of the most.

None of my friends called it pathetic outright, but I knew they thought my constant moaning about Kate early in college couldn't be anything else. I remember one of them saying "Scott, trust me. For every guy, there is a girl that got away. The details might be different, but overall it's always the same story: guy likes girl; girl probably doesn't like guy; guy eventually gets rejected by girl and bitches about it to his buddies while getting wasted."

Now, I could say that they were wrong about this one incident in my life. Kate was right in front of me. She'd kissed me a hun-

dred times in the last two days. The past was just empty context. I was in a world only I knew, but I could share it with her. I could open up to Kate. I could be honest. I could be loved. Also, she'd slept with me, twice.

She grabbed my hair and bit my lower lip, half-laughing and half-snarled. Her hands were on my hands, my ass, my back, my chest. Her nails were sharp. Of course people stared. I think I was bleeding, but the phone kept ringing.

She didn't stop until she noticed the mark on my arm.

"What the hell is that?" she yelled. I tried to shrug it off, but she grabbed my arm and led me to the entranceway where the music was quieter.

"That," she said, pointing to the burned mark. "That wasn't there this morning. What happened?"

"I, um," I muttered, both wondering why I hadn't thought of a cover-up and why she hadn't noticed it when we were naked earlier. "It was an accident."

"Really," she said, not questioning so much as interrogating.

"It's a cigarette burn," I said.

"You don't smoke."

"No, but that doesn't mean I can't burn myself with a cigarette."

"You did this to yourself?" she asked, equally worried and visibly re-evaluating who she'd hooked up with for the evening.

"Yeah, well," I said. "There weren't any chairs to throw into a wall."

She took a second to process my explanation, and get her own idea of what it might mean. Then she reached into my pocket and stole my phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“What do you think?” she said. “I’m checking to see what your ex-girlfriend’s name is.”

I tried to grab the phone from her. I told her, “There’s no girl.”

“Look, I get it. I never asked if you were seeing somebody. I didn’t think you might be going through the same thing as I was. Hey, maybe that makes all of this easier, you know? We’ve got something really big in common, if that’s the case. I just want to know.”

I stopped lunging for my phone, because I’d just realized she understood something I was only now grasping. What had brought us together was our common heartbreak. It was shitty things leading to good things, and the reinforcement of my spectrum was enough for me to let her flip open my phone and look around for my missed call list.

I could tell by her confused look that the list required some explanation. I said, “Shawn, right?”

“Yeah, but why? What does he want? And why weren’t you answering?”

I began to head outside, and Kate followed. I knew if this situation got any closer to the truth, we should move the proceedings outdoors. “I think he’s mad at me,” I said, trying not to give too much away. “I stormed out of his place today. We had a fight.”

“Oh my god,” she said. “Are you hurt?”

Kate followed me. We got to the door and felt the cold night air. I said, “No, nobody hit anyone.”

“Then how was it a fight?”

“We just yelled.”

“But you’re guys. Don’t guys hit each other when they fight?”

“Not all guys,” I said.

“Well, you should answer it and get it over with,” she said. “You know, be a man about it or something.”

“I don’t want to be a man about it,” I said. “I really can’t talk to him right now. Or ever.”

Kate laughed. “I had no idea you were this melodramatic.”

My roommates in college might have been wrong about every guy having a girl that gets away, but they were right about most other things. Once, Jesse, the only one of them I really liked, told me a story of when he was a kid. He was walking along on the CN railway tracks, about half a mile away from his house.. He was maybe 8 or whatever. These trains come through all the time, and Jesse always got out of the way long before the train came close. Only there was this one time when he felt something completely different. It was the same sort of day as any other, and he didn’t really feel any differently, but for whatever reason, he didn’t move.

Some thought rippled through his brain that was much heavier than the average 8-year-old should be thinking: what’s really going to happen to me if I don’t get out of the way? And even at 8, he knew there was nobody around that could really tell him what it would be like to die, or what it would be like afterwards. He knew it would hurt, surely, but it was the after that was the biggest mystery.

He still got out of the way long before any real sense of danger set in. And really, he only stayed on the tracks a few seconds longer than normal, and it still took the train a good five minutes

to hit the spot where he had been standing. Still, none of that made his childhood moment of great philosophical transcendence any less terrifying. He was absolutely right. It's possible to know what it would feel like to be hit by the train, but what followed was anybody's guess. That's why, when I saw in her eyes that she'd put two and two together and began to dial Shawn's number on my phone, I headed outside to her car. I sort of had an idea of how she would initially react to the news of my little affair, but had absolutely no idea what would happen after.

"Hi Shawn, it's Kate," she began. "Why have you been harassing Scott all night?"

I quickly asked for her keys, and she tossed them to me. I got in, and I could see her inching towards the driver's side. I was about to open the door, but then I saw her hand pause in front of the window. At that moment, Kate knew everything, and it had stopped her in her tracks.

This would be my bar story, to be told with slight variances every time I drank with new friends. Drinking with people meant meeting other people, which meant leaving the house, which meant being okay enough to stop crying and get on with life. This imaginary string of events gave me the most comfort. The rest came from knowing that I'd done relatively little wrong. It's not likely that either Kate or Shawn would be telling their hypothetical future bar friends about how manipulative or abusive I was, and how happy they were now that I was gone. Even though I was the other man in one relationship and the rebound in the other, I figured that I'd played both parts well enough to dispel any blame.

The funny thing is, the image of all of us in the future made me realize that I was just as willing and knowledgeable as Shawn in what we were doing. I mean, he never did actually leave Mark, did he? It really was just as much my fault that I landed in this situation. If Kate slid into the driver's seat in a few minutes and told me that she never wants to see me again, it *would* be my fault. It would be my fault because I wanted to be with Shawn and didn't tell her, and because I really had no right to be with her in the first place. We belonged on opposite ends of the spectrum, and that's exactly where we'd return. Her car felt warm even with the engine off. I saw her shadow through the back window, pacing.

I wasn't innocent. Sure, I'd tell people I was completely victimized; but even as it all unfolded, I knew I was to blame. Without me, Shawn would probably be happy with Mark, and Kate would be doing something other than having rebound sex. Maybe she'd be going after Ray. Maybe she'd grab his new girlfriend by the roots of her hair and break her back against a wall. Kate was the strongest woman I'd ever met. She could have carried this car home on her back if she got angry enough to do it. I couldn't imagine her having the sort of sex she was having with me without a certain amount of rage. I could hear feet crunching on the snow outside, behind me. Her reflection in the rear window gave away nothing.

She hung up the phone and walked to the driver's side of the car. The door creaked open and slammed shut. There were goose bumps on her arms. She cracked her neck to one side. Still, there was no way I was speaking first.

"All right," she said. "I guess I lost my own bet."

“What?” In this moment, one word at a time was all I could manage. I know I wanted to explain everything to her before she had a chance to speak, but at the same time knew there was never a chance I had that sort of strength.

“Last night, when I kissed you, I thought that I had it figured out. I mean, sure, I’d been dumped, and yeah that fucking hurt, but I guess I always knew he had it in him to do something like that. Ray was just the kind of character where cheating was part of the package. I should have seen it coming, dating a guy like that, living with him. It didn’t matter to him; he could cheat on you and leave just like that. You still don’t see it coming and it still breaks your heart, but in hindsight, it makes sense. You know what I mean?”

Of course I knew what she meant.

“Anyways,” she said. “When I kissed you, I thought I knew you; I mean, in a way, I’ve known you for years, right? I never stopped to wonder if you’d changed. I just kind of took you at face value.”

I could see the whole thing coming. She wasn’t good at the long speeches. She wanted to call me a big fucking asshole and tell me to find my own ride home. She would have said the same thing back in high school.

“But people do change,” she said, “People do grow up and beyond what anyone might think they could turn out to be, right?”

I’d caught my breath, and remembered where I stood in my own big mess. “So what are you trying to say, Kate?”

She coughed, and started the car. She only turned on the heat, and I could immediately feel it on my toes. “I wish you had been honest with me, Scott.”

She sounded hurt, but it felt like I'd known what to say to this for years. "I'm sorry, Kate. But I've been a little windswept here. In the last day or so, you've completely blown my entire world apart. It's easy for other things to lose their importance, you know? It's easy not to mention something."

"Oh, like your fucking boyfriend?" she said, blowing the fuse I hoped I would never see ignited. "How does that particular piece of information become completely lost in the course of one day? Huh? Explain that one to me, please!"

"Wait a minute," I said. "Shawn is not my boyfriend."

"Sure, he isn't now," she said. "Not after you stormed out on him today and did what we did last night and tonight and oh, my God, I can't believe you. You son of a bitch!"

She was screaming, but neither of us moved from our seats. We both knew there was so much more to say, and both of us knew that something had to be resolved. Shawn was lying to more people than I thought.

"Okay, fine, here's some truth," I said. "I am not Shawn's boyfriend. I never have been. This guy Mark is Shawn's boyfriend. Yes, I've been seeing Shawn, and it's been happening for quite a while now and I thought he and I were really close. But that's the thing. It was all sort of in my head, you know? He was just fucking using me, and today when I went over to his place, I pretty much made him choose between Mark and me, and he picked Mark. Do you know why I did that?"

She shook her head.

I said, "Last night, I got caught up in the moment in a way I haven't in a long, long time. You made me feel like Shawn had

never made me feel. And you know what that is? It's the knowledge that there is nothing beyond the surface. You didn't sleep with me for any alternate reasons, you know? I know exactly what last night was and I'm fine with that because it was honest. That's why I went straight to Shawn's. I wanted everything to be as honest as possible."

She relaxed, allowing her body to rest on the seat. "Is that everything?" she asked. "Is this you being as honest as possible?"

"I'm being honest, but I'm not even close to giving it my all. You know, for a while I even thought I was in love with him. Not lately – I'd been doubting the entire situation for some time, but it is like you said, right? Even if you do see something bad coming, you still convince yourself so deeply that everything will end up exactly as you've pictured it, and you believe it. Then it hits you that the one you think you love doesn't love you back, is really just using you for whatever he needs at the time, and when it comes down to choosing who he really wants to be with, it's the easiest decision in the world." I flopped back in the seat, unable to find the energy to look at her reaction.

"I'm floored," she said. "I really am. There's absolutely no way I could've known you were this fucked up."

"Yeah, well, same to you."

We both sat there for a minute, just breathing the hot air. I couldn't see out of the windows. The fog was layered with more fog. If there were cops around, it was a miracle we weren't busted for hot boxing or fucking.

Other than Shawn's strange definition of our relationship, I really did think I had everything figured out. "I want you to say yes

to something,” she said, calmly. “And I want you to say yes to it before you hear what it is.”

“Yes.” I didn’t know what I was doing, but her car was warm and this hadn’t ended up being an altogether horrible experience.

“And you can’t go back on it,” she sat up in her seat, “I mean, you could, but it would be really fucking lame of you.”

“Yes, I said.”

“I want you to stay with me for a week,” she said. It felt like an anticlimax. For a second I thought she’d want all of us to fuck or something in order to get it out of our systems.

“Of course,” I said. “That’s no problem.”

“And I don’t want you to see Shawn during that time.”

“I don’t want to see him again, ever,” I said.

“That’s very sweet, Scott,” she said, taking out her compact to apply some lipstick. “But we both know you will. Still, I think you can go a week.”

“It’s really no problem.”

“Actually,” she added. “I don’t want you to see anybody this week. I mean, go to work and do all the things you need to do. Just consider my home your home. Don’t go home. Don’t go to things you can cancel. Get out of your book club or whatever.”

“I’m not part of a book club,” I sneered. “What if I had a dog?”

“Do you have a dog?”

“I have a goldfish.”

She took a long breath and let it out. “I want you to let it die, Scott. I want your goldfish to die because you were too busy fucking me.”

I was never particularly high on the damn thing anyway. “It’s just a goldfish,” I said.

“So that’s a yes?” she asked.

“For the seventh time.”

Kate turned on the radio. More dance music. I kept agreeing with her, thinking how this was all going to work out. This would be the beginning of something I’d wanted longer than anything else. Somewhere, mostly in places where the idea of my spectrum rang loudest, I knew that in no uncertain terms I had allowed myself to be happy.

No Chinook

* * *

7

I cooked breakfast for Kate in the morning as she sat and read the same magazine. Pancake mix dripped off her tile counter. There was flour on my jeans, my sole item of clothing. Outside, a hard wind pressed against the house. It had gained momentum last night and had not let up since.

“I put bananas in them,” I said, bringing the plate to the table. I made twelve, thinking it might have to be lunch too.

“And chocolate chips?”

“Of course,” I said. “No healthy meal goes without chocolate.”

“We fucked four times last night,” she said, not mincing words much. “Does this mean I have to drive you off a bridge?”

I was in the middle of chewing. “I don’t get it.”

“You haven’t seen Vanilla Sky, huh?” She didn’t seem surprised.

“Can’t say,” I said. I had seen it; I just didn’t know what she was talking about.

In between bites she said, “Near the beginning, Cameron Diaz exclaims that she had sex with Tom Cruise four times the other night. Tom asks if that’s good. Ooh, these are really good,” she said, switching topics between Tom Cruise and pancakes.” She says that two times is good and kisses him. Wow, what did you put in these?” I hadn’t done anything special. In fact, I wasn’t a particularly good cook. All I’d done was follow the box-side instructions. “Then she says three is really good in this sultry little sex-kitten voice. She kisses him again. Tom asks her what four times means. Seriously, you’re cooking every morning this week.” At this point, I simply figured that Ray had been actively trying to poison her food before this, because these were really nothing-special pancakes. “She just kisses him, even though he keeps asking. All she says is ‘four is...’ and it’s driving him crazy.”

I’d remembered the scene and where she was headed by this point, but she was on a roll and hearing her go on about something while eating my cooking just sent me over the edge.

“Anyways, the next scene she plays him her music and drives off a bridge.”

I kissed her. “Way to ruin the ending.”

She said, “Whatever. That was like, what, twenty minutes into it? There’s a lot more than that.” Then she kissed me for the fourth time that morning. It was one of those kisses where we were both in awkward positions, but we held it just to prove that we could.

*

I had a new sense of focus like never before at work. With my article finished almost halfway through the day, I found myself helping out other columnists with their editing. I was doing anything I could to keep busy. It wasn't that being bored would make me think too much. It was that I felt I had nothing to fret over. I felt free of neurotic worry for the first time in months.

Before the end of the day, the boss gave me something extra to write for the next issue. We were in the middle of a Chinook, he said, and it'd be interesting for the traveling businessmen to have something they could read and experience at the same time. The issue was going to be out in a few days, so I'd need to take this one home to finish.

*

I was down on the floor of Kate's living room writing about Chinooks on her laptop when I heard the shower running. I stopped writing as a realization came to me: for at least the last day, Kate had smelled of me. I knew it was stupid to think this, but I didn't want her to shower. I wanted whatever residue crawled between us to stick and become permanent. Other people would know that way. The people who smelled one another would know.

She came downstairs in a long t-shirt and jeans. Her hair was still wet but she left it down. She sat next to me and kissed my shoulder.

"She's not giving you too much trouble?" she asked, referring to her computer. "She does the weirdest things sometimes."

“Like what?”

“Sometimes she’ll flicker and just turn off. She doesn’t like being forced to do something she’s not comfortable with.”

“You’re kidding,” I said. “It’s just a computer.”

“That’s what I thought when I bought it,” she said, curling her hair behind her ears and sitting cross-legged. “But it’s got feelings. It’ll only let me check my email at certain times of the day. It’s cracked.”

I clicked on the Internet icon, and Hotmail sprung up. I signed in and winked at her.

“Well,” she said, “It likes you better, I guess.”

“Can’t say I’ve got an answer for you. I’m not a computer nerd or anything.”

“Since when?”

“You’re stereotyping me,” I said. “I am deeply offended.”

She kissed me. “Say that again.”

She kissed me. I said, “I am deeply offended.”

Kate laughed. “It’s just, you hung around those people at school all the time. You had to have picked up on it, right? I mean, isn’t that why you were with them?”

“You think I did that out of common interest?” I asked.

“Why else do people hang out with other people?”

When Kate asked me that, it immediately made every morning I walked into high school and didn’t talk to her seem like a stupid and immature decision. The closest thing to a good excuse was that as a kid I was a scared little shit who was only comfortable around people who didn’t intimidate me, and as a teenager I never found the courage to try being any different.

I said, “It’s stupid now, I know, but back then, I thought there were a lot of rules. Like, rules about who you could talk to and whatnot. My friends filled me in, pretty much, and I never really questioned them. But, who isn’t generally stupid in high school, right?”

Immediately I knew, like I always had known, that Kate wasn’t stupid in high school.

“I can’t say I really regret anything about it,” she said. The back of her t-shirt was wet from her hair. “I had a bunch of goals and I went for them. I had some pretty good friends. I have so many great pictures and stories.” I wasn’t anticipating she felt any guilt over having a better four years than I did, but that didn’t stop me from searching that out. “But you’re right, Scott. Most people are pretty big shits in high school. They comfort themselves with the idea that they were young and stupid and that makes it all right, but they were just as conscious of their actions then as they are now, you know?”

I didn’t get it. This all seemed to be a direct contradiction of what we’d talked about before. “But what about the fizz candies? What about the crap in your teeth?”

“Well, it’s nothing I’d ever consider doing again. I mean, planning and goals and all that stuff is really a giant drag at this point. And I don’t need a ‘few great friends,’” she said, and paused for emphasis, “When I can get so many good ones instead.” I had no idea what she was trying to imply.

I hadn’t particularly wanted to share my spectrum theory with Kate, but I knew I couldn’t bring it up anyway as she began to share her own ideas. For one thing, it would make me look ex-

actly like the kind of guy she was talking about, but more than that, Kate would never need to know about the spectrum because she always existed outside of it.

I was living outside my range, too happy to dwell on theories explaining repression and the unfairness of life. It was being too fair, really. According to my own set of beliefs, this would lead to something terrible.

*

Later that day, we were lying on her kitchen floor.

“If you look at it this way, you can totally see it,” she said. Kate was trying to show me the giant face of Che Guevara on her ceiling. She told me it was there when she moved in, but Ray never noticed. It had been driving her crazy every time she looked at it.

“Please tell me I’m not crazy,” she said, nudging my shoulder with hers.

“Of course you’re not crazy,” I said. “But at the same time, just because you see things that aren’t there doesn’t mean that you’re crazy. You might just be gifted.”

“So you don’t see it either?”

“I’m not gifted.”

“Shut up!” She said. “Nobody sees it. Nobody ever sees it. I’m hungry.”

She got up and grabbed some ramen noodles from a cupboard, the kind you can eat without water or heat. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I said.

“Why did you move away from home?”

I didn’t have to think about it for that long. I said, “hated my parents, mostly.”

“Me too,” she replied. “Crazy how that works, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“So, what was it?” She asked.

Thinking about my parents was akin to working diligently on a tile-stain in the bathroom of your newly rented apartment. The problem was present before you ever got there, and no amount of effort was ever going to fully remove it.

I said, “I think the only reason my parents got together was so that each of them could have someone to fight with all the time.” I stayed down there, on the floor. Through all of this, I was focusing on the spot where Kate saw Che. “I mean, some nights they just wouldn’t sleep. Some bill was paid too late or dinner was burnt or the car had a scratch or just some random bullshit that most people would forgive the person they loved for. But that was the problem, you know? I don’t think I ever saw them in any situation resembling love.”

“So they weren’t fight fuckers then?”

“No,” I said. “My parents were not fight fuckers. Or maybe they were. I sure as hell hope not.”

“As I see it,” she said, “There’s only two kinds of parents. The ones that divorce, and the ones that should.”

She offered me some noodles. I took them.

I said, “I can’t argue with that.”

“So that’s why you moved out here to the city?”

“I was sick of home, but they were really only part of it,” I said.

I kept looking at that ceiling, thinking, how does someone see people in their ceiling if they're not crazy? "I was sick of the whole thing, really. The high school, my friends there, and Carly."

Kate asked, her mouth full of raw ingredients, "What happened between you two, anyway?"

"I was with Carly for three years," I said, but then stopped. The actual hours clocked spending time with Carly far outweighed time I'd spent with any other person in my life. And at the same time, it was so easy for her to let go of me. And just when I thought I could maybe make out part of Che's hat, I had the realization that I might never get over Carly. I might be fifty and still wondering, what if?

"I was really, really in love with her. The last year of school started really well. We were going so strong, and what the hell did I know, right? I thought we'd be together forever. But then she began seeing this other guy. It started as a one-time thing, but then she just kept going. They started seeing each other more and more, and I slowly fizzled out of the picture. She came to me one day and said 'you know it's over, right?' She didn't care what I had to say about it. She was just making sure I wasn't stupid about the whole thing. As if I needed an 'oh, by the way.' So I spent the last half of school sulking around, mostly hanging out by myself, writing, smoking."

Kate just stood there. After a moment she said, "And then that's where I fit in, isn't it?"

I nodded. That's all there was to do.

*

The next morning, Kate came downstairs in a pink housecoat and a messy, frayed ponytail. She sat down at the table with me and stretched.

“Morning,” she said, detached; squinting.

“You have to work today?” I asked.

She nodded her head, and her ponytail shook, settling in a way that drove me nuts. She added, “But only for a few hours.”

“Coffee?” she pleaded. I pointed over to the percolator, and she smiled wide. I drank my tea slowly and read the paper.

“Jeans with holes in the knees are back,” I said, reading a headline in the fashion section.

“Good!” she said, with more enthusiasm than I figured it’d warrant.

That 67’ mustang that I wanted in the classifieds was sold. Kate came back and asked for the horoscopes and crossword. I’d noticed over the last two days that it was her little thing in the morning. Once she got about seven words in the crossword, she’d quit to make out with me, ignoring her morning breath.

“Want to hear yours?” she asked. “It says ‘Aries: you’ve got a birthday coming. The stars tell me that you have been restless lately, and that love has been on your mind. Don’t ignore these feelings, Aries. Something you love may be just around the corner.’ Ooh, Mr. Scott Clarkson, someone just might have a crush on you.”

“Kate,” I replied coyly, “it didn’t say ‘someone,’ it said ‘something.’ And it’s wrong. See? My Mustang is gone. Someone bought it.”

“Well,” she said, pouring her coffee, “It’ll just have to be a someone, then.”

Kate sat down next to me, took a pen from the utensils’ drawer and studied the crossword puzzle. About ten seconds later she asked what a seven-letter word for ‘pants’ was.

“Trousers,” I said, and she scribbled it down.

The arts section had a feature on a few new jazz bands oddly making the charts lately. “Well, shit,” I said.

“What?”

“Jazz was just about the only thing left.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jazz,” I said, “Was the only free thing we had left. And now they’ve killed it.”

Kate sighed, and at that moment I should have probably dropped it. I’m not really sure why I cared. I’ve sometimes found myself rambling on about things I didn’t even feel passionate about. I really could not care less about music, the underground, or the average American.

“Jazz,” I sighed, as if it were the last time I’d utter the term. “They really sped up the process. I mean, I knew it’d have to go eventually; that there would come a time when it wouldn’t be okay for someone to take up an open microphone and belt out 5 notes without a shill for shoes or soda or batteries. Someday, it would stop being about love and become about the mechanics. I just didn’t think it would happen so soon.”

“What are you talking about, Scott?”

“This is how it always happens, you know? Every genre gets this treatment. It starts with a handful of jazz singers who get lucky and get breakthrough records in the underground. Those major labels see this happening, and snatch them all up, give them huge advances and big press. Their major label debut comes out, and by the end of the first month, they’ve all sold a million each. This gets called things like ‘unprecedented,’ and these singers are getting praise and press from people who have never covered jazz before, like this guy here. The genre gets big, the radio overplays them, the music becomes the soundtrack to every car commercial in the country, and soon enough nobody can stand it. Poof, dead genre.”

“How do you know he’s never written about jazz?” she asked.

“You can just tell,” I said.

“There’s no way.” Kate sounded like she wanted a fight, but I couldn’t go there. Not this early, not with her. Still, the process of sophomore philosophizing is an easy thing for me; words spray like a garden sprinkler system a child might have neglected to turn off. It doesn’t turn off until the parent braves the blasts of water and turns the tap.

“You’re fucked up, man.” Kate told me. “Honestly, how a guy comes up with that shit at this hour, I’ll never know.”

“It’s kind of automatic,” I said. “It just sort of comes out. Honestly, I didn’t even think it through.”

“Like the Brad conversation,” she said.

“The what?”

Kate wrote down ‘squall’ along the bottom of the puzzle, and

explained it like this. “The Brad conversation. It happens to me at least once a week. Hell, we probably had this conversation back in high school.”

“Brad who?”

She looked at me, pursed lips and wrinkled nose.

“Brad Pitt, stupid. This is how it always goes, always: there are two girls chatting. One mentions a random celebrity and says how much she’d love to meet him or sleep with him or whatever. Now, the second girl will disagree about this particular celebrity, and mention someone a little more famous. The first girl will disagree with that choice and up the ante again. This volleys back and forth for a few minutes until one of them mentions Brad Pitt, and they both immediately swoon.”

“Okay,” I said, recognizing the story and knowing exactly what would follow. I was jealous of her at this point. I was sure I had come up with this whole spiel. “I think I get it.”

“I’m not finished yet,” she replied. “Now, a third girl enters the scene, and while the first two girls bicker about their preference for ‘Interview With The Vampire’ Brad or ‘Oceans 11’ Brad, this third chimes in, saying she thinks he is the most repulsive man on earth. The first two girls are all aghast at the statement, immediately defending his infallible acting prowess and unforgettable photo ops. Nothing they say will steer this third girl off-course from insulting everything about the man. Whether she’s jealous or genuine never matters, and isn’t the point. What matters is the consistency of this conversation happening to just about everyone at some point in time. This happens to everyone at least once.”

I had never been on the opposite side of this conversation, but loved that we shared this morsel of basic life philosophy. I said, “At least.”

“Oh, one more thing,” she said. “There has to be a guy who was either there and kept silent the whole time, or comes in after the third girl had expressed her hatred. When the three girls have exhausted their opinions, they turn to him and ask his opinion, which is one of three choices. This, by the way, is a great way to judge a guy. He can adopt the traditional, homophobic stance of saying ‘hey, I don’t rate guys by their looks,’ attempting to be macho, or he can say that he either finds him attractive or not. It’s the test I use every time, and I won’t date the guy that chooses wrong.”

Her kitchen tiles were cold against my feet and a chill went through me. The tea refreshed my reflexes and senses. My hearing was astute and my sight medically perfect. I had no problems with my sense of smell or touch or taste. I felt empathy, but I knew that empathy wasn’t the correct feeling. Fact of the matter is, I will still never understand women. Stand-up comics that I watched late at night as a teenager had told me to stay away from the whole lot of them, to live in the mountains with my beard and coal stove and beaver pelts. They told me I’d be happier up there, rid of all the puzzles surrounding the opposite sex.

And like an amateur, like someone who hadn’t had almost the same conversation in a different universe, I asked, “So what’s the right answer?”

Kate sipped her coffee without taking her eyes off me. Then she snickered and walked out of the room, saying, “We’re always

kids, you know. I don't think anyone grows out of saying 'if you don't know, then I'm not going to tell you'."

*

After work, I still wasn't done the Chinook article. I couldn't think. I was enraptured. When I arrived back at Kate's doorstep, she handed me a beer. We began drinking at five and by seven were seeing each other in different lights.

"Favourite colour?" Kate asked. "Brown," I said. She gave me a look, just like everyone else does before I explained things. "I don't mean like any brown though. I mean brown as in a theme, like a season or a city. I once read this big story on the UK punk scene emerging in the early seventies out of a very 'brown' London. It's like the idea of a broken-down and listless area where people get pissed off at their situation and do something about it."

"Wow," she said. "You put more thought into your favourite colour than anyone else."

"Really?" I asked. "Anyone else?"

"Maybe not the guy from Blues Clues."

"Yeah," I said, "I'm sure he's got to think real hard."

"Well, sure," she replied, "Why would you assume that because the show is called Blues Clues that his favourite colour is blue? How do you know it's not red?"

"I suppose we could call him," I said, being both preposterous and daring. I'd find him, if she wanted me to. At this point I'd call anyone and ask for favourite colours.

“Your turn,” she said. We’d been playing this game since the third beer.

“Okay,” I said. “Favourite random person on the bus.”

“Oh, toughie. One sec.” Kate uncrossed her legs and ran back into the kitchen. We’d been sitting on the spot where the chair had been before she’d broken it. She said she wanted to get to know things about me that didn’t matter in the least. Banal things. Ice breakers. We began revealing our favourite movies, moved right onto music, sports. Eventually it became difficult to stay in the shallow end of the pool.

She came back with two more beers. These were Ray’s. There was close to a full case when we started. “Thanks,” I said.

Kate sat back down and flipped her hair behind her ears. “Okay, it’s got to be this one driver I used to see almost everyday. It was first year of university, and I really don’t remember how we began talking or anything, but almost every day I got on the bus, we’d chat. We ended up being pretty close. She told me about her kids and how they were doing in school and how they were almost my age and stuff like that. We really opened up to one another. How about you?”

“This one’s easy,” I said, cracking the new beer open. “College. My buddies and I used to call her the emergency wife. It sounds horrible now, and we never said it to her face or anything, but back then it was really funny. She didn’t seem to have a pattern, like the weather. You know, ‘if you don’t like the weather in Calgary, wait five minutes’ and all that. She would be on the bus when we left campus to go to the pub or whatever. She sat near the front, and every time we’d pass her, she’d ask us to marry her.

Once, she grabbed Greg's arm and almost pulled him down into her lap. So this one time Marshal came up with the idea that the last one of us to marry would have to come back and find her."

Kate was holding back that infectious laugh she'd cultivated. "That's really awful of you guys. She must have been crazy if she was asking you and your friends for it, eh?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't fish for compliments," Kate said. "It's not attractive."

I said, "I wasn't fishing for anything."

She said, "Everyone is always fishing for something."

It was funny, her saying something like that without changing her tone; she managed not to lose any of her half-giddiness. It made it impossible to take her seriously. If Kate had tossed out a general, sweeping statement like that back in high school, it would have sounded deep, maybe even profound. But on the floor of her living room, it carried the weight of a dollar-store birthday card. Kate was never the kind of girl I would expect would have much to say about the universe. She just didn't have enough scars for that.

*

"Do you think he's thinking about you?" she asked me during a commercial break. We were watching hockey.

I knew who she was talking about, but asked her anyway.

"Don't be cute," she said.

"I don't know how to be cute."

She said, "But you know how to evade questions."

“You said we weren’t going to talk about him this week.”

“I said you wouldn’t talk to him. Talking about him is completely different.”

“Why do you want to do this?” I asked.

She said, “Because the game is boring tonight.” I knew she probably just wanted to hang me out to dry. Nothing I could possibly say about Shawn could help me and Kate. Recent relationships where wounds are still open are never good news.

She was right, though. The game was boring.

“I don’t know if he’s thinking about me,” I said. Then, I lied. “He’s probably happy I’m gone.”

Kate turned the volume down a little. Her legs rested on top of mine, and they were light. She was wearing woollen socks and tights and a hoody. Kate was the most comfortably dressed person I’d ever spent time with.

She asked me, “What do you think he’s doing right now?”

I said, “I don’t know.”

“Do you think he’s with that guy? What was his name?”

“Mark.”

“Right. Mark.” Kate sounded sinister, like she’d just found exactly what she was hunting for out in the dark, when most people were sleeping. I wasn’t comfortable with her using Mark as a weapon between us.

“Kate,” I said, “I don’t really want to talk about him.”

Kate turned the volume down zero. We weren’t paying attention at all anymore. Her tights rubbed against my jeans, rubbed against her couch, sunken in from cuddling over the years.

“When was your first kiss?”

“Kate, don’t.”

“Was he with Mark at the time?”

I never told Kate this, but sometimes I was jealous of her. I was jealous because she was capable of moving in circles I had no glimpse of. It wasn’t that she was successful, because I didn’t know what she did for a living. I didn’t know how much of Ray’s decision to leave was her fault, because I came too late. I didn’t even know if she was happy because she always seemed ready to lie. She navigated vessels I could not begin to board.

“Kate?”

“What?”

“Please don’t.”

“I thought you wanted to tell me everything.”

I hated her for her capabilities, so superior to my own. She held keys to doors I didn’t. She saw things I didn’t. My world had some windows into hers, but she had doors into mine.

“I don’t remember ever saying that.”

“You said something of the sort.”

“Why do you want to know about Shawn?” I said.

Kate kissed me on the cheek and snuggled into my side. “I already know plenty about Shawn,” She said. “He’s my friend too, remember? But I can’t really picture you two together. I was just trying to understand how it worked, you know? I mean, I told you all about Ray.”

I hated her because I couldn’t understand her, and even though I could have always asked her to explain, I wasn’t capable of trying.

“You didn’t tell me all about Ray,” I said. “I don’t know when your first kiss was.”

“It was on New Year’s. The Millennium.”

I hated her, but I couldn’t help laughing.

She defended herself. “What? It’s romantic.”

“Yeah, just like a teddy bear caught inside a claw-operated machine,” I said.

She retracted, “Oh, and your first kiss was any better?”

It wasn’t something I understood at the time, but later on I would learn that it was a common thing for guys to ask their new girlfriends about. They seemed oddly unable to let their past be in the past; an inherent kind of male jealousy, I’d soon learn this relationship dance Kate and I were performing was a lot more common than I thought.

So, knowing I was beaten but not knowing how to avoid it, I retorted: “It was spontaneous. Back in the summer, when I met him at one of his parties, he spent most of the night stalking me. I didn’t know he was with Mark. He was relentless.”

I could sense I was already a joke to her. I could see the creases formed by her smile twitching in a sly attempt to hold back her laughter at my stupid cliché.

“He wouldn’t leave me alone all night. And then, he had me cornered, and he said, ‘just kiss me already.’ And I did. I didn’t think about it. He pressed me against the wall as he kissed me back. I knew he was taken and I knew he was dangerous, but the second I kissed him, I was somewhere else.”

Kate’s creases folded out into a full grin, but she maintained composure.

“I had never kissed anyone like that before. He was almost a complete stranger, but I felt like I was getting to know him just from this kiss. Suddenly, I knew all of his favourite songs and what his writing style was like, and how he licked his stamps. I could taste his favourite drink and knew how much chocolate sauce he mixed with milk, what kind of magazines he bought and when he first started thinking about college. It wasn’t just that I felt like I knew him. I could feel things about him that he didn’t know yet. I knew I could get him to fall in love with me. And I thought I knew how to make him mine.”

Kate’s smile vanished. She looked pained, but then she sat back up and looked straight into me, searching for her own version of the truth.

She said, “I hope I find someone who kisses me like that.”

And here was just one more way Kate could shake me. For most of the week, she would be wonderful. She would make me smile in the same way I did when fantasizing about happiness. She seemed to personify so many archetypes of love for me that it seemed like for once, the world would deliver on a promise of happiness.

At other times, like this one, she’d say something that Shawn had himself said once, and while I’ve learned that people sometimes say similar things in moments of serendipity, it was still hard to completely forgive her for being a little bit like him.

These connections between Kate and Shawn were problematic to my attraction to both of them; I didn’t want to see bits of Shawn in Kate. I wanted them to be completely different, but I knew that would probably never happen, because they both

breathed, they both kissed, and they both referred to me when they talked about things that changed their world.

*

It was one of those mornings where nothing needed to be done. We were trying to stay in bed as long as we could. We were hungry but relished resisting the hunger.

“So,” she said, resting her head on my arm, “Tell me about your novel.”

“I don’t have a novel,” I said.

Kate tilted her head and looked at me. “You spend your days at a computer writing articles, editing articles, reading articles. I remember you wanted to be a writer. That means you have a novel.”

“You’re stereotyping me,” I said.

“It’s early. I don’t have the energy to see a multitude of dimensions.”

“I don’t have a book.”

“Yes, you do!” She exclaimed. “Even if you haven’t written it yet, you’ve got one. Fine, forget that you’re a columnist at a lame magazine. Everyone’s got an idea for a novel.”

“No,” I said. “I just, I don’t know. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Kate poked me in the chest, like a kid. “Why not?”

“Why don’t you want to talk about your job?” I asked.

She said, “That’s different.”

“How?”

Kate hid herself in my arm.

“Hey, come on.”

“Didn’t we go through this?” she asked.

People were most honest after they’d used up every lie when pressed on an issue. I figured she would run out of reasons not to tell me eventually, and until then, I wouldn’t dig in too far.

I said, “Yeah, I’m sorry.”

Kate moved a few strands of hair out of her face and looked up at me like a duck, angled and with one eye.

“So?” She asked. “What’s it about?”

“It’s lame,” I began, feeling half-embarrassed. I hadn’t thought about this story since college. “And it’s not fleshed out and there’s only about a third of it on paper, and I have no idea how it ends.”

“That’s fine,” she said. “I just want to hear your story.”

I said, “It’s about a hotel. It’s this run-down place on the edge of some town. Drunks and hookers, you know, but there are a few guests. There’s a college professor and a dancer.” I looked down at her, and saw only her eye. “The story’s about what happens in a day at this place. There’s general unhappiness inside and out, but a few glimpses of hope are still visible. Like, there’s this kid, he’s 10 or so. He’s an orphan, but he lives there, and he has these dreams of someday owning the place and making it nice. And there are these lovers.”

“Are the lovers people you know?” Kate nuzzled her nose into my forearm. It was so damn cute. “Are we the lovers?”

“Sure,” I said. “They can be us.”

Kate said, “Awesome.”

Kate reached with her lips to the part of me closest to her. She kissed my shoulder.

She asked, “Is there a happy ending?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Do you think there should be?”

“Well, that depends,” She said, kissing my arm again, “Does the reader deserve it?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Well,” she said, “By the end of the book, have you put them through enough that they deserve a happy ending?”

“Put them through enough?”

“Yeah,” she said, sitting up halfway. “Like, most of any story is suffering, right? Whenever I see a movie or read a book it’s always like that. There’s just this hero or group who go through some peril to get to the end, and that’s like a reward for going through the whole adventure, right? You know, they learned their lesson, or he got the girl, or she got the girl, or whatever.”

I shifted her way, “So you think the whole point of any story is to fight and suffer so someone can get a girl?”

“Pretty much,” she said, “But I meant that it’s more about the audience. Like, if I’m reading a book, I’m the audience, right? And part of the reason the book exists is to please me, yeah? So, part of the reason there’s a happy ending at all is so that I feel like the book did well.”

“Even if the whole journey is completely torturous to read?”

“Especially,” she said. “Then, the ending is crucial.”

Just then, there was a gust of wind through her bedroom window. The Chinook had been blowing all week, but only now did it actually break into the house.

“See,” I said. “I hope my book isn’t like that.”

“A torture to read?”

“Yeah, obviously. I don’t want to get that sort of negative response at all.”

I thought; did she open the window while I slept? Did she get up without me noticing?

I said, “But it’s more than that. I want people to enjoy every page. Like, why take three hundred pages to get to the happy part? That’s not life, right? That’s not what really happens. Life isn’t just suffering and drama with the happy moment at the end.”

“It is for some people,” Kate said. This derailed me. She was right, again, even if her logic was flawed. I couldn’t argue with her. I wasn’t fast enough.

“Well,” I gave up, “I don’t know. I don’t agree with you, though.”

“I think you’re just trying to create this ideal world where there’s only good all the time, some fantasy place with butterflies and cotton candy and pancakes,” she said. “I think it’s kind of childish.”

I wasn’t thinking of that at all. I thought: was this one of those Brad conversations? Did it even matter what I said?

“I’m hungry,” I said.

Kate said, “Me too, but I have one other question.”

“Only if it involves peanut butter or yogurt.”

She asked me, “Do you love it?”

“What, suffering?”

She gave me that look she honed so well. “Writing, stupid.”

I said, “Sometimes. When I’m on a roll it’s great. It’s like I’m performing the one function I was really meant to do here. Some-

times that muse actually does take over, even when it's work and I don't actually care about what I am writing. Sometimes it's that easy. I don't even think. I just put my hands down and it comes."

Kate got closer to me, and we touched again.

"But then, other times, like when I get interrupted or I lose my train of thought, it can totally leave and not come back for days, and I can't write anything. I mean, I try to plough through, but it all comes out wrong, and I end up deleting it. I can't ever seem to force it. Like, the entire process is up to someone else and they're just using me to get it down, you know?"

"I think," She whispered. "You're not taking nearly enough responsibility for your actions."

Kate snuggled close, taking in a heavy breath, and seemed, for a moment, to fall back asleep. I could hear people walking down the street, likely pushing strollers and carrying plastic bags. What I was really focused on was Kate's breath on my chest, her hair brushing my arm and her arm around my neck.

In my head, I was cataloguing images of Kate to save for later, but the snapshots were starting to lessen in number.

"Hey?" I asked. She murmured something. "Didn't you say you were hungry?"

Kate groaned, "I'm comfortable."

"We should probably get up soon."

"And it wasn't me," she said, groggy from the few minutes of unconsciousness. "You said you were hungry,"

"I mean, we can't just stay in here all day," I said. "I've got to go to work."

"Me too," she said. "I'm hungry. Damn you."

I was hungry, sure, but the real reason I got her up was to ask her something.

“Hey, do you love your job?”

“What?” She asked in a kind of disbelief.

“You don’t have to tell me anything about it,” I said. “But I guess I was just wondering if you loved your job.”

“You don’t love your job,” she said, slowly getting up and trying to avoid this. “You just said that you hate it sometimes.”

“Yeah,” I said, getting out of bed myself. I was naked and so was she. We both scanned the floor for crumpled jeans, socks, and shirts. “But that happens with love, doesn’t it? Don’t you hate it every now and then? I do, but I guess I sort of revel in it. I enjoy the moments when I’m feeling impossibly uninspired, because I know how much I’ve got to fight for it. Love is about passion in all aspects, right? I wonder at which point hate comes storming in.”

“Look,” she said, finding a tank top and throwing it on. “I said I wouldn’t tell you anything about it. My feelings towards it are a part of that.”

I found my jeans under her jeans. I handed them to her and put mine on. “Come on. There’s got to be parts of you that want to tell me.”

Kate put her jeans on. I found my shirt. We were dressed. We were awake. I had to leave for work within minutes, and she had to do whatever it was she did. But before leaving the room and doing what she spent so much time avoiding in conversation. She paused for a second and said, “I really fucking hate it.”

*

I finished the Chinook article. It took me three days and it still felt rushed. Time went by faster for me in places that Kate had yet to invade. I handed it to my boss; he gave me a nod. It wasn't important, the article. It would cease to be of any value in a few days. Like the strange weather I wrote about, people would forget it in a matter of moments and move onto less trivial things.

*

“Do you even like basketball?” she asked. We were already on the court. It was in the back of an elementary school nearby, and the ground was pretty dry from the warm stretch we'd had over the last few days.

“Yeah,” I said, trying to be convincing, “Love it. I used to play it all the time.”

“Liar,” she said, and checked me. She let me go first because she knew I was about to get my ass kicked.

“Did you like breakfast?” I asked, dribbling slowly, trying to get around her and failing. She was really good at this.

She said, “It was okay. Not your best one. I liked it when you put the blueberries and bananas in the pancakes at the same time.” She stole the ball from me within seconds. “That was a great breakfast.”

“Maybe I'll make them tomorrow,” I said, trying to imitate her defensive moves, but failing miserably.

“Maybe you’ll make them tonight,” she said, passing me, tossing the ball. It missed, bouncing off the backboard right at me; I caught it. I paused, amazed. I hadn’t played in years, since the beginning of college. Kate was on me again, poking at my sides, taunting me for my complete lack of talent. She said, “This reminds me of home.”

“Why?”

“My dad and I lived right next to my grade school, and we’d go play basketball all the time. Every time I’m playing, I can smell that house. I can smell him.”

I said, “Home for me was this coffee shop in Strathmore.”

“Which one?” I loved that she asked.

I took a shot and missed. “It closed down about a month ago. I went to visit my mom, and I walked by it and saw the ‘For Lease’ sign. It was kind of sad, but therapeutic.”

“Therapeutic?” She dribbled past me and got the shot in. It was early evening. The kids had gone home, and nobody in their right mind would come out at sunset and play on a half-frozen basketball court. We were here because we felt warm and restless.

“Yeah,” I said. “I kind of like knowing that the place I called home is gone. I know, that sounds weird, but I’d rather that it not be there.”

“So your parents’ house doesn’t count?”

I gave her a look signifying it didn’t. Then, I took advantage of her inattentive stillness and stole the ball. “Hey!” she said. “That doesn’t count; I was busy feeling empathy!”

I threw the ball again. It missed, and Kate got to the ball before I did. “You suck,” she said. And I did. At least, at basketball.

“Tell me about this place of yours.” I loved that she was curious.

I said, trying to play defence again, “Whenever I wanted to relax and write and be alone and listen to fantastic music, I always went there. It was just this little hole in the wall, but it had old magazines, dim lights, and was run by this loony who had an affinity for Leonard Cohen.”

Kate dropped one more ball in the basket. It was two to nothing, and the sun was almost completely down. She said, “So you’d go there to be alone?”

“Yeah, but I’d take people there, too. A few of my friends really liked it.”

“And Carly, too, right?”

I was about to agree with her, but then I remembered that Carly had never seen this place. It was weird, because I had memories of the both of us hanging out there, but that couldn’t have happened. I didn’t find this place until after Carly was gone. Why did I think she’d been there? Was it just that I was inventing an aspect of my past? Carly, in my mind, sat comfortably in one of those couches in the back. But she was never really there.

“No,” I said. “I found it after all that.”

So Kate asked the obvious thing. “So where’s your home now?”

I told her, as she got another one in and tossed me the ball, that I didn’t know.

She said, “Yeah, well, I know how you feel.”

I told her that I knew she did. We both stood there in our jeans and winter coats. It was dark now. The only light in the area came from an archway above a door leading into the school.

I had the ball. She wasn't trying to get it from me anymore. I eyed the basket, and in a moment of stupendous luck, tossed it right in. The sound from the net was loud. Kate grabbed it and went to the three-point line.

"So," I said, realizing that she wasn't done playing yet. "What don't we know about each other?"

She tore right past me and shot. It missed, but she caught it.

Kate said, "Are we trying to get everything down?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Well," she said, shooting. "Any broken bones? That's always a good story."

"No," I said. "I've only been bruised a few times. Can't say I've ever fallen from a great height or been run over by anything, luckily."

"Luckily?" she mocked me, watching me dribble. "How are you lucky if you missed out on those awesome experiences?"

"You amaze me," I said. I had scrambled for the ball. Kate wasn't showing any sign of being tired.

"Seriously," Kate said. "Those are stories you can tell over and over and they never get boring." She stole the ball from my hands. She was so fast, even in a big puffy coat. "Like the time I broke my collarbone. I was ten, and I was riding a horse, right? Well, I lost control of it and it took off. I held on as best I could for almost five minutes, but after a while, it was clear I was going to get hurt somehow. The horse jerked one way and I was flung in the other direction, nearly landing on my head. Goddamn, that hurt."

She shot and missed. I asked, "And this is a positive memory for you?"

“Of course,” she said while dribbling past me. I wasn’t an opponent so much as a traffic cone for Kate to play around with. “It’s positive because it makes for one hell of a story. I can tell that at any party and get a great reaction. It’s always great for breaking the ice with strangers. Totally works in job interviews, too. Shows perseverance.”

I asked, “So you like the memory so much because it makes a great story?”

“Yeah,” she said. “What’s wrong with that?”

She missed by a mile, and I ran for the ball, sliding on some ice and falling on my ass. You could hear the crack of the ice below me so clearly. Kate laughed, standing there in the dark. I came back and she rubbed my tailbone in a cute though perhaps patronizing gesture.

I asked, “What if people didn’t like the story? Would you still like the memory?”

“But people do like the story,” she said. “That’s what makes it so good.”

I said, “Yeah, but what I’m saying is that you’re basing the quality of your own memory on other people’s opinions. Shouldn’t it be more about you?”

“I don’t see the point.”

I felt beaten up. There was no way I was ever going to match her at sports or sex or screwy logic. She had enough endurance to keep rising to higher and heavier levels of reason and existence.

I don’t know why, but I asked, “So what was your wedding going to be like?”

“My what?” she replied, stopping short. Even the dribble came to an abrupt end.

“I’m just trying to fill in the holes,” I said. “You know, getting to know one another.”

“Well, don’t,” she said. “And don’t ask me how he was in bed, either.”

“I wasn’t planning on it,” I said.

“Good.”

“You didn’t plan it at all?”

“I said don’t,” she said, continuing the game seemingly without me. She shot and got another in. “And no.”

I said, “I don’t believe that. Hell, I’m a guy, and I pretty much know how mine’s going to be.”

“Yeah, but what does being a ‘guy’ have to do with anything when it comes to you?” She used air quotes when she said ‘guy.’

“I can’t tell if that’s a knock or not,” I said.

“It’s neither,” she said, checking me, “It’s just an observation. You’re not hung up on being super-masculine all the time. It’s cute sometimes. But it’s mostly just strange.”

“So what, you’re the guy in this relationship?”

She thought about it for a second. “I guess so. I mean, take the whole ‘guy’ thing as an idea instead of this fixed label and you could just put it on a woman, right? I’ve always thought that anyway, but maybe that’s because I’m a sports nut.”

“Yeah, that kind of makes sense.”

“But,” she said. “I’ve always had this little theory.” I shot and hit one, tying it up again. “I always thought the whole idea that boys and girls are automatically attracted to each other to be a little naïve, and that maybe things are a little more complicated.”

“I’m not sure I’m getting it,” I said.

“It’s like this sliding scale. Like, on one end is total masculinity, and on the other is total femininity, and neither of these things has anything to do with gender. Me, I’m somewhere in the masculine camp, and I’m probably best attracted to my opposite, which would be slightly effeminate.”

“Like me?” I asked sarcastically.

“Sure, why not,” she said. “And that’s why you were attracted to Shawn. He’s just chock full of an asshole masculinity that’s really sexy, and you just match up with, and everything balances out. Get it?”

“I think so,” I said, “But I’m not sure I want to. You’re saying I’m really in tune with him?”

“I guess that’s why I didn’t really freak out as much as you thought I might when I heard about you two. I mean, it’s not like it’s this thing where you’re only interested in guys, right? I mean, sure, that might be the case, but I think most people fall into this grey zone where we need to figure out how much masculinity and femininity we have in us and find our opposites to make it complete.”

“That’s how you figured I wasn’t gay, huh?” I asked.

“That,” she said, “And the fact that I’d slept with you before finding out.”

I stopped playing. “I’m not sure I like this theory of yours.”

“You got a better one?” she asked, daring, as if she knew I had one in the making. I thought about mine. My spectrum was not necessarily about sex, but about happiness on the whole. I could tell her about it, but at this point, it was like a favourite song. I couldn’t offer it up to criticism in case it was destroyed completely and I was left with nothing of my own.

“No,” I said. “I never think about life or love, ever.”

“If you’re not going to play,” she said, throwing me the ball. “Then it’s no fun.”

“Seriously,” I said, dribbling again. My hands were beginning to freeze. “I just kind of go with everything.”

“Oh that’s bullshit, and I can smell it from here,” she said. “You just told me that you had your wedding planned. That, Scott, is not much of a fit with everything.”

She had me pinned. I tried to shoot, but she blocked everything. “Fine,” I said. “I’m probably a lot more effeminate that I’d ever care to admit. But that doesn’t mean I over-plan everything in annoying detail.”

She took the ball right from my hands. “That’s mine, bitch.”

I stopped again. “Hey, that’s not fair.”

She laughed and put on this bad southern accent. She said, “I just calls ‘em as I sees ‘em.”

“I can leave anytime I want to,” I said.

“Yeah?” she dared me, “Go. Get.”

“You don’t want me to leave,” I said, realizing that this was probably not the right answer.

A really serious look came over her face. “What I want is irrelevant here. The point is, you won’t go.”

All of a sudden, we were playing chicken, and she had me. If I stayed, she was right about everything. If I left, then I left, and being right and wrong ceased to matter. I didn’t leave.

*

Kate and I were drinking beers on her patio that night; her friends had dropped by, unexpected. There were three of them: Jackie, Phil, and Stephen. Jackie and Phil were a couple Kate and Ray had known from college. They were the kind of friends that only ever did anything as couples, so it was always the four of them. It was like a tightly-cast sitcom with alternating special guests. Stephen was another college friend, and had assumed there would be beer, and was right. We were nearly done with Ray's stash, and would finish it all off fast. I had run out to grab extras, and had just come back to the porch as Stephen was explaining the foibles of his last relationship.

"See, what was wrong with her was that she didn't get how important I was to myself." Stephen talked with his hands. His face was unshaven. His ball hat was old and ratty. "You know those girls who give you lots of space and are cool about you really doing something with yourself? Stacy was not like that at all. She just smothered me, right? It was really just like, work, sleep, Stacy. It was work, sleep, and Stacy, over and over. I couldn't take it. It was too much."

I felt comfortable in this little group, and it was nice to think that Kate was willing to share her friends with me.

"And it's not that she was just clingy with my time," he said. "No, she was clingy with everything. I couldn't visit my parents without her coming along. She'd call me at work every chance she'd get. It was always 'I was just thinking about you' or 'oh, I for-

got to tell you this earlier.' Fucking terrible, man. I tell you."

I said, "Well, I don't know, but I think that kind of attention is really sweet. She obviously cared about you."

"She obviously wanted to wear me down until she could wrap her body around me and squeeze," he said, trying to imitate a giant snake with his arms and legs outstretched. "Seriously dude, I'm betting you've never been in that situation. You'd know if you were. It's like, every minute, there she is."

"No, I've been there," I said, totally elated to be in this conversation with a stranger. "I think the difference between you and me is that I like that kind of passionate attention. I like to know that the person I'm with can't focus well without me. Like, love is supposed to be this all-encompassing obsession, right? I totally buy that, and I love it when I find myself in the thick of it. It sucks when it goes sour, and I feel for you, but I'm sure there was some point in time when you loved it that she'd call every ten minutes to tell you something cute."

"Shit," Jackie said, "Kate, where'd you find this guy?"

Jackie looked like every best friend I'd ever seen. She was thinner than Kate, and her blonde hair was similar in length. Her jeans were looser, her shoes newer. She smiled less. She was incredibly aware that Phil thought the world of her, and this annoyed her a little. It was clear she loved him too, but she dropped his hand a few times when he tried to hold hers. I wondered how long they'd been together, if Phil had stayed crazy about Jackie, if she had found a plateau and set up camp there.

"High school," Kate said.

“So you’ve known her longer than us, eh?” Phil asked me, clinking beers with mine. He shifted his weight to face his girlfriend and gave her this weird, scheming look. Phil said, “Maybe he can tell us.”

“No,” Kate sharply shot the idea down. “He won’t.”

“Tell you what?” I asked. I looked at Kate, and her face became stone.

“Well, we met her in college, right?” Phil said. “But none of us ever really knew what she was like before that. Was she the same, or like, a completely different person?”

“Well,” I said. “I was different, definitely.”

“I was totally a different person,” Jackie said.

“Exactly,” I said. “But with Kate, I think it’s different.”

“Hey, let’s not play the asshole game,” Kate said, glaring at me. I didn’t know what nugget of embarrassment she was trying to hide. Did I know something I shouldn’t? How good were these friends?

I said, smiling, “Maybe because I’ve known her for so long, or maybe because I’ve always had this image of her, you know? Like, I’m the kind of person who sets up a mental image or idea of everyone, and that never really changes. So even if she turned out to be completely different, she’s still the same girl that was nice enough to talk to me when I was insecure and just needed a friend.”

Kate went red, but in a good way. She hadn’t expected me to play along this well.

Jackie said, “That’s like, the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

Jackie reminded me of the talk Kate gave me when she pulled me aside earlier this evening. She asked me to act like I was just a friend, because she didn't want to get into the messy stuff. She wasn't ready to talk about Ray yet, and nobody but me knew about it. Kate told me that Jackie would likely suspect something, but speculation wasn't fire. It was just smoke, and since she couldn't stop the smoke, Kate figured it'd be best to just not stoke a fire.

Phil said, "So, why didn't you two ever hook up?"

I was a little insulted to think it was so obvious that we hadn't.

"Don't think I didn't want to," Kate said. "But unfortunately for me, Scott here never really liked me."

I had learned years before that the secret to blending in with people so much more confident than you was to fake it convincingly. The way to do this was to make ballsy claims that nobody could really refute, ideas that seemed to exist just within a hair of credibility but beyond challenge, like the one of Kate ever having a crush on me. It wouldn't be difficult to play along with Kate here because I'd danced the same dance with other girls who enjoyed creating fiction of life. What was more interesting, however, was that Kate would try to make anything up at all. Was Kate hiding insecurities? Or was she simply hiding me by going in the opposite direction?

I played along by telling the truth. "Hey, it's not that I didn't like you, it's that I was always far too scared to say anything. You were the same way, huh?"

"Exactly," Kate said. Everyone seemed pleased with this.

The conversation kept at this pace for hours. I didn't flinch. Nobody suspected that I didn't belong, and that gave me this great

sense of arrival that I hadn't been able to taste since moving to this city. I came to believe in the comfort I felt at this point, and wrapped myself with it as I would with a warm blanket, like the kind that could soften cold, bare walls.

When the drinks were gone, our guests' departure soon followed, and as we got ourselves upstairs, I thought about how I'd probably missed out on years of this sort of thing for no goddamn reason at all.

*

"You're going to love this place," she said. "It's my favourite restaurant in the city."

We had just been seated in front of a sunken, black fire-pit. I told Kate yesterday that I had never been to a Korean restaurant, and tonight we sat in a crowded hallway. The food arrived on small trays. Everything was raw. The stove divided us. We cooked as we ate. "It's so much fun," she said. "But, be careful. Once, I only half-cooked a piece of pork and ended up in the hospital."

"Great," I said, placing a small, square piece of beef on the grill. It was turning colours within seconds. "Should it do that?"

"Yeah, it's supposed to be quick," she said, dunking some chicken.

"Morrissey would kill me for this," I said.

"What?"

"You know," I said, "Lead singer of The Smiths. They put out an album called 'Meat Is Murder.' He's a pretty avid vegetarian."

"Huh," Kate said, chewing on a carrot. "Never heard of them."

“Really? You must have heard them at some point. Come on. Does ‘Hang the DJ’ ring a bell?”

“Is that one of their songs?”

“Well, it’s part of the chorus for one of their songs,” I said.

She said, “Don’t you hate it when band name songs after things that have nothing to do with the song?”

“Maybe they’re trying to be artsy.”

“Pheh,” she said, waving dismissively.

I said, “Well, who can argue with that?”

“Your beef is done,” she said, pointing with tongs. I picked it up with my fork and dropped it on the small plate in front of me.

“Majestic,” I commented, sarcastically. It tasted like beef, but I still didn’t see the point.

This entire setup wasn’t particularly suited to having a conversation. There was so much attention required for dinner that an extensive conversation was just going to ruin the whole experience. However, Kate had no problem attending to both at the same time.

She said, “Did I tell you I was in Korea for a little while?”

“When?”

She said, “Just after college. I thought it’d be a blast, you know? Teaching English was supposedly this easy job with free rent and lots of parties on the weekends. So I go, and they gave me this tiny crab-shack of an apartment with three chairs and a bed. It’s way out in the country, right? So it’s like an hour and a half to the closest bar that’s not full of farmers. The kids never listened to a word I said, and the Korean teacher they partnered me with never talked to me. Thank God for online poker.”

I was surprised it took her this long to tell me this story. Leaving the continent for half a year seems like the kind of thing that would have come up much earlier on in the relationship. What other amazing things hadn't she told me? I played it cool and asked her, "I heard these teaching enterprises kept you there for a year?"

"Yeah," she said. "Most people stay for the year, and I've heard that most people like it. But it just wasn't for me, you know? So I saved up enough to not make it a complete waste of time, gave my 30 days, and bolted. Since then, I've been at the job I'm at now. It was the first thing I could find."

"Hey," I said. "Look at you. You're opening up."

Kate picked up her chicken with chopsticks and held it for a second. "No, I'm just filling in the blanks. The only thing I took away from the experience was an appreciation for the food. Kimchi cures just about everything."

"So it's a total meat-fest over there, huh?" I asked, cooking my chicken, turning it with metal tongs. We were both breathing in the smoke,

"Oh my God," she said, biting into grilled fish. "Meat-fest. That's what I used to call porn."

"Are the bones still in that fish?" I asked, noticing more and more why I shouldn't be eating this stuff.

"Yeah, you've got to be careful," she said, laughing. "Seriously. Meat-fest. I haven't heard that in years."

I said, "It does work for porn, I guess."

"It totally does. Not only porn but orgies, too."

"Were you ever in one of those?"

Kate said, "Hey, private!"

I said, "I sleep with you every night. I have wounds that refuse to heal to prove it."

"So?" she said. "Just because you're in my bed doesn't mean you get to be in my head."

"Well, when will that be?" I asked, picking at something that looked like chicken but came from a different tray.

"You want to talk about futures?" she asked.

In between bites, I said, "Sure. We've talked about everything else." I was lying. I figured there were at least a hundred crazy stories I hadn't extracted from this girl. But I could tell that this was the moment where I would learn whether or not Kate had any real plans for this relationship.

"You go first," she said, obliterating any shot I'd have at this.

"Okay. Wait. I'm not really one hundred percent on what you mean."

Kate poured some soy sauce on her fish and asked, "You don't have any big dreams or goals that you've set out to accomplish? No big mission?"

"No," I said. "I think I knew everything would work out, but I never hammered out any real plan. It's stupid, I guess, but I left it up to fate."

I paused.

"That sounded tired," I said. "But I think it's true. Up until Shawn happened, I really didn't know who I was. And up until you happened, I didn't know that there was something wrong with that."

She said, "You're saying that I've screwed everything up for you."

“Yes, essentially. This beef is kind of terrible.”

“Pour some hot sauce on it,” she said. “I understand. Trust me. I know what it’s like to wrap your life around the idea of someone and then have it damaged by a sudden departure.”

“Well, yeah,” I said. “So, anyway. That’s me. What about you?”

“Well, I just told you,” she said, grilling vegetables along with pork. “It’s all shot to hell, right? I have no idea what I’m doing now. I’m really playing by Ackerman.”

“Ackerman?” I asked. This, I feared, was going to be lame.

“Yeah, it’s this phrase I had in college,” she said. “Huh. Isn’t that funny? I haven’t said that since college. Like, I have never uttered it since. But there it is, just slipping out, like leftover drunken memories told the morning your new roommate moves in because you need a story to tell over toast.”

“This was a stupid idea for a restaurant,” I blurted out. “What if you couldn’t cook? What if the very reason you left the house to get food at a restaurant was because if you cooked by yourself you’d end up poisoned or dead? What if someone got incredibly sick here because they couldn’t cook and they sued the place?”

“Anyways,” she said, completely ignoring my incredibly valid point. “Diane Ackerman came up with this one quote that I just fell in love with when I first saw it. It was in this quote about travelling. Ever since, whenever I’ve really felt this way, I’ve had her to fall back on,”

I stopped picking at the increasingly suspicious meat and paid full attention to her. Kate sat upright and appeared to begin a scene from a very old play.

“It began in mystery, and it will end in mystery, but what a

savage and beautiful country lies in between."

I asked, "Are you talking about this restaurant or our relationship?"

Kate made a face that told me I wouldn't be receiving an answer. That was okay. I didn't want to talk to Kate about the wisdom of stealing quotes from books, or how she probably had it out of the proper context somehow. I didn't want to challenge her idea of a divine truth. The only thing I wanted was to burrow inside whatever idea she had of the future that wouldn't be destroyed by oncoming storms.

*

We were sitting in Kate's kitchen. The sun had set about an hour ago. Calgary's days can last forever on a warm day. I'd made lunch. We'd eaten and cleaned up, and now we were sitting there.

"You've run out of things for us to do, haven't you?" I asked.

"No," she quipped. "Why would you say that?"

"Because it looks like you're thinking of something, but nothing's coming."

Kate gave me this look that said 'don't be ridiculous.'

She said, "I'm thinking of having a party tomorrow night. It's the end of the week, after all."

"It is?" It had gone by so quickly, I hadn't noticed. I hadn't really thought about what would happen afterwards. What was Kate going to do with me now that the week was over? That was a stupid question. This wasn't it. She wasn't going to use me for a week and then just take off. It wouldn't be like that. It wouldn't make

any sense. Even if that's how it might have started, that's not how it'd end. She won't use me. Kate wouldn't do that.

It was when I saw how naive I was being that I began to wonder if I was in love with her. My sane friends would say that it was impossible. I simply had not been with her long enough for that kind of sentiment to grow in me. To them, I'd say that all of the hours I'd spent with Kate this week would add up to the hours they'd managed to actually be in love. I was in love with Carly, and the feeling I had now was close. This time, it seemed older, more aware, but it was still beating my keener senses down to make room for the sensual escapades of sweaty dreaming. I was suddenly oblivious to the fact that Kate would ever intentionally hurt me, and this, above all things, was love as I knew it. Barring any better guidepost, the best I could do was make sail and hope for wind.

"Kate," I began, "I..."

Kate's phone rang. She put her finger up to me, like she did every time she interrupted whatever it was I was about to say.

"Yeah?" she said to somebody. "Of course you can come. Sure, bring it all. Will who be here?"

I moved closer to the phone, trying to be cute, spying on her. She grabbed my shoulder with a stretched-out arm and held me in place. She shook her head and widened her eyes and at that moment, I should have known exactly who she was talking about.

"I'll be in the other room," I whispered, and left. Her eyes stayed fixated on a ghost I couldn't see.

I sat down on her couch and thought about our entanglement. They were friends, and somehow she had already gotten the word

out about a party. Shawn was never one to stay home, so he would call. This made sense. Regardless of plans, he would invariably call her at some point. He didn't know I was staying here. He didn't know half of the situation. This is going to be weird for him. He'd never seen me with a girl. Every moment that I've known Shawn, he was it for me. No other girl or boy had been able to sustain my attention until Kate came along. In a flash, I considered his feelings. Just as swiftly, I crinkled these feelings into imaginary paper balls and bounced them off an imaginary waste basket somewhere inside my head.

Kate put her lips on my neck, and kissed me for a moment before I could think to speak.

"Hey," I said. "I don't think I want to go to this party."

She moved down, pulling my shirt to the side and kissing my shoulder. She whispered, "Yes, you do. I want to introduce you to the rest of my friends."

Her arms were wrapped around me, and her hands were working slowly on my buttons. I tried to explain. I said, "It's just that parties aren't really my thing. I always get uncomfortable and nothing good ever comes of it." None of this was completely true.

She pulled the shirt off my back and hugged me tight. She said, "No good comes from any party, honey. But good things aren't really the point of parties, are they?"

"Look," I said. "I'm serious."

"Scott," she told me. "Quiet."

She turned me around and kissed my cheek and began to work downward. She didn't want to talk. She put a finger to my lips and kissed me.

“Hold on,” I said. “Are you taking my clothes off just so that I won’t protest this party anymore?”

She nodded her head. “That’s exactly why. So shut up and enjoy it, cowboy.”

She put her hair up in a ponytail as she began to kiss my chest. My hands were on her shoulders, playing with the straps of her bra.

Kate grabbed my belt and yanked it out. I told her to stand up, and then I pulled off her top. Jeans were slid off. We landed on the couch, and were at each other in the kind of ravage I’d grown accustomed to since Kate first kissed me near the river. I had quickly learned how she liked to fuck. It did not take long to adjust.

In seconds, we were naked. She was not one for foreplay. Our clothes were deserted in stormy piles on her floor. It was all propulsion, mileage, and damage. Her nails dug into my side and I moaned. My teeth pulled at her nipples and collarbone, and she seemed to purr.

Sex with Kate was a hot wind coming from all directions. I had to give up all other thoughts if I wanted to keep up with her. It wasn’t like being used. She wanted me to be as hungry as she was, but there was just no way I could muster that kind of animal behaviour on cue. I left no marks on Kate. I was too weak to draw blood, but she wasn’t.

We fell to the floor together. Kate was on top, her hands tight against my chest, her lips all over mine. Her ponytail fell on my right shoulder, and my hands held her ass. The carpet rubbed against the claw marks, electrifying every inch. She saw the pain on my face, and she smiled that beautiful naked smile that got me in this mess in the first place.

Kate repositioned us so that I was on top, but she gave up none of the control. Her legs wrapped around my ass, and she was halfway off the ground. Every time I tried to kiss her gently, she would lunge her tongue inside my mouth. Kate sped up, but we weren't synchronized. She grabbed the back of my neck. She wanted to be pulled up, and I yanked back.

Kate straddled her weight on my thighs and she looked at me, biting her lip. It wasn't the kind of sex that lasted forever, and it was mostly because of her pace. I couldn't imagine anyone who practiced Kate's style of fucking producing a respectable time.

She flipped us again to make it last a few moments longer. She put me behind her. She grabbed the edge of the couch pulled my cock in. I put my hands on her shoulders and tried to keep as close as possible. I didn't like keeping my distance during sex. I wanted sweat on sweat, grind on grind. People don't fuck to create babies anymore. They did it to exchange fluids.

Kate grabbed one of my hands and put it on her ponytail. She wanted me to pull her hair when she came. It was one of her things.

She came. Her right heel came down on my foot and nearly broke it. I lost balance, and we collapsed to the ground. All of the intensity numbed into a dull pain, but the pain was still too distant to think about after what'd just happened. "Wow," She said. "That's new."

"Which part?"

"We came at the same time," she said, panting. "Not bad."

"That's never happened before," I said. I felt bad about it, but I lied. I may have cried out, but I hadn't come.

“Well, I’m sure someone’s done it,” she said, grabbing hold of my left hand and giving me a sweaty kiss.

We lay there for a moment, watching the ceiling fan, my cock still mid-throb.

“To answer your question,” Kate purred, “ About the party, anyway. We’ve talked about this before. Wouldn’t you rather have a great memory than a great time?”

“Even if the memory is awful?”

“Even then,” she said.

“I don’t know. I guess it all depends on how you gauge happiness.”

“Well,” Kate asked, “How do you gauge happiness?”

Kate was agreeing with the idea of my spectrum to a degree, even if her understanding of it went way beyond my theory. To me, the really unmemorable and uncool people had to be the happiest, because that was the only way the universe could be fair. But my spectrum left out the one absolute in life. Life’s really not fair, no matter what theory you use. Life will always slice through you using someone else’s theories. Kate always had the upper hand on my ideas about life.

Thank you, Kate. You’ve destroyed it completely this time.

“Kate,” I began again, “I...”

She put her finger to my lips again and inched closer. She whispered, “We’ll have none of that.”

I listened to the still air and realized that the winds outside had slowed. Eventually, we got dressed and finished up the last day, getting ready for this big party.

No Chinook

* * *



I met Mark for the second time at a party I didn't want to attend. It had been a few months since I moved to Calgary, one city jump from a small suburban town a few hours away where my parents lived—the same town Kate was from. I spent most of my time this past week cooking, fucking, and beginning something that might turn into love someday. I wasn't completely sure about that yet, but I was happy being in a relationship that wasn't riddled with lies. It was everything I'd ever wanted. Kate had organized this party at her place, and there he was, all dressed up and ready.

I hadn't yet spotted Shawn, but knew he had to be around somewhere. He had called Kate the night before to make sure I would not be here, or maybe to make sure I would. Mark must have come along. I was perfectly happy to be drinking in the kitchen with Kate's friend Stephen, listening to him go on about his ex-girlfriend, but in the back of my mind, I knew that tonight

something would happen between Shawn and myself. Whatever it was, I just hoped it that it would be for the best.

“The biggest problem with Stacy,” Stephen continued. He had been talking about his ex-girlfriend since the moment he saw me. “Was that she took me to the point where I had become so used to her high-maintenance issues that I began to miss the constant attention. I’d lie awake some nights wishing she’d call just so I could hear her bitch about her stupid job.”

Since I’d spotted Mark in the crowd, I had only been paying lip service to Stephen. I nodded in agreement, but kept minimally involved. Mark was talking to some girl, but I was too far away to hear him. It was fitting. Mark had always been on my mind first. I had always seen him first. But even if he did notice me, it wouldn’t mean anything. My name and my face meant nothing to him. For all I know, he’d seen me a hundred times more than I’d seen him, but it didn’t matter. We had no context between us; I disliked him for reasons I’d probably never have the chance to discuss with him.

Stephen continued, “I tried to go out with this girl Marlene, because she was really easy going and that’s what I used to like. But Stacy ruined everything, man. She changed me. I couldn’t handle how relaxed Marlene was, because I’d fallen in love with a smotherer. That’s all I wanted. Marlene didn’t call me for three days, and I dumped her. It was probably the most pathetic thing I’d ever done.”

I realized I hadn’t been listening. “What?” I asked, hoping he would clarify.

It didn’t faze him. “She was a telemarketer. I was always

telling her to find a new job, but she never did. I mean, she hates it, but she stuck with it for some reason. I don't know. Maybe she thought she deserved it, like it was where she belonged in life."

"Yeah," I said, keeping one finger on the pulse of this conversation, which was just enough for Stephen to keep going. The rest of me zoned in on Mark. I noticed his wrinkled jeans and half-ironed dress shirt. He was trying to look easy, but he'd put effort into it. His shoes were squeaky clean and white, as if he'd brought them in a backpack and put them on when he came inside.

Stephen said, "There are people who move, man, and there are people who don't. And there's nothing wrong with being either one, but you can't bring the two together, because motion will always come between them."

"Motion," I repeated as if in agreement, realizing that paying complete attention to Stephen would likely result in a headache.

Stephen took a swig of his beer and asked me if anyone had ever changed me. It was a simple enough drunk question, but I think I surprised him.

I thought about Carly. "To tell you the truth, I think everyone I've ever been with has changed what I want in some way."

"Yeah?" he asked. "Well, what about your last girl?"

"My last girl?" I wanted to talk about Kate, but the current situation prohibited it. I didn't want to bring up Shawn either, just in case he was right behind me. "Her name was Carly. She really ran me through exactly what you're talking about."

"She smothered you too?"

"Not really. More like she knew exactly the kind of guy she

liked and I did my best to fit the mold. Eventually, I just didn't fit her anymore and she left."

Stephen put his hand on my shoulder. "I know exactly what you mean. Sometimes you want to be that dominant alpha-male who makes the decisions, but when it comes down to it, that's just not who we are, you know?"

"So who are we?" I asked, realizing this particular brand of drunken talk had probably reached whatever depth it was going to.

Stephen, however, looked focused on what he was trying to say. "We're like buildings torn apart by winds and storms. Women, they're the wind, man. They come along and they blow by us and rip us from the foundations."

Roughly half of his rant had been slurred past the point of recognition, so I said, "Motion eventually tears us apart, eh?"

Stephen shouted, "Fucking right man! That's what I'm saying. Why don't I get to be in control? Why can't I be the storm, huh? Why do I have to be stuck waiting for someone to blow me down? That's not how it's supposed to work!" The people around us were giving him room, doing their best to be entertained by the spectacle. Stephen continued, "I'm so sick of letting other people control my life! Fuck you Stacy! Fuck you!" He pointed at all of us, and then we could all see him shut down. It was quite the sight, watching Stephen slowly crumble into himself.

I put my hand on his shoulder like he had done to me and I said, "Yeah man, fuck her."

"Whatever," he said. "It doesn't matter. She's gone and there's no bringing them back once they're gone. Not with guys like us. We just don't have it in us to make them want to come back."

I liked Stephen. He wasn't afraid to show exactly what he felt, even if it was brash and came out around total strangers. Still, I didn't want anything he'd just said to ever be right.

I took Stephen outside to get some air, and when he waved me off, I came back and was caught by Kate.

"Hey you!" she said, being flirtatious but not obvious. "I came to check up on you. How's the night?"

Kate had done her hair up a little prettier than normal. She had curls coming out of her ponytail, and she was wearing a black dress and boots. This was probably the sexiest I'd ever seen her dressed.

"Can't complain so far," I said, "I just hope it stays its course."

I felt the same about her now as I had when I'd first seen her at Shawn's party. She kind of danced when she walked and she talked with her arms outstretched. And just like the last time, she wasn't really paying any attention to me. She said, "That's great, honey. If you need me, I'll be around somewhere, okay?"

"You all right?" I asked, spinning her around to face me.

She put her hands on my face and said, "What a stupid question."

I let her go, and I turned around and bumped right into Mark. He spilled part of his beer on the floor.

"It's okay," he exclaimed. "It's only a little." He tried to rub out the tiny spot with his shoes, and smiled at me with an idiotic toothy grin that told me that he wasn't being himself.

In this moment, I couldn't imagine that Shawn would have trouble choosing which one of us to love.

"There," he said. "Nothing but spic."

I hadn't noticed this before because of the distance and people between us, but Mark appeared to be in bad shape. It wasn't just his clothes. He had obviously drunk too much; he seemed to have tear tracks on his face and dark circles under his eyes. He backed up a bit to really look at me. "Do I know you? Have we met?"

I said, "Not really."

"I swear I've seen you before," he said, holding on tight to his beer with one hand and his hair with the other, as if this would help him from falling over.

I tried to escape, "I'm sorry, I've got someone to get a drink for."

"Did we go out that one time?" He asked. I stopped myself and counted to ten in my head.

"No," I said, "We definitely did not go out that one time."

He grabbed my shoulder, "I'm sorry. Really, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to insinuate anything. I was just..."

I said, "I get it."

"Oh good," he said, "I didn't want it to come out like I was hitting on you or something."

Suddenly, I wondered just how flirtatious Kate seemed when I met her at that party. Had she been hitting on me when she was with Ray?

I told Mark, "Trust me, I wasn't thinking anything like that."

"Well," he said, "My mistake. I guess I'll just keep looking around."

"Looking around for what?" I asked him, genuinely curious. Was he looking for Shawn? Did he know Kate too? Everybody seemed to.

“Can I ask you something?”

“It’s a free country,” I said. I did not want to be caught having a heart to heart with Mark. This is just about the last awkward situation I was willing to encounter in my lifetime.

“Have you ever had your heart broken?”

“What?” I needed to leave this hallway. I didn’t want to know that anything had happened. For once in my life, I much preferred to be blind to the truth.

“You know,” he said. “Where you love somebody with everything you’ve got, and they take what you’ve built together and just smash it? Has that ever happened to you?”

He didn’t have to tell me anything more. I could picture everything that happened just by looking at his face. Something remarkable had occurred in the few days I’d been gone from my previous life. It was more than I wanted to hear.

“My boyfriend,” he said. “He told me last weekend that he’s been seeing this other guy for, like, months now. He said he couldn’t live with lying to me all the time anymore. Can you believe that?”

I didn’t want to know any of this because I was fine with Mark being the stupid asshole that drove a minivan. This image sat well with me. But the moment he began speaking about Shawn, I knew I’d begin to think of Mark as a human being with feelings that could be bruised. These few words he’d just been saying transformed him from a dangerous, unwelcome roadblock to a defenseless kitten.

“Come on,” I said, taking his beer. “Let’s get out of here. I think we both need some air.”

I took him outside and tried to sort out the particulars so that nobody would see us together. It was an hour away from new snow; I could smell it. I said, “So, what, you were trying to pick up in there?”

“Well,” he said, sniffing, “I called my friend up yesterday. I didn’t tell her what happened, but I told her that I needed a distraction for a while, so she invited me to her party.”

“That was you?” I asked out loud, fitting another puzzle piece together.

“Huh?”

“Nothing,” I said. I had no idea that he knew Kate, but wasn’t spectacularly surprised. “What happened?”

“Do you mind walking me to the subway?” he asked. “The fresh air’s killed my buzz, and it’s a dead room in there.”

“Sure,” I said. “It’s this way. Just don’t pull the moves on me.”

“I wouldn’t,” he said. “You’re nice.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Mark told me about Shawn. He started from the beginning, giving it some much-welcomed context. Shawn and Mark were together for two years until the cheating began, if you could call it that. He didn’t know anything about this other guy—only that Shawn had some pretty deep feelings for him that he couldn’t get over. Apparently they’d had some kind of falling out recently, and that had cut Shawn to the point where he couldn’t keep it a secret any longer. I knew all this already, but my version seemed skewed. Small pieces of me felt bad about hurting this guy. A very specific part of my gut began to feel terrible for coming inbetween two perfectly happy people.

“Shawn and I just fit, you know?” Mark stumbled a lot, but knew what he was trying to say. “I could be honest with him. I told him things about me I’d never told anyone before. God, we were together for so long. What did I do wrong? I must have done something. People cheat for a reason, right?”

“I suppose,” I said, feeling like a spy before an inevitable revelation of identity.

“Have you ever been cheated on?” he asked.

Just like with Stephen, I had to think back to Carly. “Yeah, once.”

“Why did he do it?”

“She,” I corrected him. “I wasn’t exciting enough for her, I think.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” he tried to reassure me. I felt awful. Mark seemed like a perfectly good guy, and it was clear that I was a shit who’d failed to consider the whole arrangement. At some point, I must have thought about Mark and what he could have been feeling. I felt terrible for dismissing him so quickly.

He told me that things weren’t settled with the two of them, and it wouldn’t be right to end it abruptly without letting the feelings settle. It made me feel pity towards Mark, though. I pictured him incapable of handling the end of a relationship, falling apart in his shitty apartment. I couldn’t no longer help but see Mark as a powerful figure in Shawn’s life, and how important it was to him to make sure things stayed straight, as it were.

Shawn was in love with me, but he didn’t want that kind of black mark on him without at least making some sort of attempt at atonement. He wanted to do it right, because he respected

Mark, and while I half-hated the bastard, I admired Mark for being worthy of that kind of respect.

“Mark,” I said calmly. “I want you to listen to me.”

“Huh?” he asked. He looked like a lost puppy.

“You’re going to be fine, okay?” I always wanted someone to come out of nowhere and tell me these things. I thought, maybe I’d listen to me this time. “You’re going to meet some great guy and forget all about this Shawn character, okay?”

“But...” I don’t know if he was trying to interrupt because he didn’t want to hear it or if he had more to reveal. But I’d heard enough and needed to finish this.

“No buts,” I said, cutting him off. “I know he was great, and for a while it seemed like he might be the one, but it’s over. Things got fucked up and it’s probably just best to wipe the slate clean and start over.”

He said, slowly, “Look, I know you’re trying to help me, and this is really nice, but I can’t really believe any of that right now.”

“Fuck, I know that much,” I said. I was mostly talking to myself anyways. “But it’s still nice to hear, isn’t it?”

“It is,” he said. “Wait, how do you know my name? I never told you.”

I said, inches away from confessing, “Does the name Scott Clarkson mean anything to you?”

“No,” he said. “I’m sorry. Should it?”

I shook my head. There was no point in even telling the whole truth at this point, because the truth didn’t matter so much as the story. I’d met Mark under sad circumstances, and revealing my role in his misery at this point would only make it worse. I felt

bad enough about being the invisible cancer marring his happiness. Nothing would become clear tonight concerning the two of us.

“We’re here,” I said. “You’ll be okay getting home?”

“I don’t know what I was doing at that party,” he muttered. “I don’t know what got into me.”

“You were looking for the same thing we all look for at those parties.”

“Happiness?”

I remembered what Kate had said. “No,” I replied. “Happiness has nothing to do with it.”

“I’m getting too old for this,” he said.

I shook his hand and watched him take the stairs. I said to myself, “Me too.”

On the way back, I envisioned the scene Mark had just described, where Shawn broke the news. It must have happened after the night at the club, after he called me three dozen times and for whatever reason referred to me as his boyfriend to Kate. Or did it happen before the club? I had seen him that afternoon. I had asked him to choose between Mark and myself. I had stormed out. Had Mark come over soon after? Had they fought about it? Did Mark see me leave? Did Shawn actually confess everything? Did he tell Mark that he wanted to be with me?

For Shawn to refer to me as his boyfriend, he must have chosen me. He must have cockily assumed that I’d still want to be with him at that point, but that’s irrelevant. Kate knew both Shawn and Mark, so Shawn would have told her about the break up—though maybe skimmed a few details—and Kate felt jealous.

That's why she wanted me all to herself for the week. She figured if Shawn saw me, he'd tell me about the break up and convince me to be with him. She wanted me to herself, so she didn't tell me. It was all making sense.

But I was happy Kate lied to me. I don't care what that makes me sound like. If it had been a week earlier, I don't know which one of them I would have chosen. Now, there was no question. Kate had dug her claws into me, and their grip was strong enough to hold me. I felt like I'd do anything for her. This may not have been the healthiest of decisions, and I'm not sure if it was motivated by love or just crazy lust, but I was stuck with her until she retracted.

Stephen wasn't on the porch when I got back. He must have found his way inside again. I hoped nobody gave him anything else to drink.

I weaved through the halls, unable to find any of the few people I knew. I checked the living room, the kitchen, and the backyard. I climbed the stairs, and finally found Stephen leaning against the railing, breathing steady.

"Hey man," he said.

"Hey, have you seen Kate?" I asked.

"A little while ago," he said, "But then she left."

"Left?" I asked. "Left to go where?"

"I don't know, dude. I just heard about it, but someone told me that Ray showed up and they left together."

For a moment, I wanted to throw Stephen down the stairs. Instead, I ran out into the street, and nearly got run over by a van. Snow was falling. The street was dark and empty. I didn't know

what I was looking for. I couldn't save her from anything even if she wanted to be saved.

I looked at the house. I'd spent seven straight days in that house. But at that moment, it was the last place I wanted to be. It was filled with strangers I could no longer introduce myself to. I couldn't say I was Kate's boyfriend because everyone probably saw her leave with Ray. I couldn't say I was anyone's friend, because I wasn't. I knew Shawn, only I didn't. I knew Mark, only he didn't know me. And Mark was gone. And Shawn was gone.

I was alone, and the only move I had left was to run as fast as I could all the way home.

9

When I woke up in my own bed the next day, it didn't feel like home. I missed Kate's body; her slow breathing when she slept, her arm draped across my chest, her leg weighing down on mine. I missed her sheets, her ceiling, her bed. Walking around my apartment felt like purgatory. I'd been out so long I barely registered that my fridge was empty and all my clothes were dirty and my fish was dead.

Considering what happened the night before, I slept remarkably well. It wasn't that I wanted to sleep alone or that I didn't want to run down every street I could to look for Kate and Ray. It's that I knew exactly what was and wasn't hopeless. There were exactly two things that could have happened. Ray showed up drunk and looking to end his bereavement, or he showed up in and at his best. Kate either left so that she could formally reject him without the public drama, or they got back together. I wasn't

an idiot. It's not like my mind hadn't been on Shawn for most of the week. God knows how much she thought of Ray. It was hopeless to try to stop it. It wasn't hopeless, however, to crash and dream.

Even though I could think about the two of them reconciling, and even though that seemed like the clearest reality, it still hurt just about all over. I still had her nail marks on my back, and I still had her voice in my head. When I poured my coffee, I could hear her voice, telling me to make it stronger. When I cooked my breakfast, she would suggest burning the bacon just a little more. I hated it. I wanted her to be beside me, tugging on my shoulder, leaning on the counter, kissing my cheek and grazing the back of my ass with her thigh. I wanted her there, at my place, telling me that she found my pictures fascinating and my bed snug. I wanted her to be with me, but she wasn't, and more than likely, she never had been.

I sat back down on my bed and I cried into my hands. It was pathetic, but it's the truth. I didn't have to wonder how she could do this to me because it all came way too easily. She called me and said she needed me because I was fresh in her life, unaware of her recent drama. It had all been coincidence before that point, but she knew I wouldn't reject her.

The more I thought about it, the more I realized that Kate had copied something I'd seen back in high school almost to the letter. Josh Randle had dumped Amanda Winters a few times before she shaved her head, and during one of their breaks, we all saw her going around with Matthew Sharpton pretty much the next day. They were inseparable for about a week, and then she got

back together with Josh as if nothing had ever happened. I remembered Amanda telling us that Matthew was like a week of beautiful weather in the middle of a deadly winter. We all wondered why she didn't stay with the nice guy, but wondering never got any of us anywhere. People do what they do. They love who they love. Reason, as I've heard hundreds and hundreds of times, has just about nothing to do with it.

What this did was remind me of the night Kate threw her bracelet in the lake, and how unoriginal I found her sense of revenge and drama. I felt I'd lived through far more than Kate, and she was just now catching up to feeling things I'd experienced years before. And at that moment, finally, my spectrum crumbled. The last week's worth of events had cracked the seams and tattered the edges of my theories, but sitting on my bed in my filthy, empty apartment confirmed its destruction.

Kate was probably the most interesting person I'd ever spent that much time with, but there was absolutely no pattern that defined her. And now that she'd vanished with her ex-boyfriend, there's really no accounting for any kind of pattern.

People are happy when things are good. They're unhappy when it's shit. Sometimes, they do something about it. Sometimes they go back to the asshole that caused all their problems to begin with. Their position in life has nothing to do with anything. It was unfair, but it was irrefutable.

What it came down to was perspective. Even though I couldn't picture Kate right now, I could only imagine that she was happy with whatever choice she'd made. Shawn could be anywhere, and he was probably happy.

My phone rang in the living room. It had to be work. I hadn't even bothered calling in sick. I banged my shoulder against the door on the way out and looked at the phone. I saw Shawn's number, and for the first time in over a week, I felt I could pick up and talk to this man.

It wasn't that I needed or even wanted him. It was that he couldn't touch me in the state I was in. The one advantage to being freshly heartbroken is the shell surrounding one's vulnerability.

"We've got to get together and talk," he said, in that way he used to when he wanted to make it seem pleading but really knew I would give in eventually.

"I don't know, Shawn," I said. "I really don't see any reason to see you. I mean, if you want to talk about things like closure and acceptance, then, well, I'm really not that guy. I'm not going to get over this no matter how much closure you create. No matter what happens, I'll probably think about what happened between us and talk about it to new friends and girlfriends and boyfriends until they're really damn sick of it."

"Why do you say that?" he asked. It dawned on me that I hadn't really been like that with Shawn. I hadn't been neurotic in the way I was with other people. I hadn't been as open, either. I was always putting on my best when he was around, and it was as if my fantasies happened in parallel relationships off in other regions of the universe.

This needed to be illuminated. There was something about the brunt descent into sadness that brought the release of truth. "I guess you never really got to see the part of me that does that," I

said. "I really don't get over things. It doesn't matter if they were good or bad. If I love someone, even if it's ridiculous, it stays with me. That probably makes you happy, knowing that I'll still be talking about you years after you've forgotten about me."

"Who said anything about forgetting you?" he asked, which was sweet, but empty to me in the present circumstances.

"Whatever, Shawn. It's not like any of this is important anymore."

"What's gotten into you?" he asked, even though I could tell he wasn't actually asking me at all. "Right, of course. Kate."

"What about Kate?" I asked. "She has nothing to do with you and me."

"Yeah, she does," he said. "She has just about everything to do with it."

"How?"

"Do you know where she is right now?"

"What?"

"Well, she's not with you, right?" he asked like he already knew. "So where is she?"

"I don't know," I said. "And why do I have a feeling that I didn't need to tell you that?"

"What I'm saying here," Shawn said, his voice firmer than usual, "You need to listen to."

"What is it, Shawn?" I asked, remarkably smarmy. "You know where she is? Well, I know where she is. She's with Ray. Am I right? Did they get back together? Did she fucking use me, Shawn? I figured it out. It took me exactly two seconds to piece it together. I'm not going to get hit with this drama. I'm not in sus-

pense, and I'm not having fun. I'm fucking heartbroken. But that's how it goes. Fuck the spectrum, you know? It was just naïve and childish justifications for my shit life. That's it. That's all it was for me, and that's all I was for her, and that's all I was for you, and I'm pretty fucking sick of it all and I'd like to be left alone."

Shawn cleared his throat. I could hear him sitting down. I could hear the motion in his breath. He asked, "Are you done?"

"Are you going to make things worse?" I asked. "Because if what you have to say just makes things worse, then I don't want to hear it. I think I've got things pretty fucking wrapped up here, and it makes a nice succinct little story to tell at the bars in Europe to strangers with backpacks, and I don't want any more." I don't know what it is about telling someone off, but I felt fifteen feet tall. "So will it make it worse?"

Over the phone, miles away, wind, water, and a hundred thousand people between us, Shawn said, "I love you."

"Well shit," I said, and dropped the phone. I dropped the phone, and didn't pick it up until I could take a few breaths and lean my head against the nearest of my boring, white walls. I heard him saying "Are you still there?" because there was no noise between us.

With my hand I clenched the phone so hard it felt like it could break in my hand. I said, shivering, wanting to slam my head through the wall, "Yeah, I'm still here."

"Good," he said.

"You know, Shawn," I began. "There were so many times I wanted to hear you say that. Really, I'm serious; there were times I wanted nothing more. But even then, even those dark nights on

your patio when you held me, even those mornings in your sheets, those days in the park and at the movies, you were never really with me. But what I really wanted was to escape everyone else's cheap declarations of love."

I thought of my last week with Kate.

Then, I thought, I'm finally seeing Shawn as a man. He wasn't a cute boy for me anymore. He wasn't something I wanted to hold. He was a man, and that kind of proclamation deserved attention, if only from my own epiphanies. I didn't know what it meant, that I'd switched his station in my mind. I didn't know why he was suddenly a "man." But he was, and I wondered if maybe that meant I was over it.

I said, "I wanted you to be mine, you idiot. I wanted nothing mucking up that great thing we had, for it to be that perfect kind of love. My greatest regret about all of this is that I probably loved you, too. But it really doesn't matter now because there's no going back to that nice idea of love with you. You've ruined that, and that's all there is."

I hung up the phone. It was probably the most dramatic thing I'd ever done to someone else.

For the next few minutes, I had trouble doing anything but soaking in the air around me. I felt paralyzed to the point where breathing drained energy. I couldn't quite see more than a few feet ahead of me, and I focused on nothing. My mind was in a blanket of euphoria and I felt textures not altogether known to me. I felt way too solid, as if there weren't actually moving parts inside of me. It was completely different from every other feeling I'd ever had. And after a few minutes, I got up and left my apartment to get some fresh air.

It was overcast, and I could feel it in my chest. Maybe it's just Calgary with its messed up weather, but it's always affected my mood. As I walked around fairly aimlessly, the low ceiling limited my thoughts of Kate and Shawn. I like to think that at some point, I would have found all of this to be pretty horrible. This feeling of responsibility washed down on me, bringing with it both the gravity of what I'd done and levied some greater control. It was my fault that Shawn ever had any sort of emotional conflict with Mark. It was my fault Kate didn't fall hard on her own ass when Ray walked out with someone else. And it was my fault for believing their stories so blindly. I never really knew about Mark or Ray, but I went along with it anyway because of what I wanted.

Still, my spectrum was destroyed, and something new needed to take its place. What was left was a sky of opportunity, a blank page torn from a blank book. I finally understood that it wasn't about what we get to have in life, or how happy we can be, or any of those fucked-up inhibitions people use as excuses for why they don't think they'll ever hook up with the people they have pathetic crushes on. It wasn't about any of that anymore, because the last three weeks I bagged a hot art teacher who had a perfectly good boyfriend, *and* had amazing sex with a gorgeous blonde that even knew my lame past.

None of this made me feel good, really. But it kept me from feeling bad, and that would have to be enough for now.

Good memories of Shawn and me flashed through my mind, and I liked that I could still focus on the fact that there were moments of happiness between us. For the most part, Kate's brief foray into my life had been unbelievable, but I couldn't help fo-

cusing on how well I'd performed. I made them both laugh and think and feel safe and satisfied. In so many ways here, I felt like I was coming out of this situation feeling better about who I was.

I sat down on a half-melted pile of snow at the corner of a stranger's driveway and pulled out my phone and called Shawn, feeling better about everything.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out as quickly as he could. "I'm so glad you called back."

"Shawn," I began. "It's fine. It's all okay now."

"Why?" he said, not sounding sure of anything. "I mean, what's happened?"

I was calm. "Nothing, really. Listen, what are you doing this afternoon?"

He was suspicious, but hopeful. He said, "What's going on?"

"Nothing," I laughed. "I just told you, everything's fine now."

"I don't believe you."

"Shawn, my ass is getting numb from sitting on this pile of snow in front of a house I've never seen before. I would like to come over to your place, but if you don't want me to I'm sure I could go find somewhere to bury myself for the evening."

"Is it that you don't want to be alone right now?"

Shawn didn't get it, but that was fine. It was no longer his job to get anything about me. I said, "Sure, lets go with that."

I got on the subway and listened to Kate's voice in my head. My eyes were open this wide now because of Kate. I was feeling something powerful that I could not explain. Perhaps it was the feeling Carly had on her bike, leaving town. Perhaps it was the feeling of the dog left on the edge of town. I didn't know exactly

what form of freedom it entailed, but I knew I was at least in the right country.

I wondered if it was possible that I was going through the five stages of grief, and that I was planted in denial. At first I discounted it. I was ridiculous for analyzing myself as being in denial when I felt so clear, but the more I thought about it, the more I figured this might be the case. I hurt in so many places, but it had nothing to do with regret or bereavement.

The thing was, I may have felt that I had been in love with Scott and Kate at different times, but I had never really been in love with either. I wasn't lying to Shawn over the phone, but I certainly didn't love him entirely. There wasn't any moment where I was completely aware of what was happening. And while there was obviously a period where I thought I could trust Kate, that period of time wasn't terribly long. It simply wasn't long enough to warrant any sort of unexpected trust.

While the train sped by black walls and lamps, I looked at nothing and knew that I was probably over-thinking everything, just like I always did. Still, it was the process of seeing every angle and getting every idea that brought me to this strange place. Any self-respecting neurotic would be pissed at both of my lovers, but I sat here only disappointed in who these people turned out to be.

I climbed the stairs of the subway and felt my phone vibrate. While I was underground, Kate had tried to call. There was a message.

"Scott, I need to talk to you. I know it sounds stupid and I sound stupid and you probably won't like it, but please, call me back when you get this so we can get together and talk, okay?"

She must not have been expecting me to have pieced everything together so quickly. I leaned up against a brick wall and called her. It was freezing, but I didn't think the call would last very long.

"Hi," I said, as cold as I could.

She sounded embarrassed already, as if she'd run over my dog. "Hi Scott. I have something to tell you."

"I already know," I said. "A guy at your party told me."

Silence, then, "I guess that's why you left, huh?"

"What good would staying have done?"

"I guess you're right," she said. "Scott, I'm so, so sorry."

"So you're back with him? He's moved back in?"

"It's..." she paused, searching for the right way to break it to me gently. "It's going slowly. But I love him. I know that makes me sound weak. Look, most of the time I do a pretty good job of staying tough, but I love him."

"I get it," I said. "You don't have to explain it to me."

"You were amazing though, Scott. Please don't take this as anything against you."

"Kate, I'm not mad."

She sounded bewildered. "No offence Scott, but I don't really see how you wouldn't be."

I said, "I guess because I never figured it would work out to anything real anyway, you know? Knowing that you're totally fine ditching me without an explanation just certified it. It's not about me being in your league or anything like that. I just never saw us together. Frankly, I was never really all there, either." I paused, deciding for once to let guilt dig in further than it had to. "I mean,

I didn't leave you at a party with your ex boyfriends' ex boyfriend, but it's not like I didn't think about Shawn."

"I know," she said. "I could tell when you were. And when I brought him up, it was like I caught you or something."

"I'm not forgiving you Kate," I said, getting back to the short and the sweet. "It's not going to be like that. We're never going to be friends, and I don't really want to ever see you again."

"Scott," she tried to say something, but I just kept going as if I'd rehearsed it.

"I'm not sorry I met you Kate, and I'm not sorry I met you again. I'm not sorry I went dancing with you and paid attention to the kind of beer you liked. I'm not sorry for giving up a whole week of my life so that you could try to get over a guy you'd just get back together with anyway. I'm not sorry I made you laugh and that we had fantastic sex and that I cooked you just about everything I know how to make. I'm not sorry about any of that, but really Kate, but I'm not sorry that it's done, either."

"Scott, I'm sorry," she said, and I could tell she meant it because I could hear her voice quiver. "In so many ways you're better than he is. I wish I could tell you all the reasons."

"There aren't any reasons, Kate. At least, there aren't any reasons that matter. You made your choice, and that's fine."

"It's that final, huh?"

"Yeah, it is," I said, feeling like I'd just stuck myself in a state of denial. "Goodbye."

"Wait," she insisted. "I want to tell you my job."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because," she said. "Because it means something to me to tell you."

I wanted so badly to have the courage to say no, because doing that would show her that I would really be able to move on. But I knew I would never really be able to anyway, and what could be more temporarily final than fixing in this last little puzzle-piece?

“Sure,” I said, “Tell me.”

Kate told me what she did for a living. In my head, her image changed, parts of it becoming cemented. The words she said held incredible weight, but I had no cargo ship to hold it all. Some of it fell. Some of it crushed me. Some of it helped.

“I’m still sorry,” she said. “But that’s the best I can do to make you understand.”

“Kate, I want you to listen to me.” I thought of it all, and what it really was. “I’m not mad at you. There are worse things to be than a vacation from the storm.”

She didn’t really comprehend that, but it was okay. Just like her, after a while, everything I said I was saying for my own sake. She said goodbye, and I didn’t expect to ever hear from her until we met again.

10

As I stood outside of Shawn's place, I wondered just exactly how many people lived there. I didn't know any of them. Maybe it was four or five, but it could have easily been twice that. The total number wasn't important, however. The only thing that mattered right now was how many of them were inside right now. I wondered how many of them knew as much about Shawn as I did. It was a ludicrous idea, but I couldn't help but feel that they were all probably going to hear what was about to happen.

I knocked. It took a minute, but then a girl answered the door. I recognized her, but it took a second of squinting to focus on the name. We said, "Alice," at the same time. I was guessing and she was helping me out.

"Hi," she said. "You were at that party."

"Yeah. I remember you," I said. "You were reading that Anne Sexton book."

“Don’t remind me,” she said. I was still outside. “I failed the damn test. I really don’t know what you see in her.”

“I’m sorry about that,” I said. “If it’s any consolation, people don’t know what I see in my girlfriends, either. Is Shawn here?”

She let me in. Alice was wearing pyjama bottoms and slippers. I don’t think I woke her up. Her black hair was done nicely in a ponytail, and her makeup was done. She held her tea mug close, as if she was gathering comfort from its warmth.

I thanked her and went upstairs. I couldn’t wait for him to come to me. Thankfully Alice didn’t stop me.

I knocked on his door. I didn’t hesitate like I used to. I was always a little unsure about knocking on Shawn’s door. I think it was the thrill of it, but that was gone now. He opened it, and he looked the same. I didn’t know what I expected to be different, but nothing was. His face was clean, he’d clearly tidied up his room this morning, and he was dressed sharply, as if I caught him on his way to work.

“Hi,” I said, sounding unrehearsed. He didn’t really know what to do, but right then I felt good that I’d come. For once, he wasn’t in control.

He tried to speak, but I put my hand on his cheek. My thumb pressed against his lips, and he shut them. I didn’t look at him with love because there was no love, but it was a look of affection he didn’t question or fight. He might have been confused or angry, or maybe he’d been dreaming about this moment, but it didn’t matter to me. I closed his door.

My other hand pressed down on his other cheek and I held his head in my hands. I looked at him in a way he’d never seen, and

his surprise would have been more apparent had I not been slowly moving him toward his bed. His hands were on my forearms now, letting me guide him to the edge, until the back of his legs bumped up against the mattress and his knees buckled as he sat down. I let go of his face and let his hands touch mine, and for a moment I thought of leaving him like this.

“I want you to know something,” I said, taking off my jacket. I didn’t have anything to say to him, so I didn’t say anything. I just took the back of his neck with my right hand and pulled his head up. I was right above him, and if there were something to say, it would have been right then.

Instead, I lowered him onto his back and crawled on top. Shawn looked confused, perhaps waiting for when I’d speak. I was fine with his unease. Without it, I might not have been able to kiss him like I did.

There are fast and hard kisses, and kisses so wide and messy that one can’t help but get dirty, but when I kissed Shawn on his bed then, it was one of those kisses that was going to last for several minutes. It lasted long, but there wasn’t much movement. It was as simple as having my lips on his lips with the kind of pressure that didn’t suffocate but certainly left no room for negotiation.

His hands emphasized his confusion. They didn’t know where to go, and he was shifting from my shoulders to the sides of my ribs to my hair and back. I finally let go of this kiss and he gasped for air. I could have left him here and a point would have been made, but it wasn’t the one I was going for. Simply kissing him wasn’t going to be enough.

He was tugging at the bottom of my shirt, and I took it off, showing him that he was definitely going to get lucky. I kissed him again, shorter this time, but harder. I kissed his neck and he moaned. I hated his stubble and was happy whenever I'd catch him within a few hours of shaving. His face was smooth this afternoon. I could feel his feet rub up against mine. His hands were on my back and when I kissed him again it was as if he'd woken up and was finally ready to accept that I was in his life and wanting what was going to happen.

I'd made love to Shawn enough to know how he worked, and with that template I was comfortable taking over and doing everything right. I knew he liked to have his nipples licked while his pants came off. I knew that kissing the side of his stomach made him crazy. And I knew what he hated, too, like when I used to go for his cock before his boxer briefs were all the way off. These are small things that only a few people in the world knew, and I took my time with them. I savoured Shawn. I did not want this to end quickly. It took me nearly twenty minutes to get us both naked.

Sex wasn't work with Shawn. He liked things done slowly, and for the most part, so did I. Still, even at the pace he enjoyed, Shawn didn't play it by ear. He had a formula for sex. I knew this from the beginning, when he did things in the exact same order three nights in a row. It was as if he'd been taught in adolescence that there was only one way to fuck. I used to entertain the thought that he had a different way of doing things with everyone that he had been with; that at the beginning of every new sexual relationship, he would map out a game plan and stick to it. But the more I thought about it, the more I knew that when Shawn took

my finger in his mouth and massaged my inner thigh, then scooted down a bit so that pulling on my cock would be comfortable for his arm, that's likely exactly what he did with Mark and everyone else he'd ever fucked.

For these reasons and others, Shawn never surprised me in bed. He got hard at the same time no matter what, and he always took pretty much the same amount of time to get off. This repetition never bothered me, though. It was a comfort to know that he was a sure deal, that in his routine I was just as much a focal point as he was, that everything happened in a way that felt natural and right, and that it would always end the same way.

He naturally went from stroking and sucking me to asking if I was ready. It was the first thing he'd said since I got here, and I knew it was more from habit than to actually say something about me being here. I turned over and put a pillow between my head and my hands, and Shawn found his way on top. Like he always did, he kissed the back of my neck as he moved his cock into me. He took it slow, taking the opportunity to move his hands around my back and around to my chest. I let out a few choice gasps, but for the most part, the two of us were either moaning or silent.

I didn't think much while making love to Shawn, but what crept through were random thoughts of other times I'd made love. Flickers of memories of Kate, of Carly, and of a few one-night-stands in college flew in and out as Shawn thrust and moaned. I never really forgot about any of these experiences, and just about every time I had sex with him, they would appear. Shawn kissed my back and upped his pace a little. I reached back and gripped his thigh. I loved the feel of his legs.

It never takes Shawn long to come, but it doesn't for me, either. Just from Shawn's touch, I get close. I could feel it building since the moment he kissed me back, and I was on the verge when I could feel him start to buck. His right hand on my shoulder blade, and his left on my ass, holding me in place. My hands begin to dig into the mattress. It's amazing, when he comes. It's bested only by its consistency.

Trimmed, clean fingernails dug into my skin. I was right behind him.

We came pretty close together, and I collapsed under him. In the haze, I heard him cry out for a second, and it was nice. I tried to look back with my face in the sheets, but I only got a glimpse of his face. It was a great face.

Shawn laid on me for a minute or two, catching his breath and allowing his quickened heartbeat to sync with my own. After that, he fell to my side and we held each other and slowly kissed. It was as it had always been; as if it just might be something that would never end. Making love to Shawn felt like something I could see myself doing for a living.

He asked what I was thinking in his tiny whisper.

I said, "I feel like smoking."

"I feel like this is perfect," he replied.

"Why?"

"Because you came back. You're here and this is all going to be okay."

He sounded like a hopeless romantic, and it was a little sad to think that I might have said the same thing not too long ago.

"It is, is it?" I asked, not really meaning it to be a question.

“For a while there I was afraid, because it seemed like you’d got over me and I had lost you to Kate, but that’s all over now and you’re here.”

“You think I’m here because Kate dumped me?”

“No, I’m sure you’re not, Scotty,” he said. “But Kate was just a reason for you to get away from me for a little while to think things through. Even if you don’t see it now, you’ll figure it out eventually. You were mad at me, but you got over it and you’re back.”

“I see.”

“And you know that I left Mark. I mean, Kate must have mentioned.”

“Sure,” I said. I didn’t want to get into how I actually found out.

“Am I missing something?”

I sat up and started looking around for my clothes.

He said, “I’m not really sure what I said just now. Weren’t we okay? I was okay.”

I didn’t answer him.

“Scott, I don’t get it. One minute you’re all over me, and it’s great, but the next you’re bolting for the door? Talk to me.”

I found my jeans, but Shawn grabbed my arm, so I had to look at him.

I said, “You don’t get it, and I don’t want to waste my time telling you.” I shrugged his grip off of me and put my jeans on. Sensing that this argument might leave his room, Shawn found his as well.

“So, what? That’s it? You’re leaving? This doesn’t make any sense, Scott.”

“Shawn, I’d like this to have a little silent dignity about it.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Nevermind,” I said. I began to walk, but he grabbed me again. I turned back to face with with a look of impatience.

He asked, “can you at least explain to me what I don’t get here? Because I thought I had everything figured out.”

“Jesus, Shawn. You’re as smart as you are and you still want me to spell it out?”

His face told me that he did.

“All right,” I said. “I’ll tell you what you’re missing. Yeah, I was pissed off when I gave you that ultimatum and you stayed silent. But really, I was just kind of confused as to why you wouldn’t pick me given all those pretty lines you used to feed me, but also because of what you said to Kate about us. Shawn, I’ve never been your boyfriend. I don’t get why you’d say that.”

“It was wishful thinking,” he said. “It was me fast-forwarding to now when you and I got back together.”

“There is no us, Shawn,” I said. I sighed, but this was true. “There never was.”

“What was that, then? What was coming to my place and making love? Tell me what that was.”

I put on my shirt. It felt crumpled, but warm. “It was what I needed.”

“It was what I needed too. I need you, Scott.”

“No,” I said, “You really don’t.”

“I love you.”

Even though he’d said it over the phone, I was still surprised. It stopped me and made me sit on his bed and look him dead in

his pretty brown eyes. Here in this moment I felt I could do anything in the world.

“I’m not saying I don’t believe you,” I said. “I’m not saying that it isn’t a really sweet notion, and I’m not saying that I never wanted to be with you. I really did for a long time, and for most of that time I believed it could actually happen.”

“It can. It can happen now.”

“Fuck, Shawn. Just shut up, will you?” My head jerked. Before this moment, Shawn had never outright asked me to be with him. I can’t say it wasn’t flattering, and I can’t say I didn’t consider it.

“Shawn,” I held my ground, clenched my fists. This was harder than I thought it would be. I took a breath, and I remembered that poem. My favourite.

“Shawn, let’s face it. I’ve been momentary.”

“What?”

I said, “This wasn’t an experiment.”

“I know that. Maybe it started that way but...”

I said, “I give you back your heart.”

“What?”

“Just let me say this, okay?”

He didn’t know what to do, or what I was doing, so I kept going. I sat down next to him. I said, “I give you permission. Shawn, listen. You loved Mark. You had this thing with me, and maybe it was a sort-of love, but it doesn’t matter. You loved him. He’s the sum of yourself and your dream.”

“Scott, all I wanted was...” I wouldn’t let him get a word in.

“He’s solid, Shawn. The fact is, I really don’t know how solid

I am. I've got to figure that out, and I really can't see myself figuring anything out if I'm with you."

Shawn sat silent, finally getting what had been brewing inside me this whole time.

"I came over here tonight to try to get over you, because I've never been good at getting over anyone. I mean, I still think about that girl from high school I told you about. I don't know if this'll work, but it's the best thing I could think of."

Shawn was either holding back tears or fists. Neither would have surprised me at this point.

"Look, Shawn, I know this is hard right now. But I think you really loved Mark, and maybe you were looking at me as some kind of escape from commitment or being an adult, I don't know. But Mark really loves you and..."

"How do you know?"

"What?"

"How do you know that Mark really loves me?"

"Can't I just know?" I really wanted to hit him.

"It's not like I don't miss him," Shawn said, and I let him keep going. "Parts of me wish that I'd never done it. I mean, yeah, there was something really strong there, and that's what made me go quiet before. But after you left, I realized how much I couldn't accept losing you, and if there was any chance of getting you back, well, that's what I'd do."

I began to close up. I said, "But what you'd realize Shawn, is that ultimately you would have grown tired of me and moved on. I was this idea in your head that isn't really me, and that's because

you and I never got each other on my terms. I am lots of what you don't know, Shawn."

Flecks of Shawn got that. I could tell because I could see right through him.

"As for me," I said, knowing what I wanted to finish. "I am watercolour."

I hugged Shawn, and in the middle of this embrace I whispered in his ear, "I wash off."

Shawn didn't cry. He didn't cry because he never did, and I never expected him to. In the end, we all become who we are, who we've been, and who we rarely say we want to be. Shawn, in all his handsome, selfish, and satisfying ways, whispered in my ear that he doesn't want me to ever get over him. "Please," he said, as if I were holding something tangible that belonged to him.

"That's selfish of you," I said, comforted by his one quality that would always likely be more charming than not. "But it's all right. I probably won't."

I kissed him, not with thunder but with all the implications of goodbye I knew how to express, wrapped up in a hug and a kiss. I cried a little, but I tried not to let him notice.

He didn't try to stop me as I left his room. I inched down the stairs, put my boots back on, and left his giant house.

It was just as freezing outside as it had been since the end of the Chinook, but it was the first time all winter that I'd really felt the chill. I didn't feel happy, relieved, or even tired. I just felt cold.

I realized, and I realized, and I realized. In the end, I found that most of my epiphanies led to nothing. Much like my spectrum, each realization became less meaningful every time a new

one came around. I thought that it might be nice to go a little while before I begin learning new things about myself again.

That's why I walked the same route to the LRT as I always did after seeing Shawn. It occurred to me that I should find another route to set my mind off course, that I could erase sections of memory that always held me when I walked this street. I thought that if I found a path I'd never taken, I'd be able to clear my head of Shawn, Kate, Carly, Mark, everyone. Maybe if I travelled somewhere new. Maybe if I met some new people. Maybe if I reinvented myself somehow.

But I didn't, because the path I took no longer signified anything. I kept straight down the same path I had taken every other time. I climbed the same steel staircase that seemed to lead straight up to the clear, wide Calgary sky.

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