

TADDLE CREEK

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TADDLE CREEK

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Tony and Ken Tobias, circa 1949. Photographer unknown.

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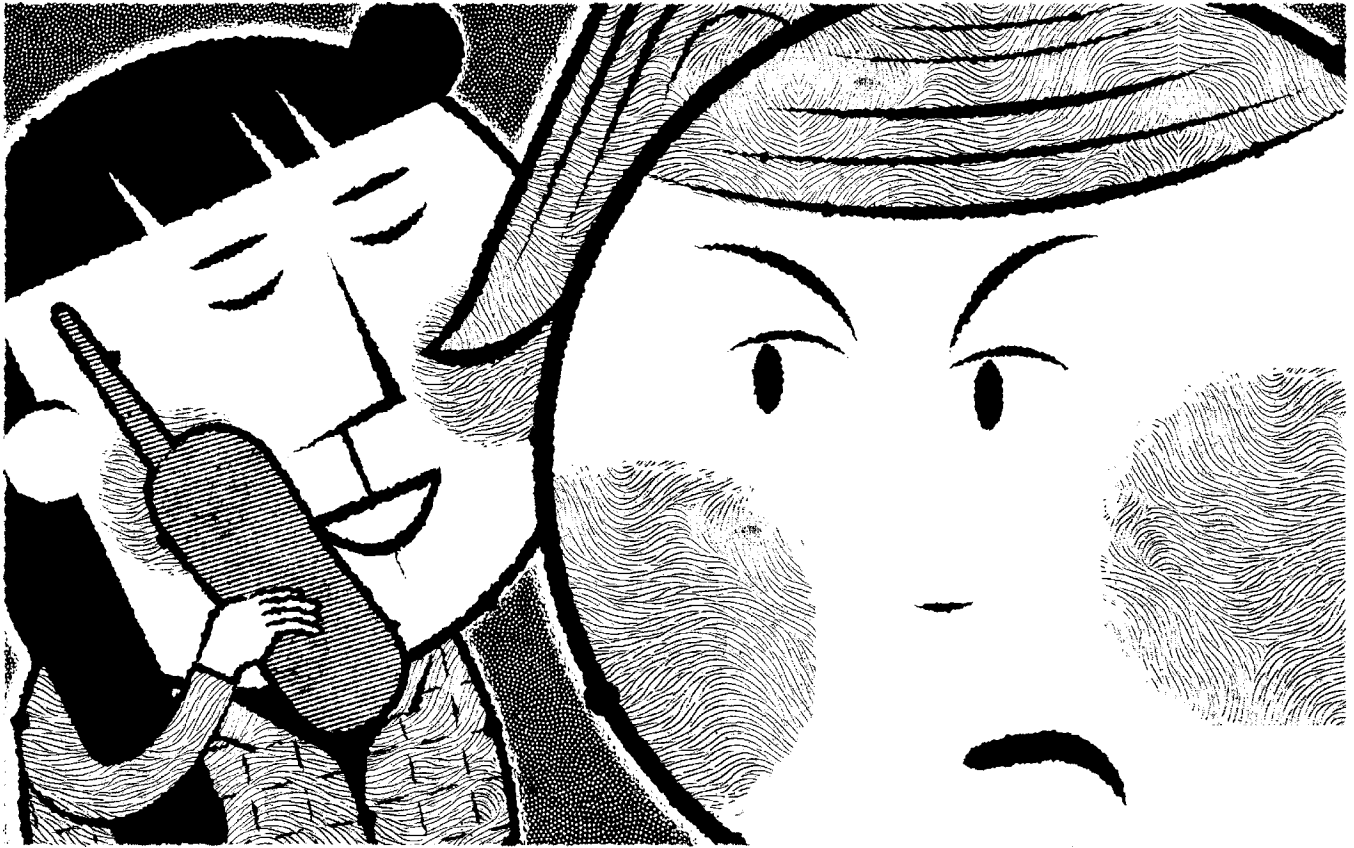
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FOUR HUNDRED DOLLARS AND A BOTTLE OF TEQUILA

FICTION BY MARY-LOU ZEITOUN

The morning after the very first night Hazel charged for sex, she decided to take the streetcar home instead of a taxi. She had been bought for four hundred dollars for a guy's thirtieth birthday. She had asked for a bottle of tequila too, but this was Ontario, where you can't get liquor late at night. She got the four hundred dollars in crumpled tens and twenties to sleep with a guy she was going to sleep with anyway. She didn't even really like tequila, it just sounded daring.

"You know it's his thirtieth birthday," his friend had said in the kitchen, waggling his eyebrows suggestively.

"Four hundred dollars and a bottle of tequila," Hazel said instantly. It had suddenly occurred to her that she had been steeling herself for sex without adoration. It was a familiar feeling. It made her feel lonely, sad, and ugly. It was bad

enough when a guy she liked didn't call, or acted like she wanted to marry him if she called him, but when a guy she didn't even like didn't call, well, that was just degrading. Somehow, she never managed to get to the hand-holding, brunch stage with boys. She was either sent home or deserted after mostly surprisingly satisfying clinches. It was bewildering. She was sick of it.

Hazel was a bookkeeper, a woman who constantly assessed value. Next to her fabulous glittery girlfriends, she was dogged and plain. That was her role. She saw it was clearly delusional of her to expect handsome, charming lovers with quick minds and warm hands. So, that night, she assessed herself for her worth in the marketplace.

At twenty-seven, Hazel was no beauty, but she was blond. Men liked blonds. When she walked into a room, she gen-

erated a stirring amongst the males. Being of medium height with a flat chest and chubby ankles, she knew it was her blond hair that caused this stirring. She was well aware that if she were a four-foot-two-inch troll, as long as she had blond hair, she'd still be in the running. Millions of mall sluts and trophy wives couldn't be wrong. Hence, she dyed her hair grimly every month, her only purchase in the slippery mud of sex appeal. The dykes at the art gallery where she worked didn't approve. She was a very good feminist in all other respects; it was a prerequisite for working at the government-funded gallery.

Hazel took the streetcar that Sunday morning at five-thirty because, for the first time in her life, she felt leisurely and in control the morning after, a feeling completely due to

the four hundred dollars in her purse. No scurrying home like all those other women who take those guilty dawn cabs. If you pulled back in a crane shot and made them all little lights, you could follow them, criss-crossing through the city. If you looked closely, you could see faces carefully applied the night before, now stale. You could see that one cowlick they almost sobbed over, now hidden in a mat of bed head. There they are hunched in the taxis, smeared with dirt and booze and cum, and wondering if they'll ever see him again, if this ruins their chances with the one they really like. No more cabs of loathing for Hazel.

Hazel also loved to savour early mornings and their pre-rush-hour calm. She walked to work early in the morning, when there was no one on the streets to compare herself to. The shy light of the new day made everything look like a carefully composed photograph, even ugly hydro poles and Coffee Times. The streetcar carried her like a queen in her litter, past the cheering storefronts.

Hazel understood why the rumped girls didn't take public transportation early Sunday mornings. You had to be strong to face crackheads with sliding mouths and eyes; to travel with people whose mothers had let them go outside without mittens in hard winters. Hazel felt strong.

A young woman with swinging black hair and a puffy mushroom ski jacket walked down the aisle, talking loudly into her cellphone, her brain stuck in a neural ditch of "ohmygods" and "whatevers." A stray, middle-class schoolgirl who lied to her parents about a slumber party.

"O.K., so now my favorites are Tristan and Scott," she gurgled. "I went to Scott's place last night. Likeohmygod—you told me York Mills was nice, but ohmygod. He made me leave when his girlfriend called up though. Man, am I hungover. Ohmygod, he's so cute! Can you like two guys at the same time?"

The girl walked by and sat down across the aisle from Hazel. Hazel turned to look at her, but puff girl casually looked out the streetcar window as she talked in her penetrating voice. She did not mark Hazel's ire. In a feat of indifference Hazel wished she could muster, the girl kept talking loudly, her



fat face composed in a teenager's blank approximation of a Gap model's: broad and stupid with a carefully drooping lower lip.

Hazel felt an unfamiliar smugness. At least she got paid. Emboldened by her status as a professional, she glared at puff girl. Didn't this fresh-fucked child know she had just been a piece of Kleenex because some rich boy's parents weren't home?

The car stopped in front of the mental health centre, the windows mutely suggesting a view worth looking at. It was a horrible grey prison in no way fooled by the nursery school landscaping, which was punctuated by black, wooden cut-outs of humans. A few sick, stalked by the silhouettes, were out in the little courtyard near the front door.

Two young men with pale faces pretended to drop kick each other, like kids do. But they scared each other and backed away after every kick, making placating gestures with their hands. They were smoking. On another bench was a swish old lady in a smart, red coat. She was eating a sandwich. Stiff with arthritis or disapproval, she got up and put her wrapper in the garbage can. A tall man stood off to the side, a foolish look of satisfaction on his face as he drew on his cigarette and looked at the spring sky.

"I think he'll call. Do you think he'll call?"

It was unbelievable how loud this girl was. "Oh, and ohmygod, I looked so good. I wore the indigo boot cuts and my yellow top with the tie in the

back? Yeah, like, and you know what he said? Guess what he said? He said, he said, 'You look nice.'"

She squealed.

At the squeal Hazel had had it. She got up to get off the streetcar. It was like a stupid-girl infestation. You finally stopped being a stupid girl and you were surrounded by them.

Getting off the streetcar, her way was blocked by two fat, old men, identical in their baldness and girth, barely able to walk. Their pale-blue eyes bulged, their noses were potatoes, and their lower lips hung grotesquely, almost to their throats. Halloween Gap models. Twins. They were twins. They shuffled slowly toward their seats. Hazel began to get mad. This was too familiar, trying to get away from being ignored and having to wait in line to do it.

Hazel turned around and marched over to puff girl, who was still bleating away.

"Would you please shut up? Everybody on the streetcar is not interested in your stupid love life."

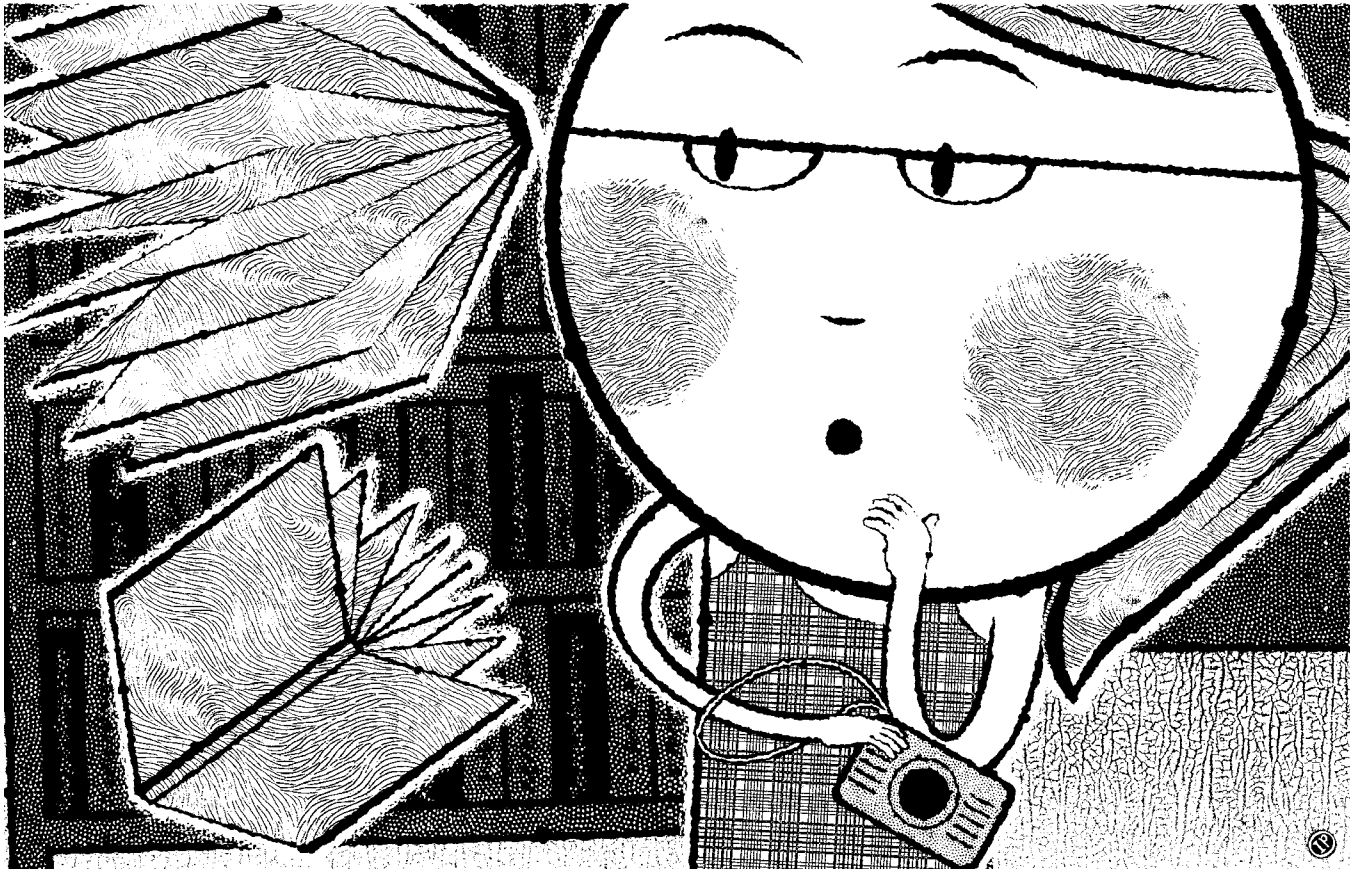
"Fuck off," the girl said instantly, her clear brow barely furrowing. To the phone she said, "Some freak is telling me to get off the phone."

"Look," said Hazel, "nobody cares about this Scott guy, he obviously fucked you because you were there and he was drunk. He's not going to call, and, although I can't really say in all honesty that you deserve better than this, I'll give you a hundred dollars to stop using the phone now. You can always remember that tonight wasn't a total loss."

The girl looked at Hazel, her cinnamon-frosted mask sliding into the face of a sad child and back again. But, dreaming no doubt of an even more subtle variation of her boot cut indigo jeans to seduce the boys with, she took the one hundred dollars and put the phone in her pocket.

"And turn it off!" commanded Hazel. Puff girl took her phone out again and turned it off, then turned her face to the window. Hazel went back to her seat and the streetcar lurched forward. She wondered who her next client would be.

Mary-Lou Zeitoun lives in East York. She freelances for several Toronto weeklies and dailies. Her book, 13, will be published in 2002 by Porcupine's Quill. Her first published work of fiction appeared in the summer, 2001, issue of the magazine.



BEST GIRL

FICTION BY ANDREW DALEY

On the afternoon of the move to the studio, Claire Atherton tripped over a packing box and spilled tea onto a plan for a set she had just completed. She tried to catch the splash of tea as it arched out of her white mug and landed with an audible splat on her desk, but her jerky movement only slopped more tea across her hand and onto the floor. She wanted to blame the movers, but couldn't because she had just placed the box, which contained her fabric and paint samples, in the middle of the floor.

Claire checked her white blouse and black skirt for any tea stains in the small mirror by the refrigerator. There was, she noticed, a single spot of tea on the lens of her narrow, black eyeglasses, which she removed with a careful dab of paper towel. She'd hated the cramped office on lower Spadina Avenue for the two months she had worked there. There wasn't even a proper kitchen, just a slop sink and wooden table, and homeless people

sometimes used the filthy washroom down the hall.

Luckily, the damage to the plan was minimal. The palm-sized puddle of tea sat near the top right corner of the plan, where a street-facing wall with a bay window met a bedroom wall and a doorway leading off-set. The plan was for the living room of David's new boyfriend, who is introduced in Episode 3; it was important, but not yet urgent. Claire also checked to see if her colleague, Joanne, the third assistant art director, had witnessed her mistake before covering the greyish spill with the paper towel, grateful that the tea hadn't been steeping long when it had hit the plan.

The resulting stain was faint, leaving only the smallest outline at the edges of the spill. None of her measurements and lines were affected and in the dull fluorescent light of the studio the stain probably wouldn't be noticed. And Claire didn't have the half day required to com-

plete another copy. It was the Wednesday before the Monday of principal photography and the next day would be lost in arranging her new office.

When the plan had dried somewhat Claire rolled it and stood holding the wet paper towel. Her wastepaper basket was missing. "They're gone already," Joanne said from behind her terminal. "They were one of the first things they moved this morning."

"What were?" Claire asked.

"The garbage cans," Joanne said, standing up. She had on pink hot pants, a man's blue dress shirt, and a phony, maroon-lipped smile that Claire hated. "I've been using that garbage bag on the floor there."

Claire reached the garbage bag as the art director, Nadine Leduc, returned from the studio. Nadine was a thin blond woman, so tall that she looked down curiously at Claire and the garbage bag as she passed her second assistant on the

way to her own desk. Nadine wore a dusty yellow suit; summer colours, Claire observed, in April. Watched by her colleagues, Claire dropped the paper towel into the bag.

"Albert needs the boyfriend's living room," Nadine said wearily in a thick French accent as she sat at her desk. "The carpenters will start it this weekend."

"But it's for Episode 3," Claire protested.

"It can't wait. We have to build the restaurant for Episode 4 also."

"Oh, it's done," Claire said, waving the plan aloft. "Albert will have it tomorrow."

Nadine was a Montrealer working on her first English production and Joanne had, apparently, set decorating experience and a college diploma in desktop publishing. Nadine had made a favourite of the girl and frequently sent her home early while expecting twelve- and thirteen-hour days of Claire. Claire also wondered if Nadine had a problem with English. Claire spoke French well, though not Nadine's indecipherable Gaspé Québécois. She was developing a different plan for her summer, one that didn't involve Nadine Leduc or missing her annual family gathering in Nova Scotia.

It would be the first job Claire had quit in her three years in the film business. She had designed pop videos, commercials, and children's television, but had never felt so overworked and underappreciated. Claire knew she worked hard: she had done a stage design program at a college in Bristol and before that a theatre arts degree in Montreal. She had felt qualified for the art director position, but had accepted the role of second assistant because she had wanted the experience of a series. *Homeboys* was an openly homosexual sitcom and anything this high profile would certainly distinguish her reel and resumé later. Now, it might have been a mistake.

In the next hour, Claire completed packing and took her usual afternoon call from her mother. The movers came and went; one of them, a fellow in a red flannel jacket and two-tone track pants, one leg navy, the other forest green, left a sweaty odour in the room. Except for Joanne's questions to Nadine about a greased beefcake image for a prop gay beer, the office was quiet.

Soon, the sound of rush hour traffic on Spadina swelled through the old, thickly-paned warehouse windows. Claire had plans to meet her boyfriend, Tim, for dinner at eight, but first looked over Joanne's

SUEÑO PERDIDO

After Valery Larbaud.

Oh endless grey clouds choking the sky,
black moon, invisible stars,
distant squeal of tires beneath
the shell of a car with a tree growing through it;
oh various trembling monsters
that lurch through cold empty cellars,
and whose scribbled claws swipe from beneath my bed,
who await me in places I'll never go; oh
constant clatter of locomotives through
my chest, tiny trembling pigeon
lodged in my bowels, ill-formed kernels of love
glittering in the back of my throat,
in my shoulders, in the palms of my hands;
oh vivid memories of decades before my birth,
of all the pain I've caused, and the pain for which
I bear no blame, the peaceful dreams
of those dear to me, the misspellings on
eroded headstones shrouded in mist; oh chaos,
exhaustion, bliss, confusion, serenity, blankness,
panic, quiet, quiet;
oh endless roaring clouds
rolling over my head, I offer you this:
my lost sleep.

— STUART ROSS

beer labels. The blond boy in his torn police uniform on the bottle of Brewer's Pride appeared sufficiently gay, and the colour and clarity of the image was excellent. Joanne had also created three other labels: a firefighter, a lumberjack, and a construction worker. Claire approved; these were the details that got their department, or at least the production designer, noticed at awards time.

At a little after seven, Claire checked herself in the mirror again. Her dark brown hair was in a tight ponytail that brushed the tops of her shoulders and, except for her eyes, which were a striking, watery blue-grey, her features were pale. In two months she would be twenty-nine. Thinking she could use a little makeup, Claire moved from the mirror to the back of the office door to retrieve her black raincoat. Nadine said, "You're leaving now?"

"Everything's packed," Claire replied quickly. As she slid her left arm into her coat, the office door swung open, hitting Claire in the shoulder and forcing her two feet to the right. The man in the

two-tone track pants strode confidently into the room.

"Would you watch what you're doing?" Claire shouted. The door had also clipped the baby toe of her left foot, which now throbbed with a wet heat. It was all she could do to keep from hopping. "This fucking office!"

"Sorry, ma'am, I didn't see you there," the man said. He quickly picked up a box.

"Next time think, O.K.? Or try knocking!"

"Claire, it was a mistake," Nadine said. "The man has apologized."

Claire ignored her boss and walked down the dusty stairway of the warehouse rather than wait for the rickety lift. Outside, a slowly descending fog obscured the lights of the cars jammed along Spadina. Claire walked towards a north-bound streetcar stop and would have been lost to sight, a creature all in black, were it not for the sheen of her raincoat. She waited, testing pressure on her sore toe, in the midst of a group of Asian women from a nearby garment factory—a head taller than all of them.

The streetcar that arrived was already full and the air within it heavy with the scent of damp clothing. Claire stood near the centre doors and opened a fogged window. She watched Chinatown, where Tim had his apartment, pass in a soft blur of electric colour, blues and greens and reds reflecting up off the wet street. It hurt her toe to stand and she wondered why she hadn't sprung for a cab.

The rain fell in earnest as she walked along College Street to the Neapolitan Bar. Tim was at a table, instead of his usual spot at the bar, his tightly-curved dark head buried in a notebook and a *Variety* magazine. The long, narrow bar was empty save for a few early diners. It was midway between the time of the afternoon and the evening regulars. For Tim, Claire knew, those lines sometimes blurred.

"So, my agent called today," Tim said as Claire slipped into the seat opposite him. "She's got an indie film she wants me to direct, something called *The Pickup Gang*. But she wants me to do some commercials to keep my name fresh. I tell her, if I'm gonna direct films, why should I waste my time on fucking commercials?"

Claire nodded. "Don't do it if it's not going to get you anywhere." She had met Tim three months earlier on a promotion she designed and he directed for some fruit-flavoured milk at a children's television station. They started dating a month ago, around the time Tim said his contract with the kid's station ended. They were sleeping together, but weren't yet the kind of couple who fawn over each other in public.

"Precisely. So how was your day?"

"Terrible. One of the movers hit me with the door and Nadine was out all morning."

"That's bullshit," Tim said. "So you're doing your job and hers as well?" He finished his drink—gin probably, Claire knew—and motioned for the waitress to come over. Claire asked for a glass of Merlot and a menu and watched how Tim's eyes never actually met those belonging to the waitress.

"Did they get the casting done yet?" Tim asked. "My friend Chris got two callbacks but hasn't heard anything in a week. And he's a fucking hottie."

"They need one more lead. I think he's coming from L.A."

"Of course they are! Canadians just

aren't fucking good enough. Fucking Americans. Sometimes I wonder if we're making television or car seats for them."

"It's because of the accents," Claire replied civilly. This was the second time Tim had slammed Americans. "Canadians don't sound like they're from Illinois or Iowa."

Tim got red-faced when drunk, which accentuated a fresh scar running out of his left eyebrow. He had explained that a poorly hung lamp had dropped on his head on the set of a rock video he directed before Christmas, which Claire had chosen to believe. She was relieved he was drinking. He wouldn't care so much when she announced, as she would soon, that she was going home alone. He'd had problems in bed on his less than sober nights and Claire wasn't putting up with that again. So home wouldn't be long in coming, after a salad and a glass of wine.

Tim was still talking about Americans. "They published the first publicity schedule this week," Claire said as she lit a cigarette. "The usual magazines and entertainment shows. But I thought I would get them to approach some design magazines."

"That's good thinking," Tim said. "Get your name in there. I called *Playback* myself once and they did a two-page story. You wouldn't believe the jobs I got after that."

Tim's problem was that despite his sometimes overwhelming sweetness he was just too selfish. And none of his grand schemes to direct were materializing. Claire didn't know what he did for money or what had really happened with the children's television contact, one that he would have been stupid to lose.

"After dinner I thought we could go over to the Sonic Gallery," Tim said after the waitress had set down their drinks. "There's this band there from New York you'd like, the Jam Pandas. They're kind of experimental."

"I don't think I can," Claire said before sipping her wine. "I have to be in early tomorrow. I'm moving offices, remember?"

What surprised Claire, as she stepped through the padded studio door, was the quiet. She hadn't noticed the red light flashing over the studio door and wondered, despite Nadine's assurances that the crew was on lunch, if they were still rolling on set. She wrinkled her nose in the dry,

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uncirculated air of the studio, which smelled of paint and sawdust. Peering through a window of the set nearest her, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the gloomy light of the overhead fluorescents. Eventually, she recognized the set as the lesbian's bedroom, though it was shrouded in a darkness deeper than any television night.

Claire set off into the warren of passageways that ran between the crammed sets. She hadn't been through the studio in a week and with the carpenters working whenever the crew was on location, the floor plan of the studio was constantly changing. She stumbled once over the false floor of a gym locker room, catching herself against one of the many wall jacks jutting dangerously across her path. What she wanted was the bedroom set of the lead's new boyfriend, on which shooting was scheduled to start that day, to take some photographs for her portfolio. Last week it was going up beside the diner set, which had somehow disappeared. She should have brought the flashlight from her kit and expected, at any moment, for her head to bounce off a wall.

Down two more short passages and behind the teenager's bedroom set from the flashbacks in Episode 2, and Claire found herself back at the lesbian's bedroom. Undaunted, she was off in the opposite direction of the locker room and found the pub set. Empty beer bottles, martini glasses, and baskets of popcorn and peanuts were still dressed-in on some tables. Bold shadows from stools placed atop other tables and along the bar criss-crossed the painted hardwood floor. From deeper in, toward the darkened stage, Claire heard the sound of heavy breathing. She could just see the outline of a human figure sprawled across the couch adjacent to the pool table.

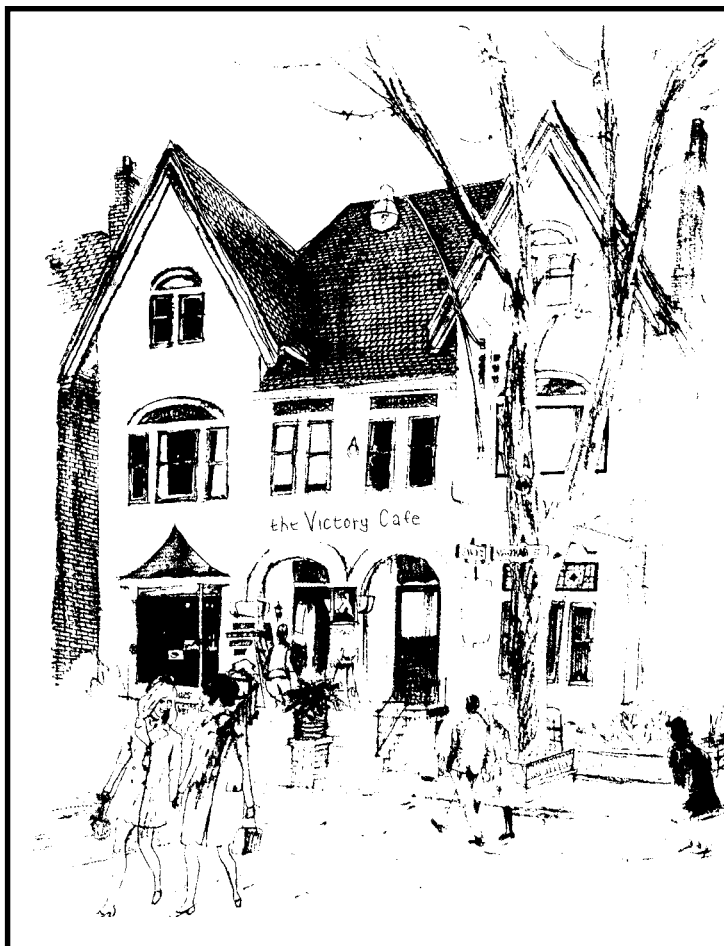
On the far side of the pub, against what she assumed was the outside wall of the studio, Claire found the advertising agency office set of one of the two leads. The couch there was occupied by another sleeping crew member. The next set she encountered was the living room and kitchen of the mother of one of the leads. At last hearing voices, she stepped through the set carefully, avoiding the two people sprawled on the couch and the La-Z-Boy. Outside the

back door off the kitchen she found the multicoloured diner set.

Claire clutched her Minolta protectively to her. With little on-set experience she was on unfamiliar territory here. The few people clustered outside the back door of the diner—grips, focus pullers, hairdressers, whatever they were—were speaking quietly and easily amongst themselves. Claire avoided looking their way as she made her way between the back of the diner and another outside studio wall.

Against this wall Claire found long trestle tables of plates of congealing diner food: hamburgers, clubhouse sandwiches with fries, scrambled eggs, and toast. Disturbed flies buzzed over the plastic wrap covering the plates. This was why she didn't work on set. She rounded the last corner of the diner set and finally reached the boyfriend's bedroom. The decorators were still working there and Claire said hello to Shannon, the lead dresser, a woman about her own age. Claire wondered what had gone wrong if, only three weeks into the shoot, the decorators were already this far behind.

Avoiding two men struggling to slide



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an already over-filled bookcase along a wall, Claire paced the room slowly, counting the steps it took her to cross it. She marvelled again at how her drawing had become something tangible. For this set—for all of them—she hadn't been given a lot of floor space to work with and thought she had made great use of it. She noticed two books on the top of the shelf being moved wobble sideways and fall to the floor. Claire tried to catch them, but they bounced from her open hand and slid across the floor to Shannon's feet. Neither woman said anything as Claire knelt to pick the books up.

What Claire didn't like were the colours Nadine had chosen, the too-friendly pastels the woman favoured and her tendency to overuse the rainbow motif, like she had with the duvet now being thrown over the bed. The furniture was too obviously Swedish department store and Claire questioned what the boyfriend, a male stripper, would be doing with so many books about architecture. But these weren't her concerns. "When do you think I can take some photos?" Claire asked Shannon.

Shannon set the large potted fern she was carrying by the bay window. "For what?"

"My portfolio. Would tomorrow be better?"

"Definitely," Shannon said sharply. "We're working here, Claire, and I'm going to ask you to step off this set until we're finished."

Claire was about to reply appropriately when a booming male voice announced: "We're back!" Claire assumed the man meant from lunch. She left Shannon standing defiantly in the half-dressed set and returned to the diner. She wouldn't say anything to the production designer, or even Nadine, about their rude decorator. Shannon was obviously under a lot of pressure and Claire could forget this one time.

The diner set, now painfully bright under the studio lamps, was slowly swirling in increased activity. Once again, it was decorated with too many rainbows. Crew members emerged from various corners of the set, yawning and strapping walkie-talkies and headsets to themselves. A young female intern was setting cutlery on the tables and Claire spotted Anthony, the pudgy, bespectacled props assistant who had made a clumsy pass at her at the launch

party, bringing out the plastic-wrapped plates of food.

Then Claire spotted Raine Masters, the tall, dark, and slender American lead who was anything but gay. He was talking to a short, hairy man in a Hawaiian shirt whom Claire didn't recognize. Claire had also met Raine at the launch party, though the business card she had given him hadn't resulted in a call.

Claire approached the two men across the floor of the diner, which was rapidly filling with more people. Raine wore a beautiful, light olive suit and a black silk shirt open to the middle of his skinny chest. Claire paused to look her own dark grey suit over, brushing away dust she must have accumulated on the trip through the studio.

"Raine, hi," Claire said loudly to the actor's back.

There was a half-moment's confusion in Raine's eyes as he turned and opened his arms to pull her into a hug. "Hey, nice to see you again," he said.

"So, how's it going?" Claire asked, aware that other members of the crew, hair and makeup women she didn't recognize, were turning towards her booming voice.

"Well, good," Raine replied. Claire had forgotten that he had a slight Southern drawl. "Everything is coming together fine. Hey, I'm sorry if I haven't had a chance to call you. We've been busy here on set and I'm still trying to find my way around town."

"That's where I can help. Anything you want to see, let me know." Behind Raine, the first assistant director, a grim-looking balding man in his late thirties named Greg, was talking to the hairy man in the Hawaiian shirt; the director, Claire now realized. If Nadine allowed her to attend production meetings, Claire would know these things.

Before Raine could reply, Greg poked his ferret face between them. "Claire, the director and Raine were working out some paces for this shot. Can you excuse us?"

"Sure," Claire said. Raine followed Greg with a mischievous smile and a roll of his eyes. He would remember to call now; all he'd needed was a reminder. But she wanted to meet the director, if that's who he was.

Anthony would know. The props assistant was now dressing-in steaming cups of coffee and glasses of pink and orange soft drinks to the empty tables. He smiled and wiped his sweaty brow

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when he saw her approaching. "Claire," he said. "This is a first."

"Oh, I'm in here every day, just to keep an eye on you. What's for lunch?"

"Egg-white omelettes for the boys—no cholesterol for them—and the usual diner fare for the extras. My boss sprung for a food stylist today, who's cooking up the omelettes as we speak. So what brings you out here?"

"Oh, some of the other sets," Claire replied. She followed behind Anthony as he returned to his prep table off set. "Can I ask a question?"

"Anything," Anthony said as he scooped up two plates. "But you'll have to follow me."

Claire pressed her hand lightly against his chest. "Oh, it'll just take a second. Who's the man in the Hawaiian shirt? That's the director, right?"

"C'mon, Claire," Anthony said. "That's Steve Szabo, the guy who did that cross-dressing gangsters thing. He's nice, but, between you and me, he doesn't know what the fuck he's doing. Too much coverage, like he's always compensating."

"Do you think I can meet him?"

"All you have to do is say hi. I'd introduce you, but I've got this set to dress. I wouldn't bother him now, though. You should have done it at lunch."

"So maybe tomorrow at lunch would be better?"

"Sure. Or some moment when he's free." Anthony took up the two plates again. "I gotta work now. So call me, like I said, we could hang out some Saturday or Sunday."

"For sure I will," Claire said to his wide, retreating back. She set off between the exterior wall and the plywood shell of the diner set, glad to leave the tables of smelly food behind her, to find the director. Instead, she met the production designer, Warren Yates, a late-middle-aged man with a pot-belly and long streaks of grey in his beard, reading some rolled plans in a work light. He had done films for the CBC, but Claire didn't know them; he was another person Nadine only allowed Claire minimal access to.

"Ah, Claire, I was told you were on set," Warren said. He rolled the plan up and peered at her over his reading glasses. He wore dark-brown professorial cords and a photographer's vest filled with notebooks and cigarettes and always had a smile for Claire. "Would you mind having a word with me?"

"I wanted to speak to the director quickly," Claire said. "Can you wait half a minute?"

"No. This won't wait," Warren said. He began to walk towards an Exit sign Claire hadn't seen before. "And leave the director and the actors alone when they're on set. What you do doesn't affect them now."

Claire followed, surprised at his pace and tone. Outside the door was a loading dock and beyond it the studio parking lot. She blinked in the bright, blue afternoon, pleased she finally understood the layout of the studio complex. Warren lit a cigarette and said, "Claire, I'm sorry, but we're going to have to let you go."

Claire didn't think she heard him correctly. "You're what?"

"There've been too many mistakes," Warren said as he unrolled the plan of the boyfriend's bedroom to where Claire had sopped the tea. "Albert couldn't read this and the guess he made was wrong. The walls didn't meet in this corner and I had to pay the overtime for three carpenters and two painters to work all last night to get it ready for today. And Albert tells me this wasn't the first time."

Cold pricks of sweat started at Claire's neck and shoulders. "But Nadine signs off on them," she said. "She thought they were fine." She had wanted a way off the show, but not like this. It had to be on her terms.

Warren rolled the plan back up. "This was my decision. Nadine wanted to keep you on under closer supervision, but she's spread thin enough as it is. Claire, I simply can't afford mistakes on this show. There's no room. I think you've got potential, but you're too inexperienced for this show. I hope you can understand that."

As ever with her nephews, Claire heard them before she saw them. Their voices, strong and clear in the broad morning stillness, approached from behind the cottage. Soon they clambered onto the front deck, where Claire was finishing her coffee, carrying orange life preservers. Matthew was nine and Devon just six. Their mother, Claire's eldest sister, Elizabeth, and her husband, Ronald, were enjoying a childless week-long tour of Prince Edward Island. In the year since Claire had seen them, the boys had done a lot of growing at their home in sunny California.

The boys were the first people Claire had seen since rising. She caught Devon, who was in danger of tripping over the preserver's trailing white sash cords, as he flew by her. "Careful where you're stepping, O.K.?" The boy simply nodded and seemed to only vaguely remember her. Claire released him to race after his brother.

Claire's parents called it a cottage, but the two-storey, five-bedroom affair on Mahone Bay in Nova Scotia was the largest house in the area. It had been built in the late nineteen-eighties when both her parents were teaching at Dalhousie University in Halifax. The family summered there every year and Claire was expected to do the same; it was the only time of year all the Athertons—Claire, her two sisters, and her parents—got together. It was a perfect vacation property on a beautifully secluded bay, but Claire's real home, if she could claim one, was Halifax.

Her father, never very far from the boys, soon appeared on the deck with his fishing rod. Audwin Atherton was sixty-eight years old and had been a professor of geography who preceded his wife into retirement by two years. He was originally from Wisconsin, an outdoors type who now lived for summers with his family. Most of all he loved to spend time, after forty years in a household of women, with his two grandsons.

"Good morning, Claire," he said, letting a hand fall on her head. "Still my girl?"

"Good morning, Daddy," Claire kissed the side of his bent head. His face was wrinkled but was free of the

stress that had crossed it when she was a teenager. Most of his white hair remained, which he wore swept straight back off his forehead.

"Your mother tells me we have a lot to talk about," Audwin said. Claire had only seen her father briefly when she had arrived in Halifax from London with her middle sister, Diane, late the night before. "Why don't you come out on the boat with me and the boys? We can talk before your mother gets home."

"Where did Mom go?" Claire asked.

"She and Diane went over to Bridgewater for groceries. They decided to let you sleep. I'm surprised the boys didn't wake you."

"I was pretty wiped out," Claire said, thinking of the late nights in London before she and Diane cleared out. And of the much-delayed flight to Montreal, the three hours it took to backtrack to Halifax, and then the taxi to the cottage.

Claire remained at the wooden picnic table with the remains of her breakfast after her father had left. She was comfortable again, suddenly, after an anxious summer. There was raspberry jam on her fingers, and the clothes she wore, a frayed pair of denim cut-offs and a dark green Saint Mary's University sweatshirt, smelled of the cedar chest she had pulled them from. She couldn't remember having owned the sweatshirt; it must have belonged to one her sisters or was left behind by one of their boyfriends.

Practicality suggested she check her E-mail before her mother returned from town and spent the afternoon online. Claire hadn't logged on since ar-

riving in London the previous week. There had been a cute message from the fellow she had met before leaving for Italy and France at the beginning of June, Serge, a guitarist in a jazz band along College Street. It was the first musician Claire had dated and that he was still interested, a month and a half after their two short evenings together, was encouraging.

She took her plates through the sliding glass doors and left them in the kitchen sink at one end of the cavernous, open-concept main floor. The room was too big for Claire and too cold when visited in the spring and autumn months. She found her cigarettes, lovely English Silk Cuts, and went outside to light up. She would have to sneak her smokes for the three weeks she would be at the cottage, having arrived in London to find that Diane had quit six months earlier. It wouldn't be the same alone.

Claire followed her father's voice off the deck and across the fifty yards of scrubby, rocky ground between the house and the shore. She sat above the beach in the grass and let the mid-morning sun, already quite hot, warm her legs. The bay was a cloudy, muddy green in colour and quite calm. Her father and the boys were out a hundred yards from shore in the yellow dinghy and drifting slowly west, the single rod in the water. Well beyond the mouth of the bay, a massive rust-red tanker lay low in the water, moving northeast up the coast towards Halifax. Her father was pointing it out to the boys.

Claire sensed, more than heard, her

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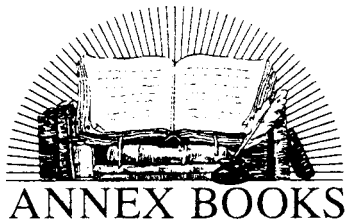
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mother approach her from behind. Stubbing out the cigarette would have been useless; she had already been caught. She hadn't seen her mother in almost a year either, when her parents had stopped briefly in Toronto on their way back to Indiana. Nor had Claire seen her last night; Lillian Atherton went to bed very early.

"Well," her mother said. "Look who's up. Did your father wake you like I asked him to?"

"No," Claire replied. Turning to meet her mother's voice forced her to squint into the morning sun. She shaded her eyes with her cigarette hand. "I got up on my own."

"Still at your bad habits, I see."

"Yes. I know Diane quit. I will too, only not right now."

"Your father and I will be much happier when you do," Lillian said. She smoothed her long denim skirt and sat beside Claire on a big rock. She had grown stout in recent years, but still had a girlish freshness about her face, which was framed with messy grey-blond curls. Another permanent—probably the work of her sister Elizabeth the week before—Claire saw, had gone horribly frizzy in the damp, salt air. "I can understand losing the job was difficult for you. But your father and I are both glad you're not there anymore. He didn't really approve of the subject matter anyway."

"You're not going into this now, are you?" Claire asked. She stubbed her cigarette out on a rock. "I just arrived. Can't this wait until tomorrow or this afternoon?"

"It's just something we want you to think about. Coming to live with us here when I'm finished at Purdue, I mean. We don't know why you're even living in Toronto anymore since it's been over with Richard for a year and now even this Tim is gone. Claire, we're not going to have the money to keep helping you when I retire. You're twenty-nine; it's time you took on some responsibility for yourself."

"I can't believe this," Claire said. "Do I ask you for money? I can't live in Halifax because I wouldn't be able to do the work that I want there. It's that simple, Mom!"

"But is it the right work for you? I mean, you've tried hard, but maybe this layoff was a blessing in disguise."

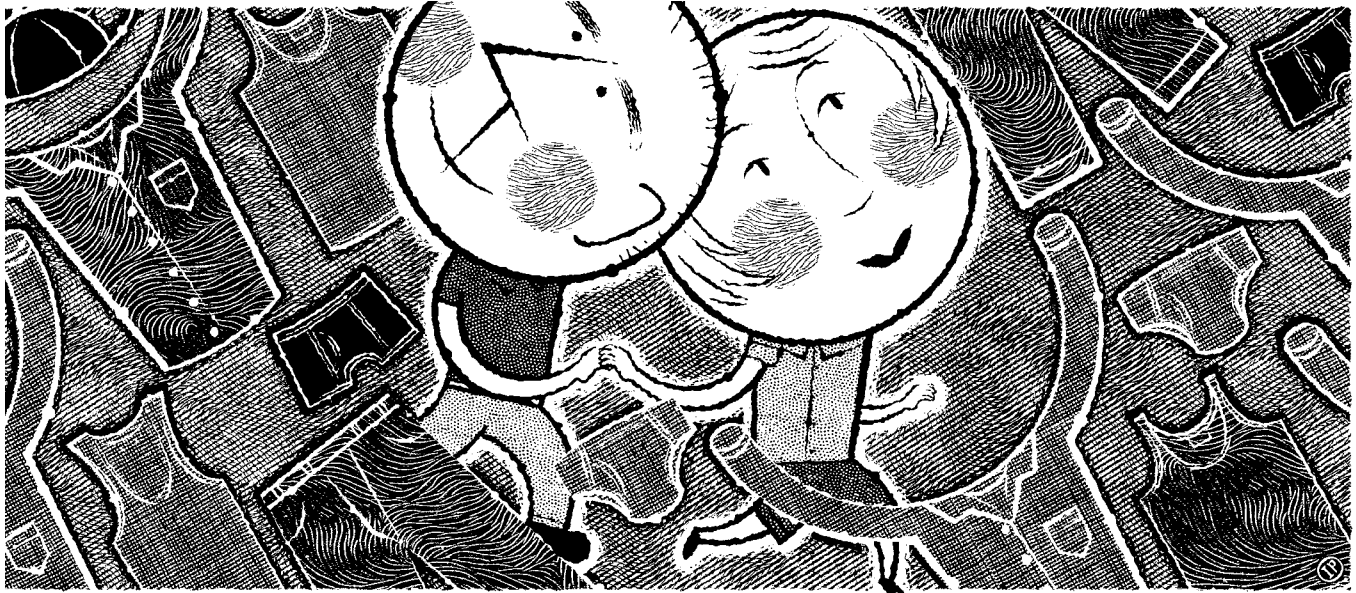
"Do you know what would help?" Claire said, trembling as she stood. Her voice was raised but her father and nephews, having drifted even further west, hadn't heard her. "Not having to come here every summer. It's hard to keep momentum going on a career if you have to derail it every August. And losing jobs is a natural part of the business. There would be something wrong if I hadn't been let go at some point."

"We're not saying you're not talented. You can do anything. Only that you should get down to something soon because I don't know how long we can keep helping you out. You had a nice time with your friends in France, now it's time to get to work."

"Mom, if I wanted to live in Halifax, I would never have left." Feeling tears start, Claire walked away from her mother, east along the bank above the shore. The red tanker had passed across the mouth of the bay; had Claire wanted to she could have looked right across the Atlantic to France. Where she could live and work, she thought. Claire already had the language and would need only her British passport, which her sister Diane had secured easily for herself, courtesy of an English grandfather, two years before. Or she could live in London like Diane, maybe even move into the flat in South Kensington with her sister until she got herself established. It could be the move she needed, away from her basement one-bedroom in the Annex, or the dusty commercial studios around Toronto where she'd worked for the past few years. That summer's trip had made her realize how much she had missed Europe.

And London would be well beyond the reach of her parents. As she picked her way down the bank to the shore, Claire was aware that it was late in her life to be having these rebellious thoughts about her parents. And she had only three weeks to consider her next move, or else she would get wrapped up in something in Toronto again. She decided to head back for the dock, hoping her father would see her there and pick her up. After the run-in with her mother, it would be nice to just drift along with the boys until lunchtime.

Andrew Daley lives somewhere between Little Italy and the Village of Brockton.



CONFESSIONS OF A JUSTIFIED SINGLE SHOPPER

FICTION BY ANDREW LOUNG

Whenever we went shopping, Sandra liked to make a game of spotting single men in the crowd. She identified them by their sheepish expressions and would describe to me with a dogmatic glint in her eye the conditions of these men's singleness. There was the bespectacled, perspiring teenager with the apprehensive shifting of the eyes: he merely lacked the confidence to latch on to a social circle or ask a girl on a date. The ungainly, middle-aged man with the severe face who would dart glances into stores rather than enter them and browse: this was a recent divorcee who had always depended on his wife to carry out such mundane chores. The pale, young professional, perhaps a doctor or a broker, who moved with a brisk, cloistered pace, completely incongruous to the rest of the casually strolling throng: he had sacrificed love and friendships for his career. The shivering senior with the protruding lower lip and the frequent scratching of his head and concurrent retracing of steps: he was a dour widower not old enough to be living in a retirement home, yet not young enough to be included in the family outings of his adult children. Each of these specimens

was always magnified by some type of pathos projected by Sandra herself, which I thought wasn't very fair, but perhaps that was how she comprehended men, as full of hidden tragedy and confusion.

But now I am a single man myself, abandoned by Sandra after six years. I thought I'd never be one of those men who look so dispossessed around a storefront. I could always count on the company of a woman. Before Sandra there was breezy, impulsive Ellen, and before Ellen there was extravagant, showy Bess. But Ellen and Bess were really only year-long stopgaps between my poker-faced, retail-savvy mother (who could talk ten per cent plus the sales tax off any merchandise) and the disciplined but fashionable Sandra, who had a mercenary aptitude for tracking down bargains. That's how highly evolved my relationship with Sandra was. Even before we moved in together three years ago, I could just call and she would accompany me to the corner store for a pack of gum.

"Does little Derrick Lee need an escort?" she would jibe me each time, but she never once refused to come along. Only my mother could equal that kind of track record.

But now I was on my own and I found myself in dire need of some pants. So I gathered up my resolve and went shopping. I arrived at this mall, which shall remain nameless, in suburban Toronto just after dinnertime. There was a disruptive pang in my heart, and I realized how much I missed Sandra right then, with her quizzical smile and her quiet perseverance that became accentuated when shopping.

I came across this little boutique with some silvery mannequins in the window. The mannequins were naked—perhaps a kooky avant-garde effect—so I wasn't quite sure what was being sold; but two of them were vaguely male, and this opened up the possibility that I was in the right place. I went in. The interior was poorly lit, and in the dainty blue shadows I imagined for a moment that Sandra was standing there, holding out black velveteens for me to try on. But it was only another mannequin, arms outstretched in a defensive posture.

Once, four years ago, Sandra and I had a terrible fight and we found ourselves immersed in a liquid state of semi-separation. I had gone to a boutique very similar to this one to find a peace offering. I

brought along Connie, Sandra's best friend, to help pick out the gift. She chose a red silk teddy with spaghetti straps and black lace trim. It was sublime, but also one hundred and twenty dollars. Connie, with that look of automatic consolation she always uses to mask a deeply embedded ignorance, whispered to me that she knew where to get the same teddy for a third of the price.

"I'll take care of it," she said warmly in my ear. "I want to see you two lovebirds back together."

Connie brought me the teddy the next night, and I immediately took it over to Sandra, who adored it. She modelled it for me, we made up, then made love with alacrity. And because the gesture itself was sufficient enough to redeem me, Sandra returned the teddy, as a complementary gesture, to the boutique I originally visited with Connie. Apparently, Sandra had noticed, even coveted, the teddy there weeks ago, and assumed I had, by some act of omniscience, merely followed up on the impulse for her.

Well, as it turns out, Connie was a kleptomaniac and had stolen the teddy from the store only hours after she and I had left it. The teddy was tagged merchandise, and Sandra was swiftly taken into custody as soon as she handed it to the clerk for the refund. I received a hysterical call from the police station and had to go down and rescue Sandra from a jail term and utter ignominy. Since I had no money for bail, I had no choice but to turn Connie in—it was, for me, a simple, reasonable trade-off. Yet Sandra did not see it that way, and decided (in the way women have of catering to men's self-importance while at the same time using it against them) that blame for this entire sordid matter should lie squarely on my shoulders.

"You should never have gotten Connie involved," Sandra had said when we arrived at her doorstep after an interminably silent drive from the police station. "You know when it comes to my friendship she has tunnel vision."

"Oh, sure. I spit on the sidewalk the other day and you call me a criminal, but Connie is running some sort of underground lingerie racket and she has tunnel vision?"

"You're a Benedict Arnold. How can I ever trust you again with my friends' well-being?"

"But, honey pie, your friends don't have to trust me," I said. "They only

MORNING ON THE SPADINA CAR

this day,
emerging is the first very good thing,
finding breath
out of the earth

finding some outdoors through bodies

to spot Ten Editions as it glides by;
there is (I'm guessing)
a book on the shelves in that store,
untouched since me, years ago

I'm trying to feel better than the morning

reading words,
to prove that can still happen
in the middle of ordinary;

grinding Babstock with the
back teeth of my brain—he's substantial,
takes some work to desiccate

by Nassau I've dropped him,
reading faces instead
in the final approach,
readying, bracing

she's got one of those noses,
the Aphrodite nose on the everyday,
and her sunglasses look expensive,
cushioned there in auburn, ready
for something brighter than now,
brighter than me

by Queen she's come to resemble
some New York morning hostess,
all wideness and wonder,
and I'm satisfied to de-car

feel the bull
brush my shoulder
on its way to money

—JOHN DEGEN

have to tolerate me."

"But you're intolerable."

"Well, maybe, but that's my only fault."

There was an electric silence then, and, to undo the stalemate, I kissed her. And she was, in return, thrilled by my insolence, and thus kissed me back. And then we rushed back to the boutique and bought back the teddy.

After the boutique with the silvery mannequins proved fruitless for men's pants, I next came across one of those youth stores, but instinctively passed it. I am only twenty-four, but that already seems conspicuously antiquated in one of those places, with their heavy atonal background music thumping against your chest, and their armies of florid adoles-

cent clerks all trussed up in baroque body piercings and pastel-coloured hair. When I first started dating Sandra six years ago, she bought much of her clothing at these places, and, as our relationship progressed, she got me wearing all those preppy cotton twill slacks and striped rugby jerseys. For a time, we used to drive once a month across the U.S. border to the outlet malls in Buffalo, where this style of clothing is harvested in discounted abundance. In order to avoid paying the border tax, we would wear the new clothes over our old clothes, sometimes in several claustrophobic layers, like those Russian matreshka dolls that stack one inside the other. But, fortunately, she soon outgrew that fashion—fortunately because I feared we were becoming one of those stuffy couples who, from their shared habits, start to look like brother and sister.

Sandra and I *were* in many ways similar, but two people in close emotional proximity can become too crowded by their similarities. We were both tight with money, but this came as no surprise. Frugality was in my blood, inherited through my father's erratic employment (a plumber by trade, he was physically limited by two mild strokes and the early onset of osteoarthritis) and my mother's compulsive micromanagement of money (coupon books, penny jars, non-negotiable weekly allowances). Sandra, on the other hand, learned to be careful with money on her own. She scraped her way through college and nursing school with government loans and odd jobs, and still carried her student debt around like a basket of stones. And so perhaps it was natural for

Sandra and me, as we grew closer to one another, to become protective of each other's finances. We even planned to co-sign for a joint bank account.

But my mother always warned me that when it came to money management, there is a fine line between caution and neuroses. And somewhere straddling that line is blind pettiness. One month after we moved in together, Sandra and I once spent three quarters of an hour in a hardware store bickering over the appropriate price of a stepladder. We started to keep records, down to the penny, of how much was spent on the other, on the other's family and friends, and how much was received in return, and we pinned these statements to the refrigerator. We were like two petulant children on a see-saw, each attempting to be lifted by the other's downward pressure. At some point, I no longer felt any gravity or lift, only the fulcrum snapping.

There was a haberdashery tucked away in the corner of the mall. The moment I entered, a gnomish, elderly gentleman with a tape measure around his neck approached me and immediately started to measure my inseam while all the time criticizing my posture. Although a sign in the store claimed alterations were gratis, the shopkeeper's own single-breasted suit seemed three sizes too large, slumping off his frame in bountiful folds. After sizing me up over eyeglasses perched low on his nacreous nose, he suggested "a buff gabardine fabric, half-worsted, half-cotton, in a houndstooth check with a high cuff."

"Is that available in the team colours of the Green Bay Packers?" I asked, but was rebuffed by his flinty glare.

When I was fourteen, my mother took me to a haberdashery for my first suit. It was actually a narrow tailor's shop on Yonge Street, pinched uneasily between a used record store and a Caribbean restaurant. The tailor's shop, which was constantly fighting off angry rock music through one wall and the piquant aromas of jerk chicken and roti through the other, was owned by my father's distant cousin, a fastidious, middle-aged bachelor whom the elder generations of my family believed to be of dubious sexuality. He bought suits and blazers that were badly stitched and cast off from other stores, then altered and resold them. Because he had become, through family whisperings, "the odd one," my mother refused to let him come into the change room with me as I was trying on suits, and, as a measure of retaliation, he reneged on his promise of a substantial discount. I watched with steep despondency as my mother's haggling prowess failed her for the first time.

"What was the point of me coming here if I have to pay full price?" she had argued. "The boy's still growing. He'll be going through suits like a baby goes through teeth. We won't be able to afford it." It was the only time I had ever heard my mother use my family's lack of money as a bargaining chip. It was a hurtful and undignified tactic made more hurtful by the insinuation that I was sapping our already tight finances with my bourgeois demand for a suit.

My father's cousin remained unmoved

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by my mother's appeal, and, in fact, he seemed to grow more indignant and defensive with every word. By the way he kept looking out the window while my mother spoke, I thought my mother and I might be defenestrated. But instead, he stood there with the elbow of one arm cupped softly in the hand of the other arm, which formed a shelf across his slender, vase-shaped chest, and, with his nose high in the air, he asked us to leave.

On our way home, my mother, hunched over with contrition, asked me not to tell my father what had happened. She confided in me that my father's health was deteriorating rapidly and, as a result, our family's financial situation was a little shaky. We, in fact, could not afford to pay the full price on a suit, she said. The outer corners of her eyes were cracked with little lines of reluctance.

"I'm sorry," she sputtered, and the lines around her eyes deepened. Those were difficult words for her.

"For what, Mom?"

"For not being honest enough with you about your family. This sort of thing stays with you."

"No, of course it won't." I slipped my

confirmation beneath the spread of her apology like a key under a mat. It would be held there for security, so that in years to come I could always extract it during a conversation and show her that her revelation this day—that we were indeed poor—had actually pulled me out of the hole of resentment she assumed I would never escape.

After fleeing the haberdashery, I meandered a while through the huge department store; it was stratified into several floors through which an indecipherable landscape of merchandise was spread. On the main floor, jewellery, colognes, and cameras were displayed in glass vaults like museum relics. As I walked by each of these display cases, my face was reflected in the glass. Under the topaz lighting of the store, my image looked wary and withdrawn. I paused at a display of watches. Before we separated last month, I was intending to buy Sandra a Swiss watch—a Swatch—for her twenty-fifth birthday next week. My mother had offered to help me pick it out. She liked Sandra, but kept a restrained acceptance of our

relationship, as all mothers are apt to do with their son's first extended relationships. The first time the three of us had gone shopping together, my mother got separated from us in this mall in Mississauga; it took over an hour for Sandra and I to find her. She was sitting on this walnut bench beside the lottery booth, her hands and purse all resting compactly like a little origami arrangement on her lap; it was as if there had been a plan from the beginning to meet at this spot. From her blank demeanour, I was not certain whether I should chastise her or apologize to her.

"What happened?" I restricted myself to something blatantly neutral.

"You had us in a panic," added Sandra, and my mother looked up at her, trying to read a reproach into it. I suppose she didn't find any, because she started complaining about the swelling in her ankles, and I got the feeling that she was leaving blame up in the air for me to levy. She acted as if this was a mother's prerogative, as when she finishes reading a bedtime story and asks the child for the moral to see if he or she has been paying attention. But it was asking too

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The Place To Be



much of me, and I left it in the air. And though these two women in my life remained on sufficiently pleasant terms, I don't remember the three of us ever shopping together again.

I was gazing at the arrangement of Swatches when beside my reflection in the glass appeared a wan, ghostly cameo of Sandra. I jumped, and for a moment I thought the apparition was rising out of its glass enclosure, but really it was just Sandra approaching from behind me.

"Hey, you," she said.

"Hey." We had not seen each other, and had spoken on the phone only once, since she moved out twenty-six days ago. So, in the momentary awkwardness of the encounter, we had reverted back to a punchy, noncommittal, adolescent dialect.

"What are you doing here?"

"Shopping for pants."

"Well, you're not going to find any in there," she said, pointing to the watches. Her face was bright, but seemed smaller and tenser, as if it had been condensed by the same muscular process that produces a fist. As a result, her brown, almond-shaped eyes appeared to be focused intensely inward on some portentous, trapped thought, even as she conversed blithely with me. It was almost as if she were going through some effort to reacquaint herself with my sudden presence, as one adjusts vision to the dark.

"Yeah, I seem to be a little lost," I responded.

"What a surprise," Sandra said, and the flippancy was surprisingly nostalgic to me.

"It's these damn monster department stores," I said. "Men's clothing is dispersed everywhere. There's sportswear, activewear, casual wear, outerwear, formal wear, designer wear. It's so confusing."

"And you'd rather there be some sort of all-inclusive trousers section. Did you ask around?"

"Yes, I think there used to be one a while back. Remember the last time we were here? But it no longer exists," I answered. "The salespeople here whisper about it with some kind of mythological reverence, as if it were that ancient super-continent, Pangaea, before it separated into smaller land masses."

"You're ridiculous."

A smile loosened the confined quality

of her face for a moment. "How's your father?" she asked.

"Not so good. Mom's really worried that if things don't improve we might soon have to put him in chronic care."

"I'm sorry." I thought she might put her hand on my arm, but she instead crossed her arms over her chest.

"We'll be fine," I said. "I've been moved up to floor manager at the warehouse." I was working at a company that manufactured plastic computer casings.

"You mentioned a while back that it might happen."

"It's more pay, anyway."

She uncrossed her arms, and it seemed to signal a saturation point in the conversation, or perhaps it announced her desire to depart, as when pigeons fan out their tails just before taking flight. When she left me a month ago, her parting words had been "Let's not linger on this, O.K.?" and there was some sort of accompanying physical gesture as well, a palm held out to me or a nervous rubbing of her elbow, something I can't quite recall, though I try every day. And so, with indelible irony, her request not to linger has itself lingered on.

There was a cough behind us. We were in the way of a family that wanted to peruse the watches, and as we cleared ourselves from the aisle, our combined forward momentum dragged from me the suggestion (well, plea actually): "How about helping me find some damn pants?"

"Does little Derrick Lee need an escort?"

I put my palms together like a supplicant. "Has there been a time when I didn't?"

Sandra contemplated the faded denims I had on. "Do you remember what I said were the three requirements for buying clothes?" she asked.

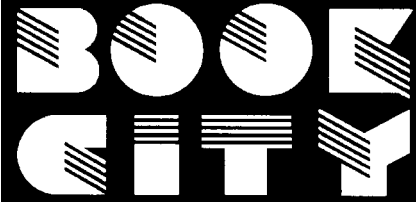
"Reasonable fit, agreeable style, acceptable cost."

"Very good. And what three things do you need to find those three things?"

"Diligence, forbearance, luck."

She was pleased that I could still recite her mantra correctly. And as she took my hand and led me once more through the chinos and corduroys and tweeds, perhaps for the very last time, I knew I could never fully satisfy her prodigious requirements for us.

Andrew Loung lives in the Annex. He has been previously published in the Hart House Review, the U.C. Review and Ça Met Égal.



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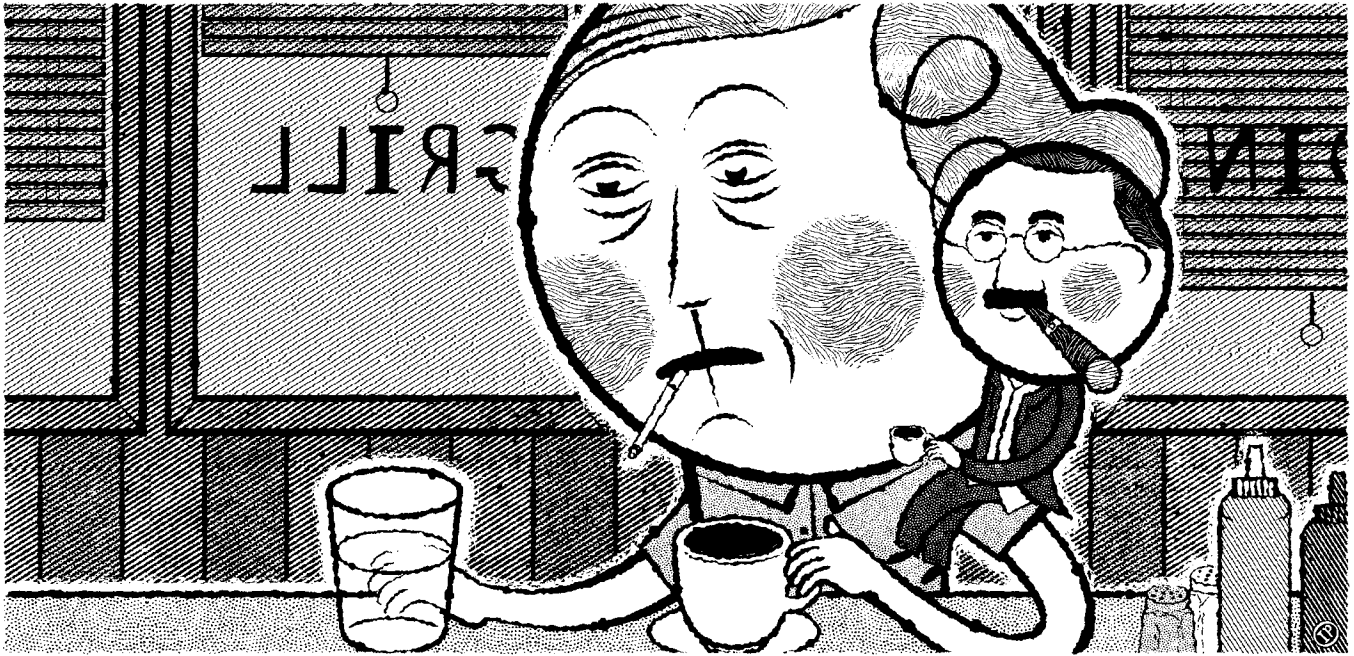
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BALANCE

FICTION BY ALEX BOYD

Ben walks the streets, his hand ducking back into his pocket, always wanting to reassure himself that the knife is there. Inside more private moments, he would sometimes take it out and play with it. On occasion he notices something new, the newspapers covering that store window, the small sign announcing that it would soon become something else. Almost as though a place can cocoon. But more often the streets seem like shifting patterns of old. *There is always so much old*, he thought. *If you are new you are creeping into the world.* It was up to him to be the pin, to hold something down until it happened, and this time he might actually succeed in making a difference.

There is a thump and people look. Two cars have bumped each other, a gesture that would almost look loving if it weren't for the expression on the face of the young man stepping out of one of the cars, a brown Jeep. The young man takes a look and says "More damage to your car than mine!" He gives a giggle and hops back into his car, pulling away. Ben's hand goes into his jacket pocket and his fingers find the knife once more. He slows, but picks up his pace again.

Little birds, if I had bread for you, you'd get it, Simon thinks. Small sparrows and chickadees appear near the bench, hop around, and shotgun away, as if moving to invisible currents.

Today at the bookstore, Simon had moved slowly, his mind like an anchor. He turned to his co-worker Lisa and asked, "Do you ever have the feeling that something's wrong but you don't know what it is?" Before her response came, they waited through a layer of silence.

"No. No, I can't say that I have."

Simon walked into the receiving area in the back and dropped the same question in front of Veronica. She was new to the store and he found her to be quiet, mysterious, and beautiful. She moved her hands in a way that was tired and yet showed she was completely unaware of their elegance.

She looked at him. "Something's wrong but I don't know what it is? I feel that all the time."

Simon asked Veronica out. During the first drink they had together she explained about literally running from her office work, packing up and deciding to try life in another city.

Now, in early evening, he kicks his feet, tries to unwind and get the new little

seeds out of his mind. Watching the birds. The woman he'd helped today was about forty-five, well dressed, and dipped in perfume. She looked as though nine people had spent the morning working on her hair. The hair was a tidy bun of blond as if ready to unravel and give birth to something Simon didn't want to know about. It was one of those days that Simon didn't want to be there, and one of those customers who needed to hold hands with an employee.

"It's all alphabetical by author, so the man you want is right here." He starts to walk away.

"Now the difficulty here is that my husband needs the one he doesn't have."

"Oh." *And how am I supposed to help you with that? Pretend to be interested, pretend to be interested.* There is one hardcover next to six paperbacks. Titles like *Death Learns the Tango*.

"You could take the hardcover, that's the latest one, so he may not have it, and it could be returned if—"

"Yes, but I need to know. I need the one that I need. I have the one I need written down here somewhere." She begins to go through her pockets, purse, and bags for long minutes while Simon thinks about what he could be doing. She

pulls out a tremendous wad of money. "Oh, that's not it."

If this isn't an American tourist, Simon thinks, *I'm moving to France.*

Another stretch of silence hits bottom with the woman saying, "Oh, I feel so terrible."

And so you should, you incompetent woman! Do you think I have nothing better to do? The words come up and hit the back of Simon's face, but he does not say them. Simon the bitch. He thinks around for something to say, despite really having nothing to add.

"Ah, well, that's O.K. The books will be here."

"Could you just write down all the titles so that I can compare them with what my husband has?"

Why, of course. Simon returns from his terminal a minute later with each title on a scrap of paper. More for her cyclone purse.

"And could you put the phone number of the store on it?"

Why, of course. Another minute, another scrap.

"All right, thank you. I'll check with my husband. We don't have much time. We're just over from New York."

Ah, yes.

The first day that Simon had worked in the bookstore they put him on the information desk and everyone else left. He hadn't even had a tour, so he tried to tell people where the washrooms were by looking on a map of the store along with them. People almost blocked out the rest of the store sometimes, so many of them approached the desk. For the first few days he kept a copy of *The English Patient* nearby, reading sentences between customers the way other men might take constant sips from a flask. That was two years ago. Simon liked bookstore work, to be outnumbered and surrounded by books, like a good army. *But for God's sake—something new, anything.* Ben had been teaching him some of his skills, at least. Somehow, stealing appealed to Simon because it felt like experimentation, stepping outside the rules of your own life. The important thing was to steal from those who had too much, to steal in an ethical way.

It's early evening and Ben is sitting in the No. 1 Spadina Street Grill, in his usual booth. He imagines a finger in his ribs, watching Poke slide into the booth.



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Ben never got around to asking him why the finger stab was his usual greeting. Somehow, it was simply who he was, never any other name. He remembers Poke looking up, brushing dirty hair out of his eyes, and ordering the all-day breakfast as always, whatever time it was. Poke and his stupid jokes. The other people in his apartment building called him Catman, he was so quiet. *What drove him to suicide?* Stupid pressures, growing like cracks in the ice he stood on. *Why is the world no different now?*

When he had first heard of his death, Ben turned the fact over in his mind, looking at it from different angles. He had concluded that when somebody harmless is removed from the world, there is no guarantee that an equal amount of harm is removed. Worse than no guarantee, there is no sign of it at all. On a quiet night in his apartment, Ben stood up from his kitchen table, opened a drawer, found the sharp knife with the solid handle. He walked the few steps over to his jacket and slipped it into the pocket.

Simon adjusts his napkin and silverware. "Nineteen-seventy-seven," he says, "was the year we lost humour." He raises a finger. "The year that Groucho died."

"And you think," Ben answers, "that you can . . . tap into that?"

"Of course! The past can inspire the present, ignite it."

"I don't know, Simon. Sometimes I feel like I'm still trying to put the past out, you know what I mean? I mean it's fine to appreciate what was . . ."

"It's still there."

"All right, it's still there, any old work of art. But do you have to have such . . . intensity?" Ben has trouble finding the words, the image of the past spreading like a hot sun over a new day, melting it into a desert.

Simon looked over his shoulder again at the old woman, Helen. Helen always waited outside until every booth was taken and then came in and asked to share with someone so that she could talk. She listened also, which people said was rare anywhere, and at each comment brought a hand down to slap the top of the table and say "Oh!" or sometimes laugh, throwing her head back to reveal her crooked teeth. She would look out the window to find words and then string them together, sentences as delicate as cat bones. Old Helen had been in Toronto for thirty years, but was still

GEOGRAPHY

This is the place.

These are the frozen vistas I have envisioned in dreams.

The shore,
 stretching to infinity on either side,
 you have to go beyond the sloping dunes of sand,
 passed the tall grass,
 swaying with every crash of the ocean,
 to enter the woods where I first lost you.
 Each tree crouching against another,
 a dark foliage woven against intrusion,
 beckoning us with murmurs and promises.
 These are the woods we entered screaming gaily,
 but left in silent wisdom.
 My eyes closed, I can keep track of you,
 memory pained into existence,
 your breath, trailing behind a bush,
 your touch, resting its imprint on a rock
 _ The games were never simple,
 the rules were never clear or explained _
 your hands in coolness raised against the invasion of sunlight,
 your laugh crystalline and throaty,
 a fragile liberation,
 and finally, your dance, impish, lithe,
 laughing at the fear that sent me yelling your name,
 like the prophesy of betrayal,
 reverberating with every wave;

There'll be a next time.

There is always a next time,
 when you find yourself alone
 staring at your face in the mirror,
 making sure you still exist.

— CATHERINE DUCHASTEL

"not quite used to it, you know." The waitress would walk away when Helen was just beginning to say the words, the same thing she always wanted. The first time Ben had been nearby he was startled at how rude he thought it was, until Helen had been brought her coffee and glass of ice water. "Oh, you're a dear girl." The rumour that interested Simon was that she'd once been involved with Groucho Marx.

"You are not even going to try and sleep with old Helen, Simon. If you even try to take advantage of that dear old lady I will punch you in the face," Ben says.

"All right, all right," Simon laughs. "You act like I'm some handsome calf who just gets whatever the hell he wants. Obviously, I've never told you about some

of my former attempts at romance. Hey, do you know what Groucho Marx said when he was asked 'What would you do differently?' in an interview shortly before he died?"

"No." Ben actually feels a little happy.

"He said, 'I'd try more positions.' It's true!" Simon laughs again while Ben considers calling him an idiot.

There is a way that Simon pictures laughter. On the air all around them, so that you can reach for it, or you are bumped into it somehow. When Ben thinks of laughter it is something that managed to break into the world, a plant making its way through a crack in the sidewalk.

Ben's thoughts go back to Poke. He had been told his last words, that Poke had lifted his head from the hospital bed

and said "Something's wrong." Ben remembered his father's last words—he was very weak, in a hospital bed and drifting in and out of consciousness. When the phone rang, his eyes opened and he said, "Who's on the phone?" before closing his eyes and eventually drifting away and dying. It seemed odd, or maybe just interesting, to Ben that his father's last words carried no significant meaning. He inquired about what was probably a wrong number, blissfully unaware that he was speaking final words.

Poke was a man who asked for spare change all day to see the nearest movie that he hadn't seen before. His strange habit was ordering a large Coke and popcorn even though he was standing at the back of the line and it would be at least five minutes before he was served. People would stare at him as he calmly and repeatedly said, "A large Coke and popcorn, please," until he finally got up to the counter and swallowed, simply staring at the man behind the counter. Under that new pressure he would pause, then finally get it out. Seeing a film was an added bonus, and a good film was even better, but what Poke liked was the relief, the dark folding over him for two hours and the great doorway to somewhere else on the screen.

It was Poke who told management about "the weasel," his nickname for the greasy man, about forty-five, who would sail down a row of the theatre and sit next to a woman. It didn't matter if there were lots of empty seats around.

Then he'd lean in as far as possible so that the woman would have to squish to the other side of the seat to avoid him. Whenever a woman got up to move, he'd find another spot a few minutes later. Poke couldn't go so far as to confront the weasel, but was satisfied watching anonymously in the darkness while an usher stepped in and leaned over the weasel, spoke to him, and then escorted him out.

The door outside the No. 1 Spadina Street Grill has the word "PLEASE" over and over again in small cardboard signs running almost all the way down the glass to the doorknob, where there is another sign, "LIFT LATCH, THEN PULL ON DOOR." Even so, Ben and Simon sit and watch one person after another walk straight up and pull repeatedly on the door.

In the background, old Helen can be heard asking the couple she's sitting with about her husband: "He died of cirrhosis of the liver—what's that?" There is a quiet delay while they mumble that they don't really know, and then the man is optimistic enough to offer, "Well, he sounds like he was a nice man, your husband."

"Why would you say that? He drank a lot, you know."

Over near the door, the cash register is beginning to sputter and whine. A man and a woman are standing impatiently while the owner tries to convince it to co-operate, flicking switches and trying again.

"Did I ever tell you why I gave away my book of romantic poetry?" Simon asks.

"Uh, what?" Ben turns back to look at Simon.

"Nice book, you know? Thick hard-cover, expensive—the professor I had for romantic stuff was named Hornby. Starting his class, I'd heard some nasty things about him. The man was a thousand years old. He started the English program at my university. He taught me in his very last year before retirement. There was a sign posted near the offices for the English department that said to sign the page if you wanted to be able to continue to benefit from the wisdom and experience of Prof. Hornby. Under that someone wrote 'JOIN THE PROF. HORNBY CLUB AND GET AN A!' Anyway, I liked the man, despite how abrasive he could be."

"How? I mean, what did he do?" Ben asks.

Simon pauses. "This is one thing I saw. After a comment this guy made, Hornby turns and states to the rest of the class, 'Now, whenever you see his eyes light up, that means he's beginning to get it!' But he was also full of these great remarks, like, 'Don't treat anything like it's the gospel. In fact, don't even treat the gospel like it's the gospel.' It's true that he also used to drool into his grey beard, but whatever. I liked him. In fact, he was one of the few teachers where I'd stay after class and walk him out, just because I was sincerely interested in what we were studying and in talking to him. I wasn't one of those eager, kiss-ass types, you know?" Simon makes the word kiss-ass snakelike, uses the first

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letters as little stepping stones to enjoy the sound of the letter “s.”

“Oh, no,” Ben says. By now four people are waiting over by the cash register and the owner is giving it gentle smacks and making stupid jokes to try and help the situation. Ben is trying to keep his mind off the distraction while Simon talks.

“Those types used to ask questions just to demonstrate their knowledge, and they’d come to class and set up a spot with little datebooks spread out in front of them—so much stuff that half the time I thought one of them was going to pull out a potted plant. Anyway, I don’t think Hornby wanted to be nasty; he just didn’t have the patience some days. But if you approached him and spoke to him, he was O.K., you know? He used to make more harmless little jokes than nasty ones, often grabbing at our personal characteristics. ‘How do you get your hair like that, Simon? It probably takes a lot of effort to make it look like you just got out of bed.’ He was so old that I had to walk slowly with him, just like I do with my dad. Part of me even felt that I had the conversations with Hornby that I wish I could have with my dad. We discussed faith, life after death, these kinds of topics. And he listened.”

A woman in the cash register lineup steps forward a little. “You know, you really have to get your act together with this register, this is just ridiculous.” Ben is still facing Simon, trying to ignore her, at the same time thinking, *What a stupid way to phrase a complaint.* A second later, a man jumps in with, “Yeah, this is getting a little irritating.” Ben leans in to be able to focus on Simon.

“So, one day, I go to class, the second last week of school, and I’m tired, lots of work to do. Suddenly, Hornby is firing all these questions at me, one after another, dropping all around me like shells. And I’m so tired that I didn’t get a chance to read the poems I’m supposed to be able to talk about. So he’s asking me things like ‘How does the mind of the poet change from the beginning of the poem to the end?’ and I haven’t even read the fucking thing. But he doesn’t let me off the hook, keeps going back to me and nailing me to the wall, both of us so disappointed and offended. Only once did I have some kind of response, when the discussion began to cover belief in an afterlife. He turned

to me and asked, ‘Do you believe in God?’ and I said, ‘You mean after the last twenty minutes?’ It got a laugh, at least. After class, the worst of the kiss-ass boys approaches me to say, ‘Oooh, you got burned, bad,’ and all I could say was, ‘No kidding,’ and walk away. Hornby had announced that the following week, in our last class, I was to come prepared to lead the discussion and take it somewhere. I was to ‘demonstrate my ability.’ Can you believe that? After all the free time I spent after class talking with him, he demands that I ‘demonstrate my ability.’”

Simon stops because both he and Ben are distracted by the noise at the door. The man behind the counter is now calculating the bills by hand, writing them out with the help of a calculator. The man is saying, as if for the second or third time, “Look, sorry, all right? This isn’t the kind of thing that happens very often, usually people are a little more patient.”

“Oh, well I guess it’s just me,” one of the men says. “I guess everyone else waiting here is really enjoying themselves.” The complaining man turns to look behind him for support and a woman helps him with, “Oh, yeah. This is great.” The man behind the counter is clearly angry, but goes on writing the next bill.

Over in the booth, Simon asks Ben, “What do they think, that he planned this?” He pauses. “And worse than that, don’t they have this in perspective at all? There are parts of the world where you are shot at, you know? Or where you don’t have any fucking food, never mind the luxury of . . . But not here in Canada, where we’re flustered if we have to stand in a line for a few precious minutes.”

“Nothing,” Ben says.

“Sorry?”

“Nothing has ever happened to them.”

Ben takes out his knife and places it on the table next to the plain cutlery. The knife with the solid handle doesn’t look like anything terribly different. He spins it around so that it makes a circle, takes it, and puts it back in his pocket. He stands up and looks at Simon. “I’m going.” Ben begins to walk towards the cash register and the people.

“Wait, Ben. I’m coming. Let’s take the back door. I have something I want you to see.”

“The back door? But we have to pay

the bill, I want to go over to those people there.”

“I’ve paid the bill. I mean, I’ve left enough. Let’s get out of here, Ben. I have something I want you to see.”

Ben looks down at the table, sees that Simon has dropped a twenty-dollar bill there. He feels a slight tug in the direction of the back door, notices that Simon has curled his arm around his, snug and tight like a chain link.

The same night, in rows of packaging, canned goods like tin soldiers, Ben is looking around, shopping slowly, reaching for things he doesn’t want, drunk with distraction. It wasn’t often his thoughts could push something out of his throat. He decides to put something back, turns to Simon: “You insisted that we leave.”

“Yes. I think I had an idea of what you were planning in there. Would you have done it? Which of the people, and where would you have stabbed?” A strange kind of curiosity fills Simon.

“I don’t know exactly. I had the idea of racing by and slashing, maybe writing a letter to a paper so that I can explain. Being a kind of decency terrorist. Or maybe really finishing one off for Poke. Someone who gives off a kind of stupid heat, burns with stupidity, with ignorance.”

Ben gets his bread. They wait to get up to the counter. “Pulling yourself into knots isn’t a way to live, enjoy anything,” Ben says.

“Yeah. Ironic. I served a woman at the

CONTRIBUTORS

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store once. She'd had to stand there for a minute first and I said, 'Sorry for the wait.' Know what she said?"

"No."

"She said, 'I enjoyed it.' I wanted to ask her how she became such a remarkable woman, but I didn't really get the chance."

They get up to the counter and the food is punched up on the register, but, instead of his money, Ben accidentally pulls an old phone number out of his pocket, says "Oh," and hesitates a second. It is an old number, useless. The cheap hotel where his friend Poke had the money to stay for a few nights after some old man gave him a fifty-dollar bill.

Simon jumps in with, "What my friend here means to say is that he wants to pay for the food with this phone number. It's a good number."

There is a small curl, the beginning of a smile, on the face of the young woman. "Um, I don't think so."

"But you know, this could be a valuable number. I mean this could be a real friend, you know?" Simon's eyebrows go up and he tilts his head a little. "O.K., I guess this is one of those places where you just take money."

Ben finds his money and they pay. He doesn't say the words *Simon, you can paint on blank things. At times, you are my voice.*

Crossing the bridge, Simon stops to admire the view. It is a fresh night and the air feels healthy and good. In the dark, the trees are moving and thinking in the wind, hushing the earth with a quiet voice. Simon steps over and leans on the thick stone railing and Ben comes over to join him. Not far below, the concrete path winds its way across the grass in the park.

"So, what happened when you went back?" Ben asks.

"Where?"

"When you went back the week after, to lead the class in the discussion and try and impress Hornby, show him your stuff or whatever."

"Oh, that. I remember sitting there before the class started, obviously nervous, while Hornby made remarks like, 'Well, I hope you're ready.' One woman who I'd spoken to before was kind enough to give me a little wink. I did all right, I thought. I moved fairly comfortably through a comparison of all of the odes by Keats. The discussion pattered along and then finally picked up and got into the air."

"And? What did he say?"

"Well, I didn't catch him in the classroom, so I went to his office and said, 'I hope I've redeemed myself in your eyes somewhat.' He turned my own expression back to me and said, 'Somewhat.' Can you believe the bastard? As part of an excuse to explain why I hadn't necessarily always spoken in class, I told him that I had worked hard to break out of a pattern of extreme shyness. I mean, walk seven miles rather than have to ask the bus driver how much I owe, that kind of shyness. Even having thrown the shyness off I still wasn't in the habit of talking in class. He told me that 'believe it or not' he'd been really shy all through high school and I resisted the urge to say, 'How lucky that you've had this chance to take revenge on whoever you want for an entire career as a university professor,' but I didn't. Somehow it wasn't the way to say goodbye. Anyway, that's why I gave away my nice hardcover book of romantic poetry."

At least a few minutes pass before Ben says, "You know how different people can be inside things? Can represent things?"

"Sure, that's what I'm talking about." Simon looks down to see that Ben has the knife in his hand, shining slightly in the moonlight. Ben puts it at the edge of the stone railing so that the handle is over the edge and he is holding down the blade with one finger. He lifts his finger and the weight of the handle carries it over the edge and it falls with a gentle thump into some of the tall grass below. Another long pause.

"You're . . . all right with that?" Simon asks as they start to leave.

"Oh, yeah. Or at least, I'll try it out."

"So you could be back again, pulling up long grass by the roots, looking for that goddamned knife?" Simon laughs.

They are leaving the bridge on the far side when Ben asks "Hey, do you think you could get that book back from your friend? I mean, just explain that you need to be able to drop it off a bridge, right?" Simon found a way to his open, crisp laugh years ago and it's a sound that comes out now, into the night.

Alex Boyd lives in Bloorcourt Village. He has published poems, essays, and fiction in various newspapers and magazines. Samples of his writing can be found at www.alexboyd.com.

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