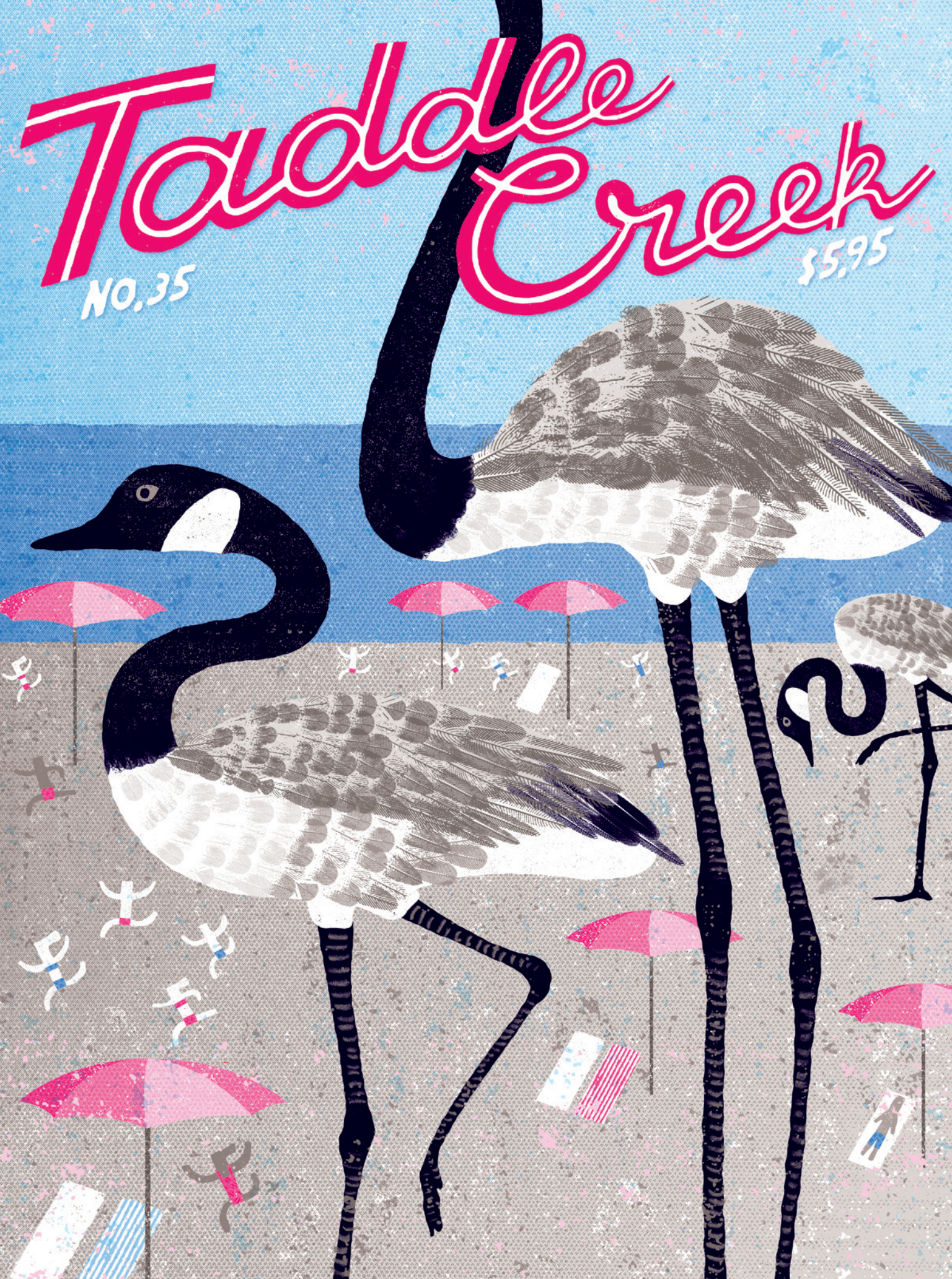


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# TADDLE CREEK

NO. 35, SUMMER, 2015



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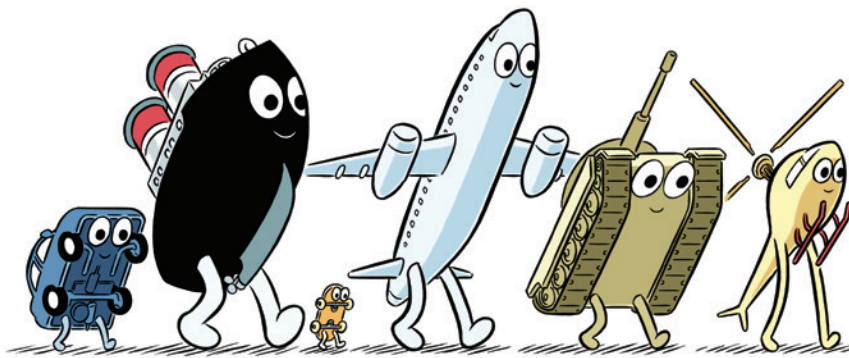
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*“A fourth dimension of affection.”*

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## THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Lana Pesch** (“Name Withheld By Request,” p. 4) was long-listed for the 2014 CBC Short Story Prize, and won the Random House of Canada Creative Writing Award for 2011–2012. *Moving Parts*, her first book, will be published this fall.

**Stevie Howell** (“Ontarioabandoned-places.com,” p. 7) has written poetry appearing in *Descant*, *Eighteen Bridges*, *Hazlitt*, *Maisonneuve*, and the *Walrus*. Her first collection, *[Sharps]*, was published last year.

**Thomas Blanchard** (photograph, p. 8) is a photo-based artist and freelance photographer, and a visual arts instructor at York University.

**Lauren Carter** (“The Great and Powerful,” p. 10) is the author of *Swarm*, a dystopian literary novel—listed as one of the “Top 40 books that could change Canada,” by CBC’s Canada Reads program—and *Lichen Bright*, a collection of poetry.

**Farzana Doctor** (“Ikea Bed,” p. 12) was named one of “Ten Canadian women writers you need to read now,” by CBC Books. She co-curates the Brockton Writers Series, and her third novel, *All Inclusive*, will be published this fall.

**David Collier** (“Future Flâner?,” p. 16) currently has work on display at the National Gallery of Canada, as part of an Alex Colville exhibition.

**Suzette Mayr** (“Concrete Swans,” p. 24) is the author of four novels. Her most recent, *Monoceros*, won the ReLit Award and the W. O. Mitchell Book Prize, and was long-listed for the Giller Prize.

**Tara-Michelle Ziniuk** (“By the Lachine Canal I Sat Down And . . .,” p. 27) is a freelance writer, editor, and media-maker. She is the author of *Emergency Contact* and *Somewhere To Run From*.

**Sue Carter** (“A New Vantage Point,” p. 28) is the editor of *Quill & Quire*, and the arts and ideas editor of *This*. Her writing has appeared in the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Life*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Canadian Art*.

**Andrew MacDonald** (“Progress on a Genetic Level,” p. 36) has won a Western Magazine Award for fiction and been long-listed two times for the Journey Prize.

**Stuart Ross** (“Hello, I’m a Poem About Johnny Cash,” p. 39) published two books this spring—*A Hamburger in a Gallery* and *Further Confessions of a Small Press Racketeer*—and also translated (with Michelle Winters) Marie-Ève Comtois’s poetry collection *My Planet of Kites*.

**JonArno Lawson** (“Under a Billboard at Bathurst and Eglinton,” p. 41) is the author of several books, including *Down in the Bottom of the Bottom of the Box*, *Enjoy It While It Hurts*, and, most recently, *Sidewalk Flowers* (with the illustrator Sydney Smith).

**Dave Lapp** (*People Around Here*, p. 44) is a contributing editor to the magazine. His most recent book is *People Around Here*, a collection of his strips from *Taddle Creek* and elsewhere.

**Ian Phillips** (The Cover) is a freelance illustrator and amateur birder who lives in an old trophy factory. He has contributed to the magazine since 1998.



# T H E E P H E M E R A

## THE BLACK AND WHITE ISSUE

Last fall, *Taddle Creek*'s editor-in-chief had the pleasure of speaking with a group of up-and-coming writers, at a lunchtime seminar hosted by Diaspora Dialogues, an organization dedicated to promoting diversity in new Canadian literature. Much of the discussion focused on topics common in such settings, including where to submit work, how best to submit it, and what type of work publishers are looking for. All of the authors in attendance were born in a country other than Canada, and eventually the conversation turned to why it was so hard to find literary magazines and book publishers willing to accept work focused on the immigrant experience. The general feeling in the room was that Canadian publishers simply weren't interested in the stories immigrants had to tell. It was a discussion still on *Taddle Creek*'s mind one wintery Saturday morning earlier this year, when some tweeters who had read the magazine's "Growing Up in Toronto" editorial package, from *Taddle Creek* No. 34, commented with dismay that nearly all of the artists featured in it were white.

Whether other magazines lack interest in the immigrant experience is not something to which *Taddle Creek* can speak, though perhaps it's a conversation that needs to be had in another forum. Instead, the magazine will shine the spotlight on itself and address the question, Why is the fiction, poetry, and general focus of *Taddle Creek* not more diverse?

First, some background: *Taddle Creek* finds fiction and poetry for its pages in two ways: through unsolicited submissions sent via mail or E-mail, and by actively soliciting authors whose work it enjoys.

Very little of the work appearing in the magazine comes from unsolicited submissions. *Taddle Creek* loves nothing more than discovering a talented author previously unknown to it—except perhaps having the chance to publish that writer's very first story or poem. Still, much of the work that makes its way to the magazine's slush pile (as it's known in the industry) is not up to the standards *Taddle Creek* has set for itself. There are many reasons for this: It could be that an author needs more time to hone his or her talent before being ready for publication. Or that the work submitted simply isn't the type of fiction or poetry *Taddle Creek* is looking for in its mysterious, frustrating-to-writers hard-to-describe way. But most of the time, it's that the work submitted, in *Taddle Creek*'s opinion, simply isn't very good. *Taddle Creek* sometimes will write an encouraging note or provide feedback to an author who seems promising, and occasionally those authors eventually do make their way into the magazine, though this is not the norm. But *Taddle Creek* believes in the level playing field an open submission policy creates, and finding the odd gem makes the whole process worthwhile.

So, to answer the question posed at the Diaspora Dialogues session, if *Taddle Creek* rejected your work, it has nothing to do with ethnic background or subject, and more to do with the fact that the work being presented probably wasn't ready for publication, much like the work received by the many non-immigrant writers *Taddle Creek* rejects in a given day.

With that said, *Taddle Creek* obviously solicits most of the fiction and poetry appearing in its pages, and herein lies the magazine's failure. While *Taddle Creek* is very proud of the overall gender bal-

ance of its contributors, and of its regular inclusion of work by writers who do not identify as heterosexual, its record of publishing stories by authors and artists of non-European descent, admittedly, is not good. *Taddle Creek* does not actively seek to achieve balance in terms of gender or sexual orientation, it's just something that seems to happen naturally, which makes the magazine's lack of racial diversity all the more acute. If *Taddle Creek* solicits most of its fiction and poetry, it should be doing a better job soliciting from writers of different backgrounds.

In regards to the "Growing Up in Toronto" feature, *Taddle Creek* was aware that it lacked diversity prior to publication. Finding any artists who actually grew up in the city was difficult. Finding more diverse ones proved even harder. *Taddle Creek* did try, but should have tried harder, and accepts the criticism.

*Taddle Creek* cannot promise to be interested in every story told from the immigrant point of view, just as it cannot promise to be interested in every story told from any point of view, and the magazine does not believe in tokenism. But *Taddle Creek* would like to feel as proud of its ethnic diversity as it feels of its other types of diversity, and so it promises to make a strong, long-overdue effort to improve in this area. Reader discussion has shamed *Taddle Creek*, and hopefully reader discussion will help solve the problem. *Taddle Creek* thanks those who dared to point fingers.

—TADDLE CREEK

Congratulations to Pascal Blanchet, whose illustration for the cover of *Taddle Creek* No. 34 recently was nominated for a National Magazine Award.

## NAME WITHHELD BY REQUEST

BY LANA PESCH

Through the cement and darkness, the half-empty subway car burrowed its way underground, the same kind of burrowing that was upsetting Jill's stomach. Her legs were thick and numb; her feet may as well have been nailed to the floor of the human cargo carrier. Across the aisle from her sat a teenage girl with sharp black hair who looked to be the same age as her niece. The girl was dressed in mesh, her lips painted a dark lizard green. Another woman with tight curls was eating blueberries, picking them out of her purse one by one.

The crease in Jill's forehead ached, and she rubbed it with her thumb. It was a humid August morning outside, but cool here in the air-conditioned train. Further ahead, a man was reading the *Economist* as if he was reclined in his own living room. He had salt and pepper hair and funky glasses; Jill imagined he probably owned a Lexus but on occasion took the subway to clear his conscience. Maybe he owned a dog too. A Filipino woman was fast asleep, her head knocking against the plastic divider. She was overweight and had two plastic shopping bags on the floor, between her legs, that contained several bottles of cola. Jill tried not to judge, but with one glance she had already assumed the woman was the author of her own demise. Maybe she was just trying to get home and relax after some awful all-night cleaning job she worked to send money back to her husband and kids on the other side of the world.

"Shame on you," Jill thought to herself. What would her dear old mum have said? "Snap out of it," she would have barked. "It was just a damn dog." Any one of these people could be in the same position as Jill, or worse. Far worse. The Filipino woman, for example. And maybe goth girl was homeless. Maybe she was depressed because she was bullied or abused or addicted to drugs or sex or gambling. Who knew what was going on with people?

Jill had taken the day off from her job,

reviewing movies for a morning radio talk show. She had planned ahead, knowing she wouldn't be able to sit in front of the microphone, alternating between earnest critique and witty sarcasm on the latest blockbuster. She had no energy for her usual clever banter with the host, who followed up her segment with a list of events going on in the city that weekend—outdoor art shows, Shakespeare in High Park, another charity marathon and its associated road closures.

Earlier that morning, before she took Captain Stubing to the vet one last time, she sat on the kitchen floor, next to her loyal companion's rug, eating stale mini-Kit Kats for breakfast. She'd found the chocolate bars in the crisper, left over from Halloween. When she dipped them in her coffee, they left splotchy puddles of oil floating on top. When Jill offered one to Stubey, he didn't even look up. He just lay there indolent and languid, not his usual self. He knew what was happening. Animals know.

All those droopy heads and blank stares on the subway could very well be masking pain greater than Jill's, heavier pain that was more important. Sluggish pain that hung from rafters and old pipes. Thick, oily pain that oozed from concrete walls, seeping through the city's cracks. Maybe salt and pepper hair just lost his job and had to remortgage the house, sell his boat. It was all relative, right?

But her little Captain Stubing wasn't just a damn dog.

The subway slowed down and pulled into Bloor station. Jill was headed west-bound, Spirit of the West singing in her headphones about sadness growing. The music gave a semblance of comfort, coaxing her back home. At the station, a few teens—late summer zombies less than half her age—exited the car and filed their way through the grotty tunnel, slow-marching drones dragging their feet toward a staircase of light. Despite its flaws—delays, construction, overcrowding—the subway was a decent system. Enter, ride, exit. Life

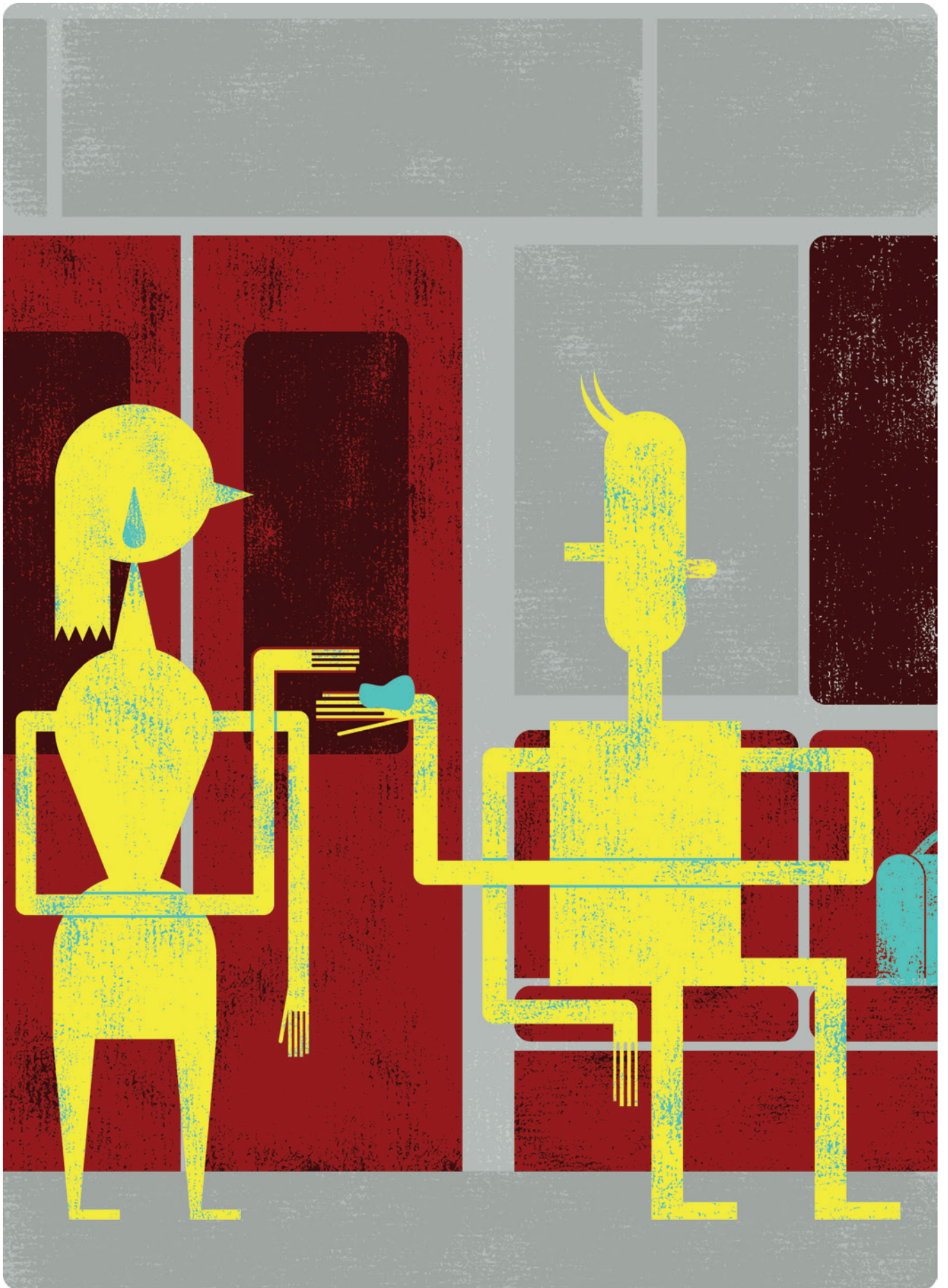
was a subway. Jill's mother's abrasive voice rang out: "Did you think the thing was going to live forever or what?"

Jill had thought the end would be more complicated. She remembered her grandmother's pearly grey skin as she lay motionless in her casket. Freakish and skeletal, but not terribly different than she was when she was alive. Then Brenda, her cousin who died suddenly, at the age of twenty-nine, from a brain aneurysm. Cremated and given an open-air ceremony two years after her death, so relatives from overseas could attend the get-together, on the family property in the Annapolis Valley. But Stubey had shown Jill how straightforward death was. A slim silver needle slipped into the soft flesh of his backside. The whole thing was dignified and graceful and over in an instant.

A few passengers entered the train and a tallish blond man with a duffle bag made a beeline toward her. Jill inadvertently caught his eye, then turned her head to the window. She focused on a coffee spill on the platform floor. There were plenty of empty seats on the train, but he chose to sit right next to her. She kept her eyes on the platform. Cracked tiles and crumbs of debris lined the crease at the bottom of the wall. The city had gone to shit. The train started up again, slow at first, then accelerating to what felt uncomfortably fast. Maybe the driver was anxious, letting off steam, or in a hurry to get to the end of his shift. Jill was a regular rider and this train definitely was moving faster than normal. She turned to face forward and adjusted one of her ear buds. In her anguish there was a tiny part of her deep inside that lifted. In her periphery, she saw the fellow next to her staring at her legs. He had a nervous energy about him, a slight, constant shaking of his left knee. The subway squealed as it curved around a bend in the track.

"Do you eat a lot of protein?" the guy said, suddenly.

Jill shifted in her seat. She should have just turned her music up louder. The



sooner she could get back to her apartment and lock the door behind her the better. She needed to be alone right now, not making small talk with twitchy strangers on public transit. She wanted to detach, unhook herself from anything that required effort. She wanted to be alone in the stillness, grieve in solitary confinement. She pictured her Siamese fighting fish, the only pet she had left now, violently pivoting from invisible predators in its bowl, flicking its luminous blue tail like a whip. Protein? How much was a lot? Tuna, peanut butter, beans—she'd given up chicken because of all the documentaries. What did it matter?

"Sure," Jill said. "Enough, I guess."

She was so tired, but he was right there, so close, crowding her. He was wound up, tight, fidgety. The subway sped along and she stared out the window, her eyes snagging on imaginary objects in the dark. Flashes appeared then vanished.

"You have great muscle tone," he said. He was speaking loudly, but no one seemed to notice. So many worlds in such a small space. "Your calves are nice. Calves are hard."

Jill recalled the documentary she had

seen about Temple Grandin, the autistic woman who went through life perpetually anxious, which led her to the discovery that she had more in common with animals than people, cows in particular. Jill tugged at the bottom of her T-shirt, waded it a little for airflow. Less than an hour earlier Jill had held Stubey's furry white head in her hand as he faded away. She had leaned over him while her beloved Westie licked her cheek one last time, his breath sour and warm and reeking like bad milk.

"Are you a Scorpio?"

Captain Stubing had been fourteen years old. Jill had been twenty-six when she got him. She hadn't even meant to get a dog, but when she attended the S.P.C.A. adopt-a-thon with her friend Charlene, there he was. Things weren't good with Ryan back then, and when she walked up to Stubey's cage, he was sitting there behind bars, little white ears perked straight up, dark eyes bursting with optimism. Jill fell hard. She named him after the character on *The Love Boat* because of his white coat and happy-go-lucky attitude. Stubey had outlasted Ryan. Later, he also outlasted Pete. He was probably the clos-

est thing Jill would ever have to a child.

"Leo," she said, taking her headphones out and cradling them in her hands.

"A Leo gave me this bracelet," the man nodded as he spoke, jutting his wrist forward, showing off a twisted black leather band. Maybe he was autistic. Or an idiot savant. Or just a plain idiot.

"I dated a bodybuilder once," he said, "She ate so many carrots her skin turned orange."

At Spadina station, goth girl got off the train, clutching an oversized canvas bag, head down, no eye contact with anyone. Jill wanted to get up and leave with her head down. Other passengers entered the car while the Filipino woman remained fast asleep. When the train started to move again it didn't speed up like before. In fact, it was moving much slower now, creeping through the underground like a sick worm.

"Do you wear a lot of animal print?"

She should have taken a cab. Jill shook her head with a motion that was barely noticeable.

"No? A lot of basic black then," he said. She was wearing black shorts, his leg still bouncing up and down next to hers. "You



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to get our wish. We never would have thrived if what we thought was in the bag never rived.

—STEVIE HOWELL

guy is on the cutting edge of fashion.”

When Jill took Stubey to the off-leash area at the dog park, he looked like a potbellied pig rushing around the other, bigger dogs. On those nights he slept soundly in his dog bed, beside hers, ears flopped forward, spent. When Jill had insomnia she would roll over and watch his breathing to calm her own, and sometimes his ears would flutter, roused from his peaceful sleep. She would stroke the top of his head and he would sigh, then fall back into a deep canine slumber.

Jill dropped her headphones in her lap and clasped her hands, intertwining them backward like the people-in-the-church game she used to play when she was a kid. It was painful to have her fingers linked so tightly but she liked feeling the pressure of her tendons, taut and strained. It

was a contained action, something she could control. She squeezed her joints as tight as she could and hoped she might pull a muscle, break a knuckle. She clenched her hands more forcefully and fought the urge to scream. She wanted to say, “Stop! My dog is gone! Stop talking to me!” Instead, she sucked in the sides of her cheeks so hard she thought she might pull out a molar.

The zipper on the duffel bag that sat on the man’s lap was wide open and she could see the contents: a paperback copy of *Cosmos*, by Carl Sagan, and a small plastic baggie full of turquoise stones. He picked up the bag of rocks and passed it back and forth from one hand to the other. The stones sounded like marbles rattling, colliding with each other in their contained space. They rode in awkward

silence, the train leisurely stopping and starting twice more, like it had all the time in the world. Jill closed her eyes, willed her seatmate not to speak again.

“I’m Mike, by the by. And you?”

She took a deep breath. The train was slowing down again. It wasn’t her stop but Jill stood up.

“Name withheld by request, right?”

At Ossington Jill balanced herself with the back of her hand against one of the metal bars.

“I’m just—,” she stopped herself. “I’m not good company today.”

“How far are you going?”

“Not far.”

“It’s a beautiful day outside.”

“Mmm.”

She picked at a thread sticking out on the corner of her leather purse. The seam was coming apart, the stitching working its way out one thread at a time. The doors opened and closed and she forgot to exit.

“Have you ever seen swans fly?”

Jill shrugged, gave him a forced smile. She shifted her weight from one sandal to the other.

“If you leave a wisteria seed pod out to dry, it’ll pop open. And it’s loud,” he said, his voice raised even louder, but there was still no reaction from the other riders. He stopped shaking the bag of stones and removed one. “The seeds fly out and can land anywhere.”

When the train pulled into Dufferin station, he held out a blue gemstone in the palm of his hand and offered it to her. She declined with a small wave and shook her head.

“This is me,” Jill said, four stops from home.

“Take it.”

He lowered his head and looked away from her eyes. She took the rock.

“Thank you.”

“Goodbye and good fortune,” he said, bowing deeply, leaning forward in his seat.

A few cars up, a woman with a golden retriever exited at the same time as Jill. Jill picked up her pace, tried to catch them, but they were too far ahead. She squeezed the rock in her hand. The swoopy blond tail of the dog disappeared around the corner and Jill slowed down. As the subway car pulled away, “Mike By the By” held a bright blue stone the size of a walnut up close to the window. His face was soft like a puppy, and his eyes were fixed on Jill, wide-eyed and hopeful. Then the train accelerated, and he was gone. ☪





THE SPOTLIGHT

# GOING WITH THE FLOW

*The eclectic music of Petunia.*

BY CONAN TOBIAS

Someone who doesn't take the time to recognize Petunia's full range as a musician would most likely label him as a country act. (It doesn't help that he rivals Hank Williams in the yodeling department.) Those who listen a little longer might categorize him as roots, blues, Americana, rockabilly, or jazz, and draw comparisons to Williams, Jimmie Rodgers, Jerry Lee Lewis, or the bar band from a David Lynch film. But those who listen longer still will recognize that while all of these descriptions, and others, are valid, none can define him accurately on their own. In more ways than one, Petunia refuses to be fenced in.

Since the age of eighteen, Petunia has been a wandering soul. His mantra is "We only live for a short time. We might as well make the most of it." As a result, he's spent much of his life in search of "experiences," moving from town to town, depending on the kindness of strangers—many of whom quickly become friends.

Before transforming into a travelling troubadour he worked in the film industry, which eventually led him to the Cineforum, the legendary Toronto theatre run out of the film archivist Reg Hartt's living room, and where Petunia lived and worked for a time. "The first time I saw him talk, I was sold," Petunia said of Hartt. "We've been friends ever since. I learned everything I know about the business of being an artist from Reg. And believe it or not, I learned how to walk a little more gracefully from knowing him."

Petunia came to music in a roundabout way. His parents were passive music listeners whose tastes leaned toward Paul Anka and Neil Sedaka—not the type of sounds that make a kid growing up in Laval, Quebec, long to pick up a guitar and sing. He says his earliest, most important influence was the 1976 K-Tel compilation *Looney Tunes*, which included such novelty songs as Napoleon XIV's "They're

Coming to Take Me Away, Ha-Haaa!" and "Kookie, Kookie (Lend Me Your Comb)," by Edd "Kookie" Byrnes. Eventually, older cousins played him more groundbreaking artists, like Led Zeppelin, Bowie, Boney M., and AC/DC. His true musical awakening, which he refers to as a "Frankenstein moment," came while living at the Cineforum, when the comedian Sheila Gostick taught him how to sing and play guitar, and rechristened him Petunia. He started busking soon after, and in a sense has never stopped.

Petunia's eclectic tastes and love of the road have given him a career as unique as his sound. He tours extensively, across Canada and around the world, playing to standing-room-only crowds in venues ranging from a sixty-seat century-old converted church in Parkindale, New Brunswick, to a co-op café on the outskirts of Montreal, to Toronto's rustic palace, the Dakota Tavern. "I enjoy the whole lifestyle," Petunia said. "I enjoy playing large and small venues, but where I have a lot of friends and have a lot of fun, those are the places I like to go back to. You know the saying about how water follows the least resistant path? The path with the least resistance is the way to go. That's what Reg taught me."

When not touring as a solo artist, Petunia is joined by the Vipers, a band formed from the ashes of the rockabilly star Ray Condo's Ricochets after his death, in 2004. Together, they've recorded three albums of originals and less-known covers, most recently *Inside of You*.

"For me, success is making excellent recordings, making really great music, putting on really good shows, and still being able to carry on having a life," he says. "I don't have a job—my job is what I said. So that's success to me." ▮

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[YOUTUBE.COM/TADDLECREEK](https://www.youtube.com/taddlecreek)  
Watch Petunia live at Café Touski.

PHOTOGRAPH BY THOMAS BLANCHARD

## THE GREAT AND POWERFUL

BY LAUREN CARTER

When I was a kid my dad made me kill the chickens to toughen me up. Now, I am anything but squeamish. When I'd finished, I would go inside, my mind on other things, and my mother would holler at me to take off my dirty boots and shirt. She kept an immaculate house, dust lifted off every surface, the oak railing polished with Murphy oil soap.

In university, during the one and a half years I'd actually pursued an undergraduate degree, a school counsellor told me she thought my parents put too much pressure on me with their expectations. They insisted that I be diligent in the barnyard—helping with the mucky manure in the garden earth, overseeing the animals' biological processes of eating, evacuating, and finally being sent to slaughter—and in the house, which my mother demanded be so spotlessly clean.

At the time she said this a humming started up in my head and pretty soon all I saw was her mouth moving. The walls were bumpy concrete. On one, she'd hung a bright South American blanket, probably bought from a travelling merchant in the library foyer in September. I sat there, lost in the blue and fuchsia weave, wanting to get up close, imagining the earthy, goat-like aroma of the woven wool, the scratchy feel of an animal's warm hide against my cool cheek.

Hazy smoke and beaded curtains hung inside Bohemian Village, but the day was one of the first warm ones of the year, so my friend Heather and I sat on the patio in the late afternoon sunshine.

"He isn't exactly homeless," I told her, as she tapped her silver lighter on the wooden table, which was scarred with deeply carved letters and angular hearts.

Heather swivelled her head to look for the server, lips pursed like a morning glory facing the night.

"He's squatting. That old factory on Cherry? The one in the paper last week?"

Everything was a question because I

was looking for agreement, acknowledgment, even a slight nod. Heather moved her fingers in the air like a pianist warming up and the waitress walked over. I didn't want beer but, rather than argue, I slid one of her cigarettes out of its foil envelope and held it to my lips.

"Honey," she said, as she lit it for me. When I drew in air, the tip crackled and glowed.

"Did you see Mrs. Johansen's pants today?" I asked. "Those plaid bell-bottoms with the purple clogs?" I stuck a finger in my mouth and pretended to gag.

Heather stared at me, head cocked, waiting for me to agree with her assessment of Anders, my boyfriend.

"He has a different lifestyle," I blurted out. "He doesn't care about one day buying a fancy car or making sure he's at work on time."

"Those are two different things," Heather said.

"Well, work then," I said. "He doesn't care about work."

She snorted, said nothing else, and neither did I. When our pitcher arrived, Heather set our glasses side by side and poured. I looked around the patio at the other pockets of smokers, artists, writers, and kids from the nearby university. We were all in our own separate pods. It reminded me of *Blade Runner*—those floating cars moving past one another in the caverns between skyscrapers.

"I just don't get what you see in him," Heather said, wiping foam off her top lip with one finger. She began to list Anders' inadequacies once again. It made me angry because she hadn't ever heard me out, hadn't listened as I told her about the lightning bolt of sudden attraction that had struck Anders and me. If she really cared, I would have been unlocking all those doorways, letting out my giddiness, because that's what I felt. I was in love. But my joy stayed buried beneath her judgment and my mother's imagined voice, sharp with sarcasm on the phone. A homeless man? Will it be an outdoor wedding?

That night, on the walk back to my aunt's house, I peed in a laneway. Sometimes I did that, just dropped my jeans and underwear beside a row of dented garbage cans, squatted, and stared up at the moon as urine splashed to the ground. It wasn't just a drunk thing. I did it to feel connected to the earth. Because in a lot of ways I still missed home, where the rhubarb harvest would soon be starting, where the air would be pungent with aromas. Anders would approve, I thought, and bit my bottom lip.

When I told him about it, the next afternoon, he paused thoughtfully before asking, "What do you do if you have to take a shit?" We were sitting on a park bench, holding Styrofoam cups with plastic lids. My face burned red. When I didn't answer, he said, "It's just another part of the reality."

"I know," I said.

Anders rubbed at a deep crack in the sidewalk with the sole of his black dress shoe, back and forth over the mud-stuffed gap. I chewed on the edge of the cup until a mouth-shaped hunk broke off.

"Do you have any cigarettes?" he asked.

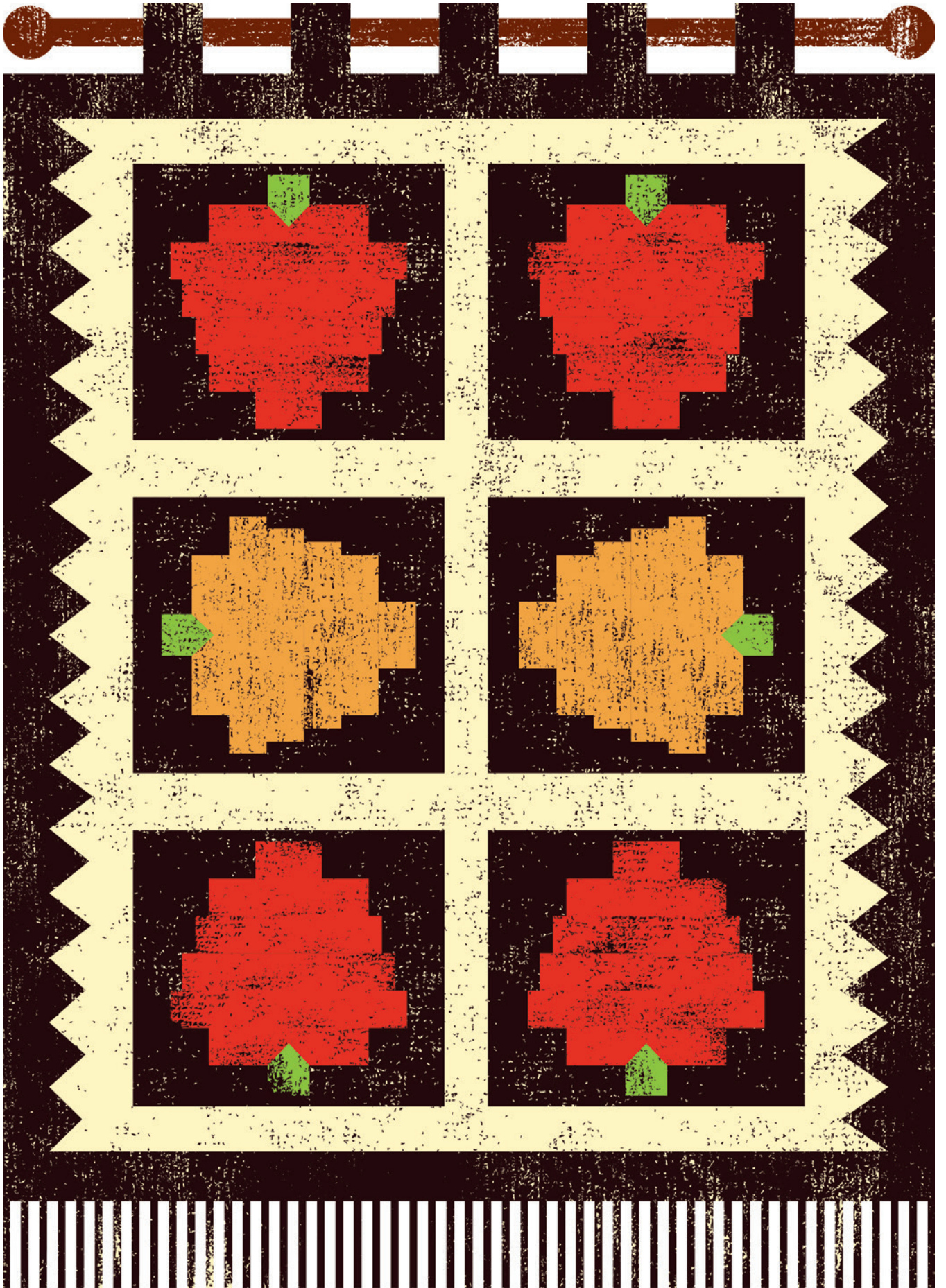
I only ever smoked Heather's so we walked to the 7-Eleven, where I paid for a pack of Belmont milds.

"Ta," he mumbled when I handed it to him, and that worried me, because it made the gift seem like charity, a donation to the needy. That wasn't what I wanted at all.

After we left the store, we headed for a picnic table in the park. The grass was wet and water soaked through my canvas shoes and red stockings, making me hop back and forth. Anders laughed at me—not like I was a spoiled baby, but like I'd never slept outside in a blizzard, like I didn't know how hunger felt. I looked like an idiot, I knew, so I laughed too.

Through the smoke of his cigarette, he squinted at me.

"I'm not a loser, you know," he said, his dark eyes accusing. "I used to run mountain rambles. I was the leader, like."



I nodded and touched his elbow, let my fingers creep around to grip the boniness of his arm. He pulled away, but only to lift his arm and wrap it around me. I sat stiffly, like a twelve-year-old out on a date. Anders looked down at my wet feet. They were freezing, the thin white fabric of my shoes still stained with soot and grass streaks from last summer. I tucked them under the table.

Anders grew up in Cardiff, the capital of Wales. When he was seventeen, he started shooting heroin with his best friend's sister. After she almost died from an overdose he went in and out of rehab until he realized he just had to leave. He travelled, went to work on a freighter carrying olives from Greece, ended up in Montreal, then hitched to Toronto. His father was a coal miner, like his grandfather before him, but Anders couldn't go underground.

"Down there in that blackness . . .," he said, a far-off look on his face as he gazed toward the edge of the park. I loved listening to him, how his accent made him sound like he was singing. Sometimes when he talked really fast I couldn't understand him. I had to strain to hear him or ask him to repeat himself.

"I hate that," he said. "It holds me back. People always thinking I don't belong."

I reached for his hand, the one not holding the cigarette.

"I don't think that."

His knee bobbed up and down but his fingers didn't move. They just lay there, under mine, waxy and cold even in the warm spring sun, and we both watched his cigarette burn down, the ember dulled to a pillar of ash.

"You were high," Heather said at work, a couple of days after our drinks at the Bohemian. It had gotten cold again. Jamal, the ukulele player who busked our corner, had a sleeping bag hung over his shoulders, with a long gash spitting out stuffing. I pulled yellow and orange peppers methodically out of a cardboard box and laid them on the fake green grass lining the wooden shelves of the vegetable stand.

"So?"

Her cheeks were flushed but her lips were pale. She didn't look well.

"So how do you know how you really felt?"

Heather meant at the protest, where I'd first met Anders. All the old chants

## IKEA BED

The amateurs  
digitally fumble  
performing  
a threesome  
on my screen

An elbow bumps a thigh  
a knee jerks  
hits a chin  
She says aaah!  
He says ohhh!

I can't tell what the  
other gal  
is thinking  
Her body mimes  
something approximating  
ecstasy

Then I see it  
when the camera shifts  
I look closer  
at their bed  
Their bed!  
It's just like mine

I compare our  
Ikea faux white iron  
Leirvik bed frames  
Ninety-nine ninety-nine on sale  
A bitch to assemble  
with those tiny  
Allen keys

The amateurs finish up  
all three apparently  
satisfied  
I lean back  
against an identical  
headboard  
and click Replay

This time  
the first woman winks at me  
The guy

shouted at cops lined up in front of the embassy, holding up scratched Plexiglas shields in front of their stern faces. Horses clip-clopped on the pavement and my friend Bobby and I slipped inside the dark mouth of an alley beside a Thai grocer to smoke a joint. When we heard a clanging sound beside us, we turned to see Anders climbing out of a Dumpster.

"Hey!" Bobby said, and put a hand over his mouth.

He was like that, paranoid, always loud about it. Plus, Anders had interrupted his long lecture on media and the culture of image I wasn't even listening to. I was staring across the road, wondering if people ever actually opened and closed the embassy's ten-foot-tall iron doors to

beckons  
Hand to my chest  
I whisper: *me?*

The other woman  
raises her eyebrows  
as though to say  
Her? I didn't agree  
to a foursome, folks  
I don't like her attitude

I press Pause  
plump up pillows, press Play  
Gal No. 2 says:  
*It sags*  
*What?* I ask  
*The bed, dummy*

The other two ignore us  
kissing and rubbing  
writhing and moaning  
but she slips off the bed  
comes in for a close-up  
*It's cheap, she says*

*Not enough support*  
*for a good quality mattress*  
*I wish I'd sprung*  
*for a Brimnes*  
*Its generous storage compartment*  
*could hold my bedtime reading*

*I know what you mean*  
I reply with wide eyes  
*This one is so princessy*  
*but Malm, with its*  
*underside drawers*  
*is way more practical*

*Live and learn, she says*  
I nod at the sage advice  
We say goodnight  
I bookmark her  
so we might  
meet again

—FARZANA DOCTOR

slip out for a smoke break or a bag of potato chips in the afternoon. It looked like the entrance to a palace, and that voice boomed in my head—"I am the great and powerful"—or whatever it was, from *The Wizard of Oz*. The summer I was eleven, that movie played on T.V. about six times and it seemed I was always watching it with my best friend, Becca, our fingers

curled absent-mindedly around naked Barbies as the screen changed to colour. Then, at the end, that moment when clever Toto pulls the curtain open and the great Oz is revealed as just a vulnerable old man, hunched over his machinery, controlling his own illusion.

Anders walked toward us, carrying a clutch of carrots, their long pale roots

tangled together. In his other hand, he held out an apple with green and red hemispheres. When my eyes met his, I had this sense that I knew him, that we'd met before. "There you are," I thought, and reached for the apple, as if enchanted.

"You're not going to eat that, are you?" Bobby said. "It just came out of—"

I took a big bite, holding Anders' gaze until I gagged on soft rot, spat up the chunk. He stared at me, mouth slightly open. The smell of garbage was in my face.

"Fuck," said Bobby. "Who the hell are you?"

Anders pressed his knuckles against his lips, his eyes lit up.

"I didn't tell her to do that," he said, talking about me like I wasn't even there.

We walked Anders back to his squat, Bobby and I, down a long alley, lined with red brick, more metal Dumpsters. The cracked asphalt sank under rainbow-skinned puddles outlined in grimy froth. I reached over to hold Anders' hand. His skin felt cold in his unravelling fingerless gloves.

"Shit," he said, but he didn't let go even as Bobby tried to tug me away, afraid, like I didn't know what I was doing. In order to keep me Anders had to hold on. I'm just like that, I guess. When I see something I want, I go for it, no matter how hard the task. Before we left him that day, Anders kissed me gently on the cheek. All the way to the streetcar stop I focused on the warm imprint of his lips. I imagined people could see it: an oddly located heart throbbing through the thin skin.

I cupped a green pepper that had grown strangely, curled top to end.

Our boss had asked us to segregate the weirdest ones, the ones people wouldn't buy, and put them in the free bin on the stand outside the store. But I liked to give each of them a chance.

"It was love at first sight," I told Heather.

"Are you O.K.?" she asked.

I had been meaning to ask her the same thing.

"Sometimes you just recognize things. People, I mean," I said, still hoping she'd understand. "It's like fate."

"But he eats out of the garbage," she said. "He's homeless. Filthy."

"He showers once a week." My voice rose as I added, "and he's squatting," annoyed at having to explain Anders' living situation yet again. I put the pepper down



# Carousel

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and gathered up some mushrooms that had tumbled to the ground. “You’re just jealous.”

Her shoulders slumped, her chin dropped.

“Seriously?”

“I’m sorry it didn’t work out for you.”

Alex, we were both thinking. The one-night stand with a musician who was married, his wife and baby back in Kentucky. How Heather obsessed about him for weeks, flinging out E-mails that were never answered. Her hand churned through the loose change in the pocket of her floral-patterned apron.

“That was totally different.”

“Why?” I asked.

“Because it was,” she said.

I moved on to the Scotch bonnets, setting aside any with oddities or obvious bruises. I had to wear latex gloves, the kind doctors use, because the peppers were so hot. When I didn’t speak again, Heather threw her arms up in the air.

“You’re fucking insane,” she said, and turned back to pricing the arugula.

“Sometimes you just know,” I shouted, causing a customer to look up from shovelling lychee nuts into a bag. Behind him, through the thick plastic windows, a blur of wet snow fell to the ground. I’d worn my thin summer shoes to work again because I was thinking of Anders. Panhandling downtown on the cold concrete, or napping on the creaky wooden floor of the old hat factory where he’d taken me one day, when we’d sat on a ratty, brown couch, scratched to its wooden frame by cats.

“Once I was an extra in a film,” Anders said, “and the director asked me if I’d consider it as a profession.”

“Why don’t you?” I asked.

He blinked. I saw the sadness in his eyes, noticed the faint scrawl of crow’s feet. I couldn’t tell how old he was but he was older than me.

“It might be an option,” he said, and threw his butt against the brick wall, which was covered in swirling graffiti tags. “Maybe it’s time to go home,” he said.

My gaze was stuck to the spot where the sparks had flared then vanished.

“Don’t go,” I said. “Please don’t go.”

He sighed, slipped an arm around me, pulled me into the spicy, intoxicating power of his scent. I closed my eyes.

“You little bee,” he said. It’s what he called me, because I buzzed around him, and because I always stopped to smell the new blooms.



Around the back of the factory, by an apple tree already in bloom, was a window that wasn't boarded up. We squeezed through, dropped to the basement floor, and he took me upstairs to his corner, washed yellow from the sun falling through a hole he'd made in the plywood. We lay there, curled together in the wide, warm shafts of light.

A few days after our argument, Heather sent an E-mail to my parents telling them to come and get me. "She's fallen for a man who lives on the street. She seems to be delusional." I found a printout of it shoved in my parents' junk drawer. I crumpled it into a hard ball and flushed it down the toilet. What did she know about me, I thought angrily. I'd forgotten she knew it all, because I'd told her everything. I hadn't counted on the danger.

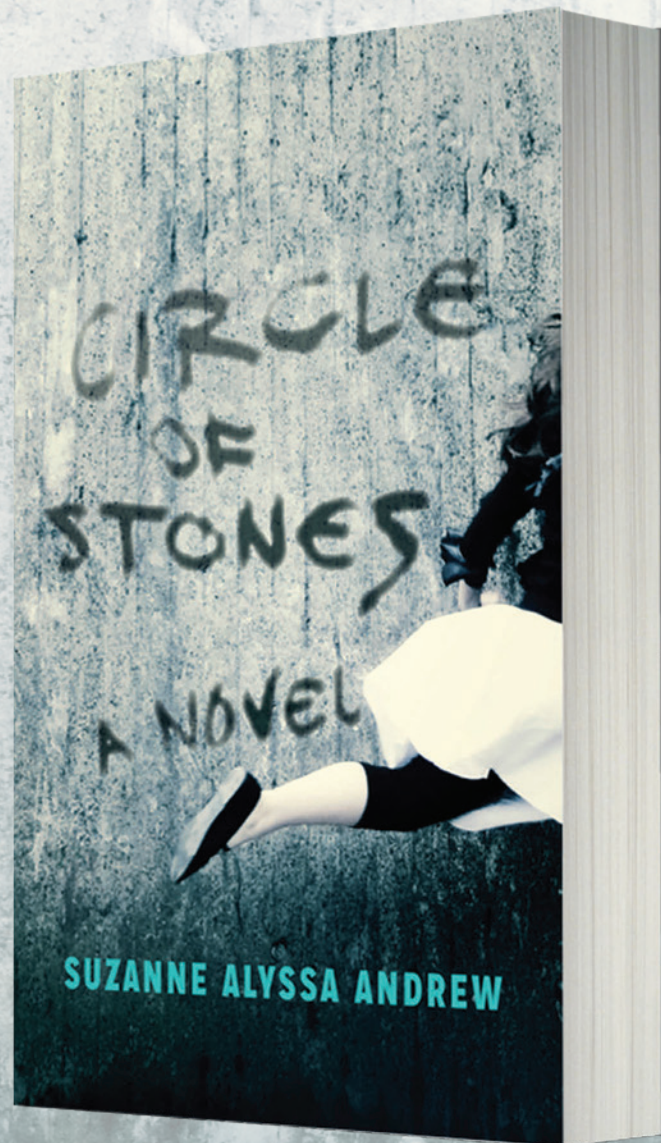
My parents didn't say anything about Anders. They'd pretended to bring me home because they needed my help. The first crops of mustard greens were coming up and the strawberries would soon be ready for tourists to pick, until their backs started to hurt from squatting in the fields. Each morning the pale pink and white pills showed up beside my orange juice in a small wooden box that had once held my baby teeth. I let their bitterness steep under my tongue.

My heart was broken, but I didn't complain—about the work or the growing heat of my attic room. When one of the barn cats had kittens, I brought the runt inside as soon as her blue eyes opened and named her Apple, like Gwyneth Paltrow's baby. In bed, I held her warm purring body in the crook of my arm and yearned for Anders, for the sounds and ugliest smells of the city, even for Heather, who'd sent me a card to say she was sorry, trying to explain her actions. I mailed her a letter addressed to Anders and told her how to get to the factory, which streetcar to catch, the bus she'd need to transfer to, the stop near the edge of the ravine where she'd have to get off. I didn't hear from her again, and never did hear from Anders, a man who'd crossed an ocean to start a new life but couldn't come to find me. My life became a lonely routine, the silence of the night broken only by the crazed chirping of frogs in the marsh across our concession line, eager to find their mates. ▽

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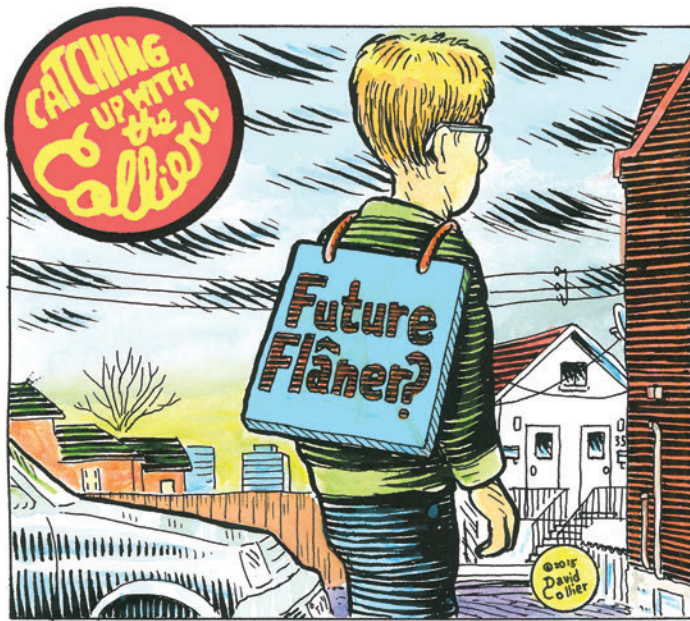
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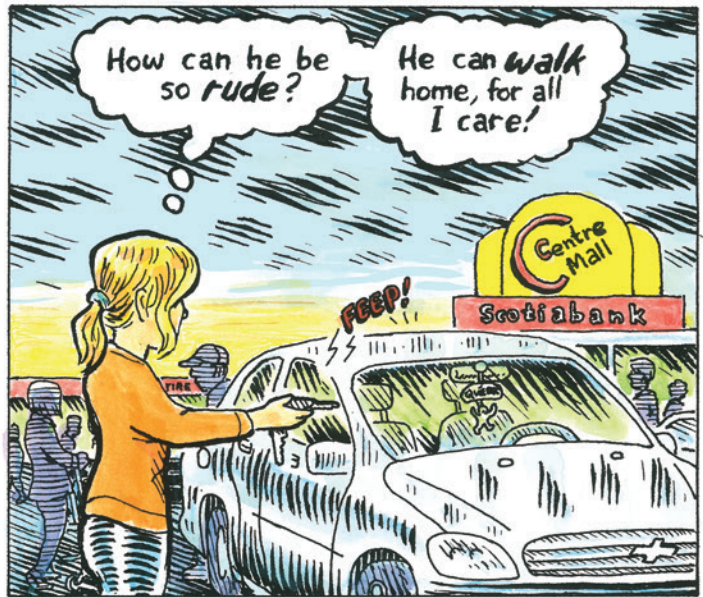
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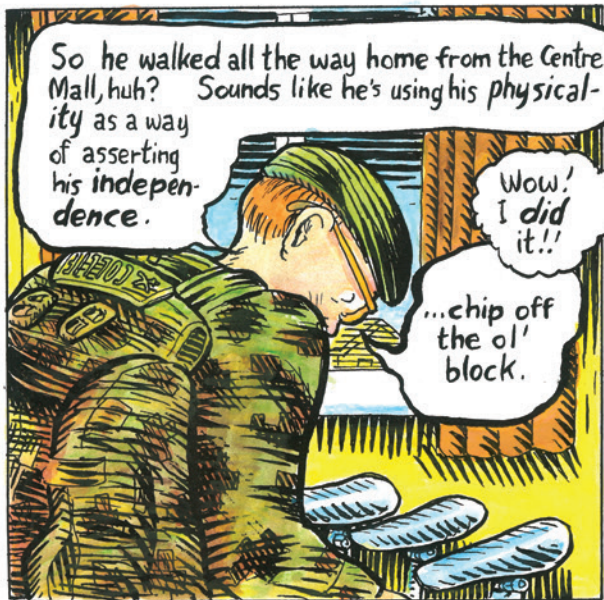
# SHOPPING DISPUTE IN AISLE THREE!



The difference of opinion, regarding appropriate clothing for a fifteen-year-old is great. James storms off, ditching Jen!



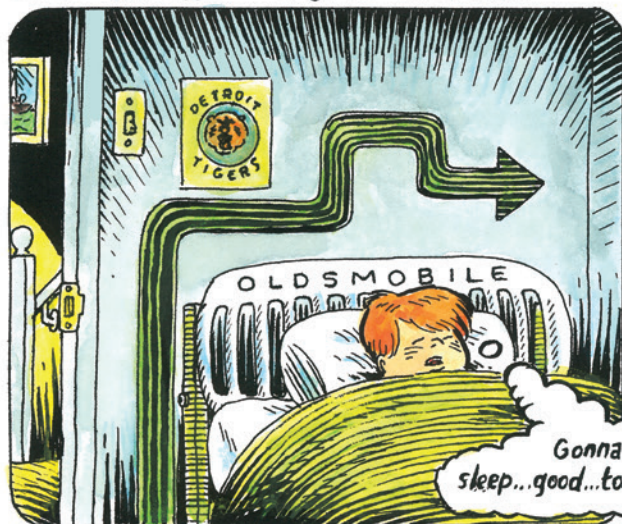
Later, the dad in all this, arrives home from work-



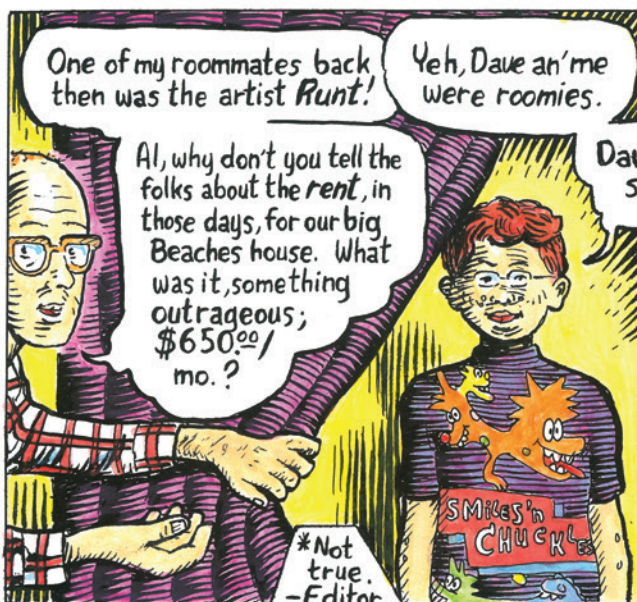
Makes me think back to the *1970s* and my first long walk: From my parents house on Castlewood Road, to the Yonge Street pedestrian mall at Dundas.



It was probably my greatest physical effort since my struggle through the birth canal.



My parents had decorated my bedroom on Castlewood with auto motifs, feeding my mania for cars. But after my long walk, something *changed* in my attitude toward transportation. By the time I was 17, I was walking home every night, from my job at *The Edge* niteclub, at Church & Gerrard, to a big house, shared with roommates, in the *Beaches*.



James, by now, has walked all the way home. Raising a kid in Hamilton, you *worry* that he'll grow up with a more *provincial* mindset. But then again, Barton Street East is pretty gritty...



## PURE SWEETNESS

*The egg cream is alive and well in New York—and a lone Montreal lunch counter.*

BY CONAN TOBIAS

Wilensky's Light Lunch is located in Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood, on the corner of Clark and Fairmount. It has changed very little since moving from its previous home, just down the street, in 1952. It is owned and operated by the Wilensky family, as it has been for all of its eighty-three years as a luncheonette, and the twenty-five years in its previous incarnation, as a combination cigar store and barbershop. Its laminated counter seats nine, down from ten—a stool was removed years ago to better serve takeout customers. There are no tables, despite a small-dance-floor-sized space occupying most of the restaurant's visible square footage, handy for corralling the lunchtime crowds. The windows of the cabinets lining the lime green wood-panelled walls behind and beside the counter are covered with mementos and clippings from newspapers and magazines, some of which use Wilensky's as regular fodder. A display fridge sells strings of karnatzel and take-home portions of salami. There are candy bars for sale behind the lunch counter, and a case of used books lines the opposite wall. Aside from a few modern heating and electrical additions haphazardly tacked onto the panelling over the years, a Wilensky's regular transported here from 1952 probably would not immediately register any passage of time. Even the menu appears to have undergone minimal change: a Kraft cheese or chopped egg sandwich sells for four dollars and nine cents; a milkshake for two forty. Coffee and soda water are a dollar fifteen and fifty-seven cents, respectively. And for a dollar seventy, a customer can cool off on a hot summer day with an egg cream—or “soda frappé,” as the French side of the menu describes it.

Most Canadians have never heard of an egg cream. Neither have most Americans, for that matter. It is a relic from the glory days of the soda fountain, when every drugstore and candy shop employed a “soda jerk”—young men who

“jerked” the fountain taps to mix seltzer water with a variety of flavoured syrups to produce cherry Cokes, lime Rickeys, and chocolate sodas. Although the egg cream was available at soda fountains across North America in its peak years, it remains firmly—almost exclusively—associated with “old New York,” taking its place in memory alongside spaldeens, the Third Avenue El, and Ethel Merman. The Brooklyn-born comedian Mel Brooks said of drinking an egg cream, “Psychologically, it is the opposite of circumcision.” Today, egg creams can be found in a handful of U.S. cities, but for the most part, the drink is little remembered outside the five boroughs.

As the Canadian city most akin to old New York, it's not surprising Montreal is home to a diner that may, unintentionally, be holding the torch as the purveyor of the country's last authentic egg cream.

The egg cream, famously, contains neither egg nor cream, though there is much disagreement about whether this was always the case. Recipes for drinks called “egg creams” appeared in cookbooks at least as far back as the mid-nineteenth century. These early recipes *did* contain eggs and cream (or milk), along with cinnamon oil, vanilla, and a number of other ingredients. They were considered nourishing and especially suitable for those with weak digestions. One version was recommended as a salad dressing.

Many believe the drink dates back to the first soda fountains, which began to appear in the early eighteen-hundreds, as chemists-cum-businessmen found ways to artificially carbonate water. American settlers had been convinced of the healing properties of the mineral water that flowed from the sacred springs of the Native Americans, and even as the understanding and practice of medicine advanced during the Industrial Revolution, mineral water continued to be thought of as a magical cure-all. Along with aiding digestion, it gave its imbiber energy when

he felt sluggish, and calmed him down when he felt nervous: Pepto-Bismol, Red Bull, and herbal tea in a single glass.

The soda fountain entered its golden age near the end of the century, when the cost of artificially carbonating water dropped, and pharmacists saw a potential for profit. In the days before pills became commonplace, medical remedies were offered mainly in liquid form. Soda water made less-palatable ingredients go down easier, and became a common mixer. Until the early twentieth century, pharmacists in the United States had free rein to prescribe nearly any drug they saw fit. Many of the resulting liquid tonics did little or nothing to cure ailments. Others contained addictive substances, such as cocaine, heroin, or morphine. They also contained as much alcohol as a stiff drink, and at a fraction of the price. Not surprisingly, by 1875 taverns found themselves in competition with soda fountains—there was at least one in almost every city in the United States, serving twelve hundred drinks per day. By the time Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act, in 1906, banning the casual use of many addictive chemicals, the soda fountain was entrenched as a major societal hub, no longer found only in pharmacies, but everywhere from candy shops to department stores. By 1911, there were a hundred and twenty-five thousand fountains in the U.S. alone, making five hundred million dollars annually on soda-based drinks that usually cost no more than a dime a glass.

To keep up with the competition—and the times—pharmacists invented new ways to entice their clientele. They installed bigger and more opulent fountains, decorated with mirrors, marble, brass, and Tiffany lamps, and surrounded them with bars, table seating, and player pianos. As fountains became fancier, so did the drinks they served. A single fountain could offer dozens of different concoctions. Soda jerks began mixing seltzer water with fruit, ice cream, and anything else that would give their shop an advantage over the one on



*Matthew Paratore's unstimulated egg cream, at Hamilton's Luncheonette, resembles a vintage Jell-O dessert.*

the next corner. Drinks containing eggs were a staple of soda fountain culture, and a common ingredient in early milkshakes, used both for their health benefits, and to create a frothy texture. Whether any of these drinks are ancestors to the non-medicinal egg cream that would become a New York staple is unknown, but a connection seems likely.

The egg cream New Yorkers talk about when they talk about egg creams today usually is said to have been invented around 1890, by Louis Auster, a Jewish immigrant who ran a candy shop at the corner of Second Avenue and Seventh Street, on New York's Lower East Side. The candy shop was the centre of every New York neighbourhood, usually housing a newsstand, rows of sweets, boxes of cigars, and a soda counter. Unlike earlier drinks that shared the name, Auster's egg cream contained only milk, seltzer water, and an in-house chocolate syrup that Auster mixed in secret. The egg cream was popular immediately, selling three thousand glasses per day. Lineups for an Auster egg cream were so long that standing to drink one became tradition.

Sometime between the wars, a national dairy chain offered Auster a small sum for exclusive rights to his egg cream and syrup recipe. When Auster refused, one of the organization's executives threw an anti-Semitic remark in his direction. Auster was enraged. He promised to take the secret of his egg cream syrup to the grave, and made his heirs vow the same. The last of Auster's chain of stores closed in nineteen-seventies, and with it went his legendary egg cream.

Not everyone believes the Auster legend. In a 1971 *New York* magazine article, Daniel Bell, a Harvard professor and one-time journalist, claimed the egg cream was invented in the nineteen-twenties, by his uncle Hymie. Like Auster, Hymie ran a candy store on Second Avenue, one block north, near Eighth Street. He also made his own syrup, which he used in chocolate sodas (one part syrup, two parts seltzer). According to Bell, Hymie created the egg cream while looking for a way to mix melted chocolate ice cream into his chocolate soda without the cream settling at the bottom. Hymie turned to the egg malted—a sweet-tasting, kid-friendly delivery system for the raw eggs Jewish mothers felt would keep their children healthy. Eggs thickened the malted, and Hymie figured they would do the same for his chocolate cream

soda, which he renamed the “egg cream.” Hymie's egg cream was extremely popular with customers, and widely imitated by neighbourhood competitors. When the Depression arrived, Hymie discovered his rivals were lowering prices and cutting costs on their versions of his egg cream by removing the eggs, replacing the cream with milk, and using a more pressurized seltzer stream to create a deceptively cream-like foam head. Hymie refused to taint his creation, and took down his egg cream sign for good.

Hymie's story is told almost as often as Auster's, but hasn't tarnished the latter's reputation as the egg cream's originator. Usually, if you're going to claim to have invented the telephone, you say you did it *before* Alexander Graham Bell, not after.

Those who choose to believe the egg cream takes its name from its ingredients are missing out on one of the great phonetic-based beverage debates of the twentieth century. Nearly all of the popular theories on how the egg cream got its name stem from linguistic misunderstanding. One, which, if the Auster story is true, seems the most believable, puts forth that Jewish customers would refer to the drink with a Yiddish phrase sounding like “echt keem,” said to mean roughly “pure sweetness,” which non-Yiddish speakers then Anglicized as “egg cream.” Less believable: soda shop visitors were in fact asking for an “A” cream, after the Grade A milk used as the drink's base. The most charming, and oft-repeated, theory involves Boris Thomashefsky, the Ukrainian-born singer and actor responsible for bringing the first Yiddish play to New York, in 1882. Thomashefsky, the story goes, once asked a local soda jerk to reproduce a drink he had enjoyed in Paris—known as a *chocolat et crème*.

With no hard evidence supporting any one theory of the egg cream's invention, even the drink's purists are flexible in their beliefs. This is significant, because they are flexible about little else. A “proper” egg cream must be made with cold, nearly frozen whole milk—it tastes better, and even two per cent won't foam up thick enough. Likewise, commercially canned or bottled fizzy water also won't do. Only seltzer streamed from a pressurized tap can create the right amount of froth to show you're drinking an egg cream, not merely a glass of chocolate milk. And, if there was a legislative body with the power to name an official egg cream syrup, the

title would go to U-Bet, manufactured in Brooklyn, for more than a century, by H. Fox & Company, and used in egg creams since 1904. (The U-Bet bottle even lists an egg cream recipe on its label.) How U-Bet eventually became the egg cream syrup of choice is another bit of unsteady lore, but those who insist on it say its superiority stems from its less sweet chocolatey taste, and its flavour-enhancing use of powdered milk. You can use vanilla, caramel, or other flavoured syrups—but if you



do, you can't call the result an egg cream.

Some gin aficionados insist shaking a Martini “bruises” the spirit and alters its taste. Others will admit to preferring their Martini stirred because of the resulting clean, unclouded presentation it produces. Egg cream lovers take the preparation of their drink just as seriously. Not even the most authoritative sources agree exactly on how to make an egg cream, but for pure artistry, there is only one method.

The two tools needed to make an egg

cream are a twelve-ounce glass (ideally a bell glass, sometimes called a Coke glass), and a long spoon. Insert the spoon into the glass and pour in three ounces of milk. Add seltzer, with the tap set for a thin high-pressurized stream, until the resulting foam reaches the glass's rim. (Holding the glass at an angle and bouncing the water off the bowl of the spoon agitates the drink more and results in a better head.) Pour one and a half ounces of syrup into the centre of the foam, leav-

ists will present the drink to their customers unstirred, creating a third, darker layer of syrup on the bottom, not unlike a vintage Jell-O dessert or, as a writer for *Edible Manhattan* once pointed out, a *pousse café* cocktail.

The rise of the bottled beverage industry continued after the end of the Second World War, as did the systemization of the food service business in the decades that followed. Combined, these factors exacerbated a decline in the soda fountain's

bottled fountain favourites like cola, root beer, and flavoured seltzers lived on. More complex drinks, like the egg cream, with its hard-to-carbonate dairy content, remained exclusive to decreasingly attended soda fountains. Beverage manufacturers such as Jeff's Sodas and the B.I.G. Company managed to mass produce the egg cream for a time. Neither survived. New Yorkers, it seems, want their egg creams fresh, or not at all. (Though the beer company Jonas Bronck's is trying a new spin



*Clockwise from left: Matthew Paratore adds seltzer to milk; Gem Spa, Kerouac's egg cream provider of choice; only U-Bet will do at Brooklyn Farmacy; Wilensky's in 2015; the egg cream has pride of place on the Hamilton's menu.*

ing a visible brown dot on top—the mark of a well-made egg cream. Rock the spoon back and forth at the bottom of the glass, disturbing the foam as little as possible. If done correctly, the egg cream will become brown on the bottom, with a white foamy head. Remove the spoon, and drink immediately, without a straw (ideally while standing). Alternate recipes call for adding the chocolate first or second, which results in a brown head when the seltzer is added. Some egg cream art-

popularity that had begun as far back as the repeal of Prohibition, in 1933. Prior to the sixties, most drugstores that still featured fountains had removed them, refocusing on the business of medicine. The first soda fountains changed society by creating delights that coaxed people out of their homes to take their “cure” among friends. Now, soda was bringing things full circle by giving them a reason to stay in, where a cold bottle of Coke was only as far away as the kitchen refrigerator. Easily

with a U-Bet-based egg cream stout.) There are two things New Yorkers agree on when it comes to the egg cream. One is that the drink is an endangered species. The other is that no one makes an egg cream like they used to. Neither of these notions is entirely warranted. The egg cream has managed to remain a part of popular culture for decades, and has done so in such a casual, unassuming way that it avoids overexposure. Harriet the Spy, the heroine of Louise Fitzhugh's

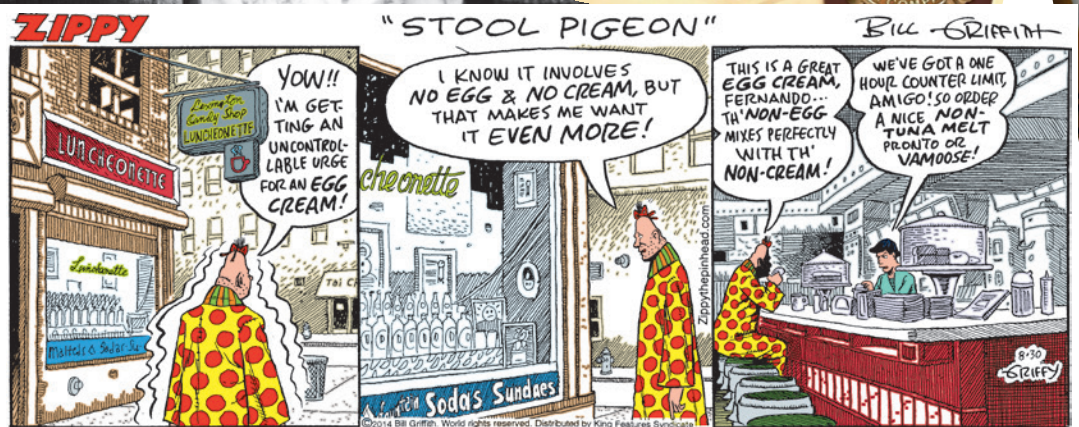
eponymous 1964 children’s novel, eschews soda in favour of an egg cream, “which she loved.” Mr. Hooper, the original proprietor of the corner bodega on *Sesame Street*, claimed, early in the show’s run, to make the best egg cream in New York. (A later episode, following the death of Will Lee, the actor who played Mr. Hooper, had Telly Monster putting serious pressure on David, the new owner of Hooper’s Store, as David attempted to live up to his late boss’s egg

and culture, presented *King of the Egg Cream*, a ten-part podcast recorded in the style of an old-time radio drama. *King of the Egg Cream* is loosely based on the true story of Harry Dolowich, a racketeer who, in 1929, organized New York syrup makers, before being convicted on evidence of extortion, conspiracy, and running an illegal monopoly. Alana Newhouse, the editor-in-chief of *Tablet*, likened the drama to *Serial*, “but with Jews, guns, and chocolate syrup.”

Third, Joe Junior (white head, despite vigorous stirring). And, on the Lower East Side, still home to a wealth of egg cream riches, the Gem Spa, a twenty-four-hour newsstand on the corner of Second and St. Mark’s Place, shares a lineage with one of Uncle Hymie’s original competitors, located just up the street from his former shop. (It also boasts Jack Kerouac and Abbie Hoffman as former egg cream-drinking clientele.) The Gem Spa’s egg cream often places high on lists of New



Clockwise from left: James Earl Jones samples Mr. Hooper’s egg cream; Jonas Bronck’s unique attempt at egg cream mass production; a Toronto soda fountain, circa 1910; Harriet the Spy eternally prefers egg cream over soda; Zippy the Pinhead gets surreal at New York’s Lexington Candy Shop.



cream legend.) Elaine can be seen mixing egg creams in Jerry’s kitchen in an early *Seinfeld*, revealing that while Jerry may not have stocked any decent alcohol, like all good clowns, he at least owned a seltzer bottle. Lou Reed paid tribute, with a song titled “Egg Cream,” on his 1996 *Set the Twilight Reeling* album: “When I was a young man, no bigger than this / A chocolate egg cream was not to be missed.” And just last fall, *Tablet*, an online magazine focused on Jewish news

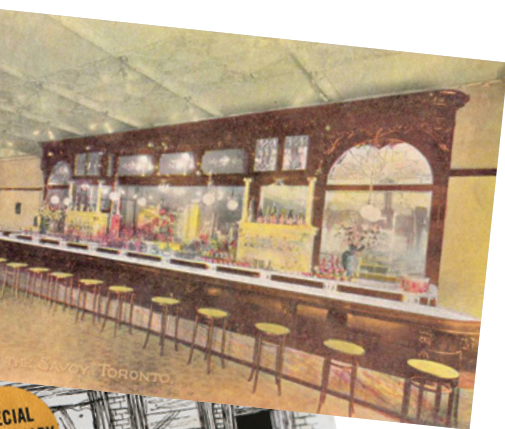
The egg cream may not be as easily found in New York today as it was when soda fountains dotted the city’s landscape, but you’d be hard-pressed to find a neighbourhood without at least one authentic outlet, each stubbornly preparing their egg cream the “correct” way. On the Upper East Side—forty-odd blocks south of where Lou Reed once nursed another addiction—there’s the Lexington Candy Shop (brown head, modern Coca-Cola-branded glass). In Gramercy Park, on

York’s best (such lists do exist), despite being served in a paper cup—all the better for encouraging customers to move along. Many newer egg cream outlets feel little obligation to the drink’s sordid history and traditions. Eleven Madison Park, a high-end restaurant that mixes egg creams tableside and that once offered a course in egg cream preparation, shuns U-Bet for malted syrup, vanilla beans, and olive oil. Until its recent closure, Chocolate Bar, a West Village “candy store for grownups,”



offered hazelnut, cappuccino, and black-and-white-cookie-flavoured egg creams. Meanwhile, the old-school Ray's Candy Store, while also considered home to one of the best classic egg creams, also offers a variety of normally unheard of flavours, including strawberry, cherry, and mango.

At the same time, other twenty-first-century egg cream enthusiasts proudly opt for authenticity. In 2010, Peter Freeman and Gia Giasullo opened Brooklyn Pharmacy & Soda Fountain with the goal



of creating an old-school soda shop that served the best egg cream in the borough. Their building, at the corner of Sackett and Henry, once housed a nineteenth-century pharmacy, and still retains many of its original apothecary drawers and shelves. Pharmacy obliges non-purists with maple, caramel, and butterbeer flavoured egg creams, but its chocolate original is made the old-fashioned way (U-Bet is sold on-site), with all of the artistry and tradition an old-timer would expect. The pur-

chase of one of the shop's JERK T-shirts entitles the wearer to free egg creams for life—or at least the life of the shirt.

Likewise, Matthew Paratore built his recently opened Hamilton's Luncheonette, on Bank Street, in the West Village, with an eye for tradition. He opted to avoid both nineteenth-century ornateness and the overly nostalgic kitsch of the fifties, settling on an understated nineteen-forties-style lunch counter that looks not unlike how Wilensky's must have in its glory days.

It's a testament to the nostalgic feeling the egg cream continues to stir up in generations of New Yorkers that it is still available today, found on menus in diners, restaurants, and movie theatres. The *New York Times* has perennially run stories lamenting the loss of the egg cream since at least the nineteen-seventies, but the truth is, it's much easier today to find an egg cream than it is to find pornography in Times Square or kids playing stickball on the street. Don't believe the headlines. The egg cream is alive and well in New York.

Harry Wilensky immigrated to Canada, from Russia, at the turn of the twentieth century. He landed in Newfoundland, and soon met and married Ida Tempkin. The couple moved to Montreal, where, in 1907, Harry opened the first Wilensky's Cigar Store, on Dorchester, which housed a barbershop in the back. This early incarnation of Wilensky's moved locations several times: Prince Arthur, Saint Lawrence Boulevard, and eventually, in 1931, a Mile End location, just off Saint Urbain. The following year, a corner shop at Saint Urbain and Fairmount became available, and Harry relocated once more. He gambled that the new site would lead to increased traffic, and ordered custom-made oak cabinets for his dry goods, books, and comics. His son Moe convinced Harry patrons might like to sit at the counter and drink a soda. He also convinced him the addition of a grill would increase business further, and one was purchased for sixty-eight dollars, on an installment plan of twenty-five cents per week. The investment paid off when Moe invented the Wilensky's Special: a beef-salami and beef-baloney sandwich on a Kaiser roll, pressed on the grill, topped with non-negotiable mustard, and still served today. In 1952, the store—since renamed Wilensky's Light Lunch—its cabinets, and grill moved up the

street, to its present location, at 34 Fairmount Avenue West. When Harry retired, Moe took over the business, running it exactly as his father had, minus the cigars and barbershop. Moe died in 1984, but Coca-Cola-branded signs featuring his name still sit at the bottom of each of the luncheonette's two windows, beneath strung up letters spelling out WILENSKY, the shop's only signage. Today, the counter is run by Moe's children Sharon and Asher, with Asher's daughter Alisa in training, ensuring the business's transition to a fourth generation.

Wilensky's in 2015 is perhaps a little sleeper than it was in the golden age of the soda fountain. Mile End has become Montreal's "it" neighbourhood in recent years, with newer eateries like Fabergé and Guillaume now sitting side by side with the old guard. It's easy to imagine Wilensky's being taken over by new owners who would turn it into a shimmering diner with a gluten-free menu. But somehow, the area has retained much of its old-Montreal charm, and lunchtime at Wilensky's (it closes at four) is still a busy affair—a lunch counter for those who like casual conversation, quick service, and little fuss. Wilensky's isn't afraid of change; it's simply, as Sharon said, doing "what our customers expect from us."

The egg cream remains on the Wilensky's menu, like most things in the shop, because it has always been there. There are no boasts of being "Montreal's best" or "Canada's only." Like all good egg cream artists, Sharon is exacting in her recipe—keeping her whole milk cold, and pouring in a steady stream of seltzer from the counter's lone tap. The inclusion of the syrup (still made in-house) first and a weaker seltzer steam denies Wilensky's customers a foamy head. A Wilensky's egg cream, like the shop itself, is utilitarian. But while the Wilensky's egg cream may lack a layered effect, it is made with a pride and consistency egg cream lovers appreciate more than any other feature. "I got an E-mail from somebody once who told me we were making it all wrong," said Sharon. "I don't need to tell you that I didn't listen to their advice, and we still make them the way we want to make them."

Auster and Uncle Hymie no doubt would be proud of such traditional egg cream inflexibility. ☞

YOUTUBE.COM/TADDLECREEK  
Sharon Wilensky makes an egg cream.

THE FICTION

# CONCRETE SWANS

*An excerpt.*

BY SUZETTE MAYR

In Agatha's Ballet for Adult Beginners class, they are learning "Dance of the Little Swans." She and the other women link hands in two human chains, the teacher presses Play on the stereo system, and they all hop and clomp sporadically, in and out of sync, trying to remember the steps and keep in time to the stabbing notes of the flutes. Agatha is the tallest in the class. They watch themselves in the long mirror. She also is the spindliest of them all in this "Dance of the Little Swans." Her own hands and the two hands she is desperately holding on to are slippery and hot. She accidentally kicks another little swan in the ankle. Maybe she should take up basketball instead, she thinks, but what a cliché that would be—another tall woman playing basketball—plus she doesn't even care about basketball. She tries not to judge her gangly, angular flamingo self in the long mirror reflected in the high sparkling windows. Her quads and buttocks ache, her neck sweats. She sweats between her small and prematurely drooping breasts (her breasts failed the pencil test when she was only *nineteen*), while the ballet teacher counts out loud, tells them, "Don't flop around like dolls! Move with propulsive strength and purpose!"

—I want to see the electricity crackling out of your toes! shouts the teacher.

Agatha chugs her breaths like a train, the inside of the windows veiled in condensation. Her joints strain until they tear and pop.

A swan collides into Agatha's shoulder, the teacher claps, shouting, the sweat from being so focused trickling down around Agatha's ears. The puffy fingers of the other women clutch hers, they clump their feet across the shiny wooden floor. They are all women at the brink of "a certain age," doing this for their "health." The ceilings in this room are very high. The building once was an old train station and she wonders what part of the station she is now galumphing around in. The old waiting room? A suitcase stor-

age space? Did the train once rush through here? Agatha can hear the whistle of the train as it crashes toward her while she flops from side to side pretending to crackle electricity from her webbed swan toes, the train's scream splitting her open. Just like the building where she works, Mawley Hall. That building, the new job, are splitting her open too. She will not cry. She will not. She will concentrate on her health; she will try to ignore the train screeching through her head.

The teacher claps one last time, and the women separate. Agatha packs away her towel and water bottle, pulls on her boots. She pushes open the shiny wooden railway station door and plunges into the dank fall air, kicking through scattered piles of fallen leaves in the tiny park between her and the street where she's parked her car. Grazing jackrabbits the size of spaniels lope away when she approaches. Hares, oversized and stringy, studding the brown grass. They were here last week too. She should remember to bring carrots for them next time. Lettuce. How much lettuce? Lettuce gets expensive in winter. Four jackrabbits are tucked around the one tree, feeding out in the dying grass, and two of them leap up to swipe and jump at each other in a boxing match, clumps of hair drifting. She's looked it up: a drove of hares, or a down or mute or husk of hares. In the half-dark they're turning into smudges against the brown grass, their eyes bulging and silver when the beams of her headlights hit them in the snouts as she manoeuvres out of her parking space. She swears she drives by another hare feeding on a dead squirrel splayed in the road. Do hares eat meat? A hare gnawing on red bone, snuffling through entrails. Agatha fights her tears. Tomorrow she has to be at work early for a meeting. She pushes down on the gas pedal.

When she stops at a 7-Eleven on the way home to buy Aspirin she sees Angus Fella, in his grey fedora, using tongs to pick up a hot dog from the rolling rows of greasy, withered wieners in the corner of the store.

Agatha has never seen him outside

Mawley Hall. She is like one of those children who believe their teachers live at school, are shocked to hear that teachers do things like shop for packets of French onion soup mix or tinfoil.

—Dr. Fella, she says. She corrects herself. She's forgotten she's not a student anymore—she is a professor now too. She is his equal. —Angus! she calls.

Dr. Fella fumbles his hot dog, startled. It squelches to the floor and rolls, picking up layers of dust and dirt.

—You'll have to pay for that, sir, says the pimply clerk.

—No, interrupts Agatha. —I'll get it! But even as she says it, she remembers she only has small change left over from buying the Aspirin.

—That would be super, says Dr. Fella.

Agatha fingers the change in her pocket, pointlessly: two quarters and a nickel.

—I can't get it, she says. —I don't have enough money on me.

—Well that's just *great!* says Dr. Fella. He claps together his thick, wrinkled hands in frustration.

—I'll buy you a hot dog another time. Tomorrow. Will you be at the university tomorrow?

—Someone's going to have to pay for that hot dog, pipes the clerk.

—I'll *pay for it*, you ninny, says Dr. Fella. —A hot dog isn't even real food. Really, you should be paying *me* to eat it.

—It's not company practice to pay customers to buy food, sir, says the clerk, barricaded behind the counter. —That'll be three ninety-nine.


—I haven't had a chance to put it in a bun, says Dr. Fella. —I haven't put any ketchup on it yet.

He scoops up the dog from the floor with his fingers, jams it into a bun. He holds the ketchup container upside down over the dusty hot dog and squeezes. A glob of ketchup blats out of the container. He takes a giant bite.

—Dr. Fella! squeals Agatha. She gags.

—That'll be three ninety-nine, sir! yelps the clerk.





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## BY THE LACHINE CANAL I SAT DOWN AND . . .

You send me a text that says, “You’re hard not to love,”  
followed by one that says, “You’re hard to love.”  
One of these things is as true as the other to you.

You keep breaking and breaking up, fixing and fixing up,  
breaking this and me, you leave and return. We do.

Split hairs in our throats, wet Y-fronts, sweaty rims of caps.  
Hands on bellies and on the absence of bellies and necks.  
Hearts flitting and flying and leaving again.

I stand in front of my old apartment, cold, and wonder  
how anyone could fall in love in Montreal twice;  
text my ex, the only one who is a friend, to ask  
if people still cry by the canal, or if everything I know of this town is passé.

Everyone here is having the same conversation about gender as they were a  
dozen years ago, the same conversations about black pants.

We don’t know how to ask for time, for directions,

A bright blue robin, improbable for the city,  
before us, in starts and fits too.

–TARA-MICHELLE ZINIUK

Here, says Agatha to the clerk, digging her new bottle of Aspirin out of its plastic bag. –I’d like to return my Aspirin and get my money back and pay for a new hot dog. Dr. Fella, please put that thing down. I’m buying you a new hot dog.

Dr. Fella, still chewing, takes another extravagant bite, pink hot dog particles and wet bits of white bun spilling from his mouth.

–Has the Aspirin bottle been opened? asks the clerk. –I can’t accept a return if the bottle has been opened. I will also need the receipt as proof of purchase.

–I haven’t opened the bottle! I haven’t even opened the box.

–I’m afraid I have to disagree, says the clerk. –The cardboard flap has been unglued.

–Someone else must have done that. I didn’t even– You’ve seen me standing–

–Have you ever considered a job in government? Dr. Fella asks the clerk.

–I am completing my degree in business administration, as a matter of fact, the clerk says.

–Even better. Even better, a fine law-abiding young man like yourself. My hot dog tastes great, by the way, says Dr.

Fella, chewing with his mouth open, his lips glossy and a dust mouse hanging from the corner of his mouth, waving the hot dog in Agatha’s direction.

The clerk pokes at his monitor and fishes out Agatha’s change from the cash drawer.

–Did you find everything you needed? the clerk asks as he hands Agatha her change.

–Jumping Jesus, I’ve gotta get out of here, growls Dr. Fella, hurling himself at the grubby glass door.

–Dr. Fella! calls Agatha. –Angus!

She chases him to the curb.

–I’m so sorry about that.

–You’re the new hire, aren’t you? asks Dr. Fella, swiveling toward her.

–Yes, she pants. –My office is 504. Next door to the washroom.

–Oof! he says, biting into his new hot dog. –That’s too bad. That’s not a good place.

–Yes, the first few months have been hard, but I know it will get better, Agatha says, trying to sound peppy.

–No, says Dr. Fella. –I repeat: *It’s not a good place*. Spittle flies from his mouth as he enunciates the “p.”

–What do you mean?

–Where did you get your degree? Canada Post? What do you mean, what do I mean? He snorts. –I mean there’s good offices in Mawley Hall and then there’s bad offices. Next to the washroom on the fifth floor? That’s the worst.

She gapes at him.

–Well, she says, –The toilet flushing *can* be rather noisy.

–Oh come *on!* he says. –What I’m saying is, and maybe this time you’ll hear me loud and clear: That building’s not just concrete and rebar. Mawley Hall has *bones*. Do you know the story about the woman who was in your office before you were? All the offices in that corner of the hallway?

–No.

–Well find out because you, junior professor, have drawn the shit card in the shit office lottery. Or don’t find out. Whatever, he says, and turns away, stumbling as he steps down off the lip of the sidewalk. –You don’t seem that bright. Did they hire you on purpose?

–I’m trying, Agatha says. –I’m really trying to fit in, and none of you people will help me fit in.

–Do you know what the architectural style of our building is called? he asks her suddenly. –Brutalist architecture, he says, wiping his nose with this thumb. –It’s the same style they use for jails and insane asylums.

He blinks at her in the half-light, panting, as though he’s just finished a long run.

–Doesn’t that bother you? Didn’t you hear what I said?

Agatha has nothing to say about jails or insane asylums. He says “jails” and “insane asylums” like they’re bad things. Like they’re not connected to the common good.

Dr. Fella throws up his hands, mumbles as he plods away from her and into the crosswalk, the hot dog’s foil envelope scrunched in his hand like he has forgotten he is even holding it.

–If it’s so bad then why are you still there? she shouts, her words evaporating in cooling mist. –Why haven’t you quit?

–Because I don’t have anything left! He spins toward her. –Mawley Hall took it all away from me.

Dr. Fella waddles across the street in a fury, white scraps of hair fluttering out from under his hat. He marches past a clump of pines. A hare hunched among the tree trunks flattens its ears against its back. Freezes. ▽

## THE GALLERY

# A NEW VANTAGE POINT

*Berenice Abbott at the Ryerson Image Centre.*

BY SUE CARTER

In 1921, Berenice Abbott departed New York for Paris. She had arrived in Greenwich Village, via her native Springfield, Ohio, two years earlier, after an ill-fated start as a journalism major, at Ohio State, and soon developed an interest in sculpture. Abbott hoped Paris would be more nurturing of her talents, but initially was forced to support herself as an artists' model. A year later, she volunteered herself as a darkroom assistant for Man Ray, the Surrealist photographer, who had also just relocated from New York. Working with Ray, Abbott's artistic leanings moved to photography. She taught herself both camera and development techniques and began shooting portraits herself, preferring unadorned, straightforward poses to Ray's dramatic setups. She opened her own studio, attracting intellectual stars such as James Joyce, Jean Cocteau, and her benefactor, Peggy Guggenheim.

When Abbott returned to New York, in 1929, she discovered a city undergoing a dramatic facelift, as nineteenth-century buildings were being razed to make way for Art Deco-style skyscrapers. Seeing the city almost literally being torn down and rebuilt gave Abbott a new vision and perspective. Skyscrapers suddenly allowed her a new vantage point that the Paris of the nineteen-twenties hadn't.

Unlike Abbott's contemporaries of the era, such as Weegee or Walker Evans, who discovered their muses on the streets, Abbott kept her unsentimental images focused on the physical city. Her

best-known photograph, *Nightview, New York City*, is a dynamic, almost claustrophobic aerial view taken from a top floor of the Empire State Building. Shot on a large-format camera with a meticulously calculated exposure, Abbott timed the image for late afternoon on the shortest day of the year to capture the warm glimmer of office lights.

Abbott spent six years independently shooting the cityscape until, in 1935, she received a Federal Art Project grant—a program under President Roosevelt's Depression-era Works Progress Administration—which she used to create *Changing New York*, her document of the city's urban transformation. Eventually, her curiosity was piqued by science. Likely inspired in part by Ray's Rayographs, which visually captured an object's energy wavelength directly onto paper without the use of a physical camera, Abbott's self-funded experiments led to geometrically stunning images of soap bubbles, swinging pendulums, and bouncing balls, created in part with equipment she invented herself. Abbott was “trying to make visible invisible phenomena,” says Gaëlle Morel, the curator of the Ryerson Image Centre, which recently obtained Abbott's archives. “How do you make abstract things accessible to people? It was also fascinating to her that science can be visually attractive.”

In the late nineteen-forties, Abbott's scientific work caught the attention of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which used her photographs in a

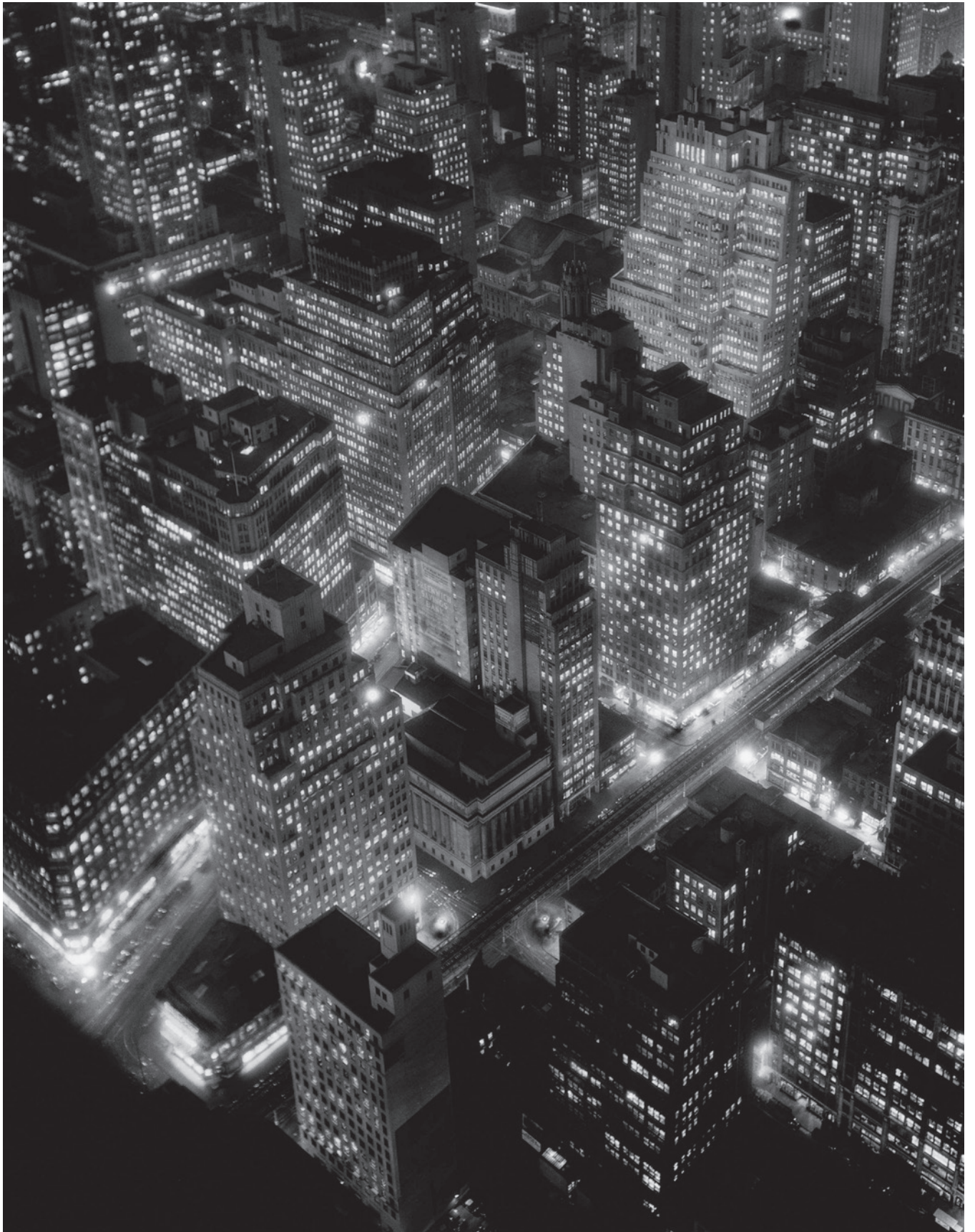
physics textbook that came to be considered groundbreaking in the field of education. Abbott continued working as a scientific and freelance photographer until the mid-sixties, when her health began to fail, forcing her to leave behind her muse for Maine, where she lived quietly until her death, in 1991, at the age of ninety-three.

Morel became acquainted with the previous owner of Abbott's archive, Ronald Kurtz, while curating an exhibition of Abbott's photography, hosted jointly by the Ryerson Image Centre and the Jeu de Paume, in Paris, in 2012. Kurtz, a high-tech entrepreneur, purchased the collection directly from Abbott, in 1985, when the photographer could no longer take care of it. When Kurtz realized the archive was too much for him to handle, he began looking for an institutional buyer for the more than six thousand photographs and seven thousand negatives Abbott had shot over her prolific career—along with glass plates, books, personal ephemera, and equipment. The collection eventually was purchased by a group of anonymous donors, and presented to the Ryerson Image Centre.

“Berenice was a very independent woman,” said Morel. “This is really a personal collection that reflects her life. When you look at her work, you can see the evolution and the development of the entire photographic medium.”

[YOUTUBE.COM/TADDELCREEK](https://www.youtube.com/taddlecreek)  
Gaëlle Morel discusses Berenice Abbott.

*Nightview, New York City (1932).*





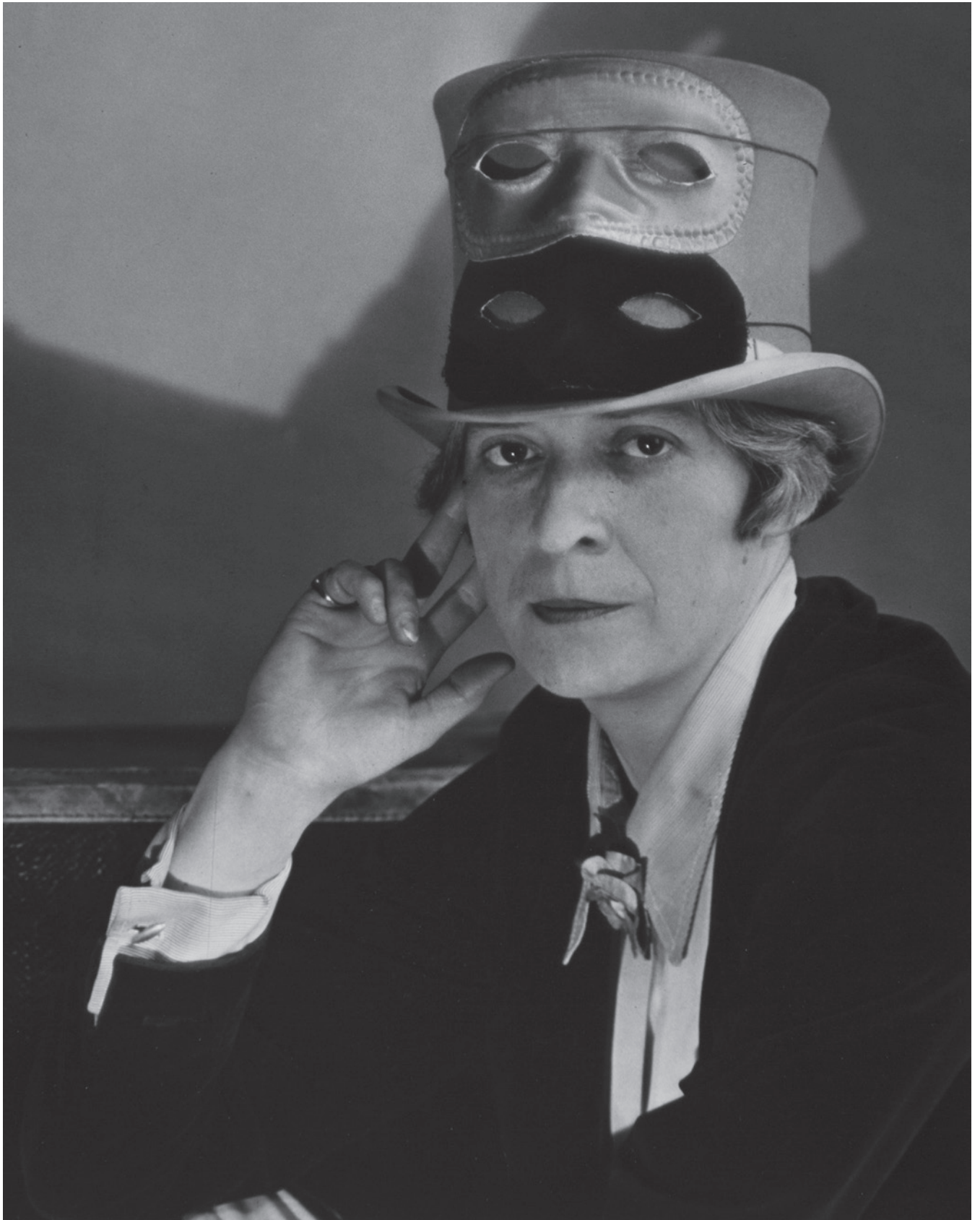
*Blossom Restaurant, 103 Bowery,  
New York City (October 24, 1934).*







*Eugène Atget, Paris (1927).*



*Janet Flanner, Paris (circa 1927).*





*Newsstand, 32nd Street and Third Avenue,  
New York City (November 19, 1935).*

## PROGRESS ON A GENETIC LEVEL

BY ANDREW MACDONALD

My brother and I tried to divvy up the depressing tasks ahead of us. He told me I should fetch our mother, who had all but given up the English language for Ukrainian. My brother thought that because I worked with more Ukrainians at the security agency than he did at his bank, I spoke it more frequently and could better articulate the reasons why she should come to our father's funeral. In exchange, he would tell our uncle he wasn't allowed to attend the service.

"He mostly speaks Ukrainian, too," I said, balancing the phone between my chin and shoulder. In the mirror, my reflection tried to figure out the best way to tie a Windsor knot.

"He'll be angry, and I'm bigger than you. He'll break your skull."

Our uncle Joseph had been a boxer once. My brother wrestled in college, at his peak placing third in the Pac-10 conference's one-hundred-and-seventy-four-pound category. The idea was that they could cancel each other out.

Joseph wasn't welcome because our mother claimed he'd done terrible things to her when she was little, before they emigrated from Ukraine. Nobody in the family knew what to think, whether he did or didn't. Our mother's mental illness made it difficult to judge. For our father, there was no ambiguity. A year before he died, he drove me to a steak house, and after we ate, showed me a gun he bought, and which he intended to use on Joseph.

"I'm going to go to his house and blow his fucking brains out."

One can see why my father's heart exploded. Though technically the product of calcium and protein and fat forming a brick of plaque in his aorta, his end represented the metastasizing of years of suffering, the day his body could no longer host his sadness.

In addition to not speaking English, our mother hardly ever left the house. Her apartment was in a dreary part of

Toronto, in the neighborhood we all used to live in. Her entire floor was filled with Ukrainians. One storey down, mostly Sudanese. Upstairs, Mexicans. The property managers liked to rent whole floors to families who knew each other, so that if one tenant couldn't pay rent, the others would chip in. It was communism on a microscopic scale.

I knew she wouldn't let anyone in, so I used the key I found on Dad's keychain. I had the black mourning dress my brother bought for her draped over my shoulder, encased in a skin of crinkly plastic.

"Hello?" I said, opening the door just wide enough to slip in.

The apartment smelled the way my mother smelled: like smoke, and some sort of vinegar. Eucalyptus plants, steroid creams for an imagined skin condition, the bleach she used on the linoleum of the kitchen to keep it chemical-white.

"I'm not leaving," my mother said in Ukrainian. I traced her voice to the dining room, where she was drinking coffee and having a cigarette, crocheting a complicated pattern into a doily.

"You need to get ready."

"Are you deaf?"

Instead of answering, I took the dress and set it on the chair next to her.

"Nicholas bought this for you. I think it's your size. Try it on."

She shook her head.

"Your father and I hadn't spoken in months. The last thing he said to me was that he was selling our *Encyclopaedia Britannica*." The doily had the look of a jellyfish in her hands. "There's coffee over there. Some left for you."

Pouring myself a cup, I marvelled at the artifacts of my childhood that still hung on the walls. It was like being in a museum with a wing dedicated to myself. Pictures of my brother in his wrestling singlet, performing an arm-drag take-down on a weaker opponent. Peacock feathers we collected during a family trip to the zoo, arranged in a petrified fan shape. And there we were in a sepia-toned

photo, a family. My brother, me, our parents, circa mid-eighties; tan lines, Dad's glacially receding hairline, surrounded by a frame made of cherry-coloured mahogany, the gilding a brassy yellow.

"You need to go," I told her. "He was your husband. You never got a divorce."

"A technicality."

"Your wedding ring is still on."

She looked down. "I've gotten too fat to take it off."

Sighing, I went to the bathroom and called my brother. Without much thought, I rifled through the medications behind the mirror, silently noting unfamiliar names. My brother answered.

"How are things on your end?"

"She's not coming."

"Why not? Did you show her the dress?"

I asked if he wanted to talk to her. "You can try to convince her."

For the next ten minutes, I listened to her switch from English to Ukrainian, shouting sometimes, turning away from me so I couldn't hear what she was saying to my brother. I went to the living room, turned on the television, and watched some soap opera without the sound on. The plastic cover of the dress I'd brought crinkled, and I turned to see she was holding it up.

"It's dowdy," she said.

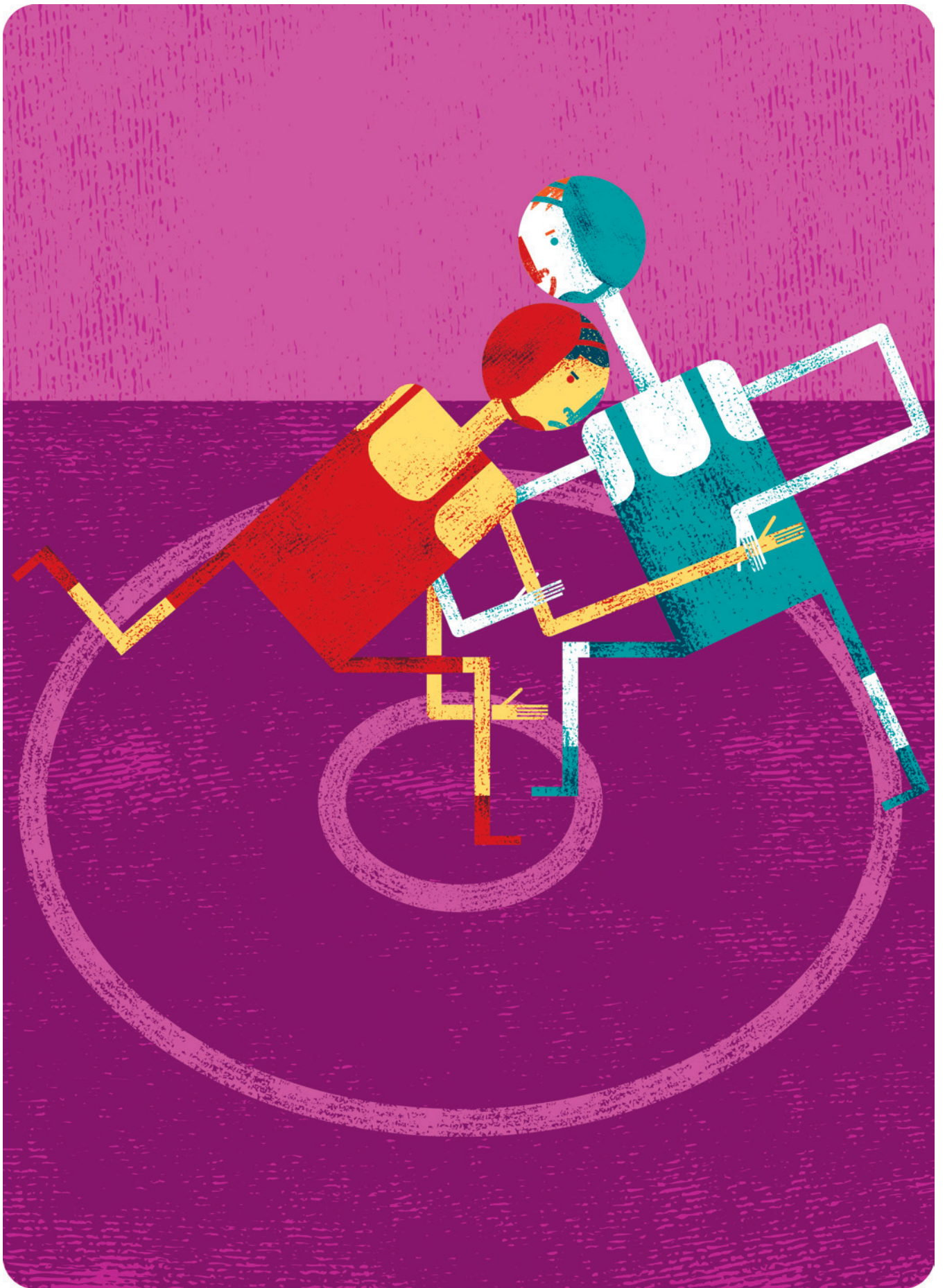
She sighed, pulling the zipper of the dress down. She held it to her chest, the bottom half falling past her kneecaps.

In the car, she asked me if I was still dating Maria Teodorowycz, the daughter of someone on Mom's floor in the apartment building. Maria was a geologist who measured the levels of chemicals in soil that corporations sent her. She and I had gone on three dates, had sex on the last one, and then . . . I don't know.

"Doesn't Tina have a friend you can see?" Mom said.

Tina, Nicholas's wife, wanted nothing to do with me.

We drove in silence for a bit. She put her hand to her face and blew on the window



until a patch of condensation formed on the glass.

“Did he feel pain?” she asked, turning down the radio. “Do you know?”

I repeated what Nicholas had told me.

“The doctors said it was slower than most people imagine. That he probably felt everything breaking down.” Some urge to punish her made me pause before adding, “Like he was having a stick of dynamite going off inside of him.”

She looked at me, her makeup starting to smear.

“Why would you say something like that?”

Nicholas was the first person the hospital called, Dad’s primary contact. I remember what I was doing when he called me in the same way I remember what I was doing when the first airplane crashed into the twin towers.

I was making rounds as security for a computer-parts warehouse. Normally I didn’t answer my phone, since it could get me fired. All it would take would be one blink on the security cameras. But my brother rarely called me.

“Dad’s had it,” he’d said, just like that.

Not, Are you sitting down? Not, Are you ready for catastrophe? “Arterial thrombosis. Think of taking a baseball bat to the heart.”

I stopped walking around the warehouse and turned off my flashlight, which left me alone in a blurry half black. My father had a very gentle appearance, the sort of soft, smudgy face that had the peach hint of a child’s pastels. He never drank and never smoked. How does a heart go like that? These are things you think about.

He had been driving a truck of anti-freeze and felt his heart tighten, and when he felt the life of him being squeezed like a balloon in a fist, he pulled over.

“They said if he hadn’t pulled over,” Nicholas told me, “he could’ve killed a lot of people.”

That night I had a dream where Dad was an infant and I was holding him, in the apartment from our childhood years. That he melted to death right in my arms, and that I tried to contain him as he became liquid, slipping out of my grasp but leaving no wetness behind.

In the car, Mom popped in the electric cigarette lighter, wiping her eyes on her

arms and on the nice new dress Nicholas bought her.

“You know, he had one testicle,” she said, snorting the pain back through her nose and into herself. “Did you know that?”

“Can we not talk for a while?”

“No, no, listen. In a way, you and Nicholas being born was a miracle. The doctors said he had a better chance of being eaten by a shark after getting struck by lightning. You know, when I got pregnant, I thought I had cancer of the ovaries or something. Even when they did the . . . what is it . . . the ultrasound, I didn’t believe it.” She lit a cigarette. “They had to cut you two out of me, since my uterus had a funny shape. So it’s two strikes against you, and here you are anyway.”

The funeral home was also run by Ukrainians. Everyone we knew who died ended up having their viewing there. My best friend got a brain tumor after high school and ballooned up with water from the drugs. He’d been put to rest in this funeral home. And then the old woman who’d lived at the end of the hall, who nobody was related to, who blessed pregnancies and told everyone she had

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## HELLO, I'M A POEM ABOUT JOHNNY CASH

This is a poem about Johnny Cash,  
as the line above this one clearly states.  
It stands in the centre of a derelict stage,  
squints out at you, then grins.

Any poem about Johnny Cash  
must refer to black-black shirts, black hats—  
to Johnny's junkie days and redemption  
with June, to "I didn't do it, my truck did,

and it's dead, so you can't question it."  
Must allude to Johnny meeting with Richard  
Nixon, and to Carlene Carter and  
Roseanne Cash, plus Carlene marrying

Nick Lowe, and to "The Beast in Me"  
(a song Nick wrote for Johnny),  
to God and prisons and swinging nooses,  
and a train pulling out of a station,

to Johnny's cover of "Hurt," and how  
my dad saw himself in the mirror  
the day before he died and he said,  
"What's happened to me?"

He said, "What's happened to me?"  
and sat back down on his bed.

—STUART ROSS

been the first woman bicycle champion in Europe.

We pulled up and Nicholas was standing in the front with Tina, who hung on him, dripping with beauty and perfection. She waved when she saw us.

Mom and I stared at her through the car window, through the caked blots of velocity-crushed insects. I looked over and saw that Mom's hand was white, gripping the door handle the way she did whenever she was in a turning vehicle. We were combatting the same gravity, the same physics.

"I don't think I should be here," she said, adjusting her seat belt so it held tight against the throat.

"Me neither," I said. "But here we are."

Once we got out, Nicholas shook my hand and Tina hugged me, and then they did the same thing with Mom. Tina smelled gorgeous and rekindled that hole of loneliness my therapist said might always be inside me, no matter how I tried to fill it.

"How are you holding up?" Nicholas said in Ukrainian.

"I'm sorry for everything," Tina added, in a broken parody of the language that made me sick to hear. She sounded like Dad did whenever he tried to speak Ukrainian, his accent, as Mom described it, a stone bouncing around in a washing machine.

We all went as a unit into the funeral home. Even though Dad hadn't been Ukrainian, the priest we got was. He shook our hands and I thought he held onto mine a bit longer than was necessary. He saw Mom and they spoke quickly, in a dialect I couldn't follow.

They stopped and the priest took a deep breath. "It's good to see you, Lena."

She took a deep breath too. "Let's get this over with."

Dad told me he wanted to be cremated, and apparently told Nicholas something different. He was dressed in his wedding suit—Nicholas's idea. A lot of the

people in the viewing room were new to me, truck drivers and mechanics Dad worked with. Rough-looking people in suits that didn't fit them properly. I felt their discomfort. Also people I passed in the apartment building whenever I visited Mom. Dad had been an only child and our grandparents on both sides were dead, so the only family there was were me, Nicholas, and Mom.

People ambled around. Nicholas gave a speech in English, I gave one in Ukrainian. Mine was short: this was my father, he was a good man, he died something like a hero. Mom wept and at some time during the speech I gave, I wept too. Tina wept, and in a shameful way her sadness warmed that hole my therapist told me I had, filled it with heat. I was in love with her, or wanted her. Something. It wasn't very important.

We went one by one to see Dad's made-up face, his fantastically gelled hair. He had been carefully shaved and smelled like plastic.

"Is it like a painting?" Mom asked. "Can I touch it?"

"You can touch him," Nicholas said, putting his arm around her shoulder.

She started touching him as if she were blind and judging the shape of his face, slowly, then spreading her entire hand over his mouth until it was a flattened spider. Someone from the funeral home came over and asked kindly if she could not do that.

"Now you," I said, patting him gently on the shoulder first, getting harder until I was almost slapping, "you can fuck off and let my mother touch her dead husband."

Before things escalated, Nicholas stepped in and pulled me outside.

"Can you relax?" he said. "I can't hold it together for everyone. You need to do your part."

There was a generosity of spirit in the way he said such things, and that generosity extinguished the warmth Tina had kindled in me. I thought: Who was this person, instructing me on being a proper human? Once, our mother had tried to kill herself by taking too much of her medication. Nicholas did nothing. He just started crying. I had to call the hospital and sit on her chest and slap her face so she wouldn't go into a coma.

I related this piece of family history to him. "Do you remember that?"

Nicholas grimaced. "I was seven."

"I was seven too," I said. "Now, if

situations had been reversed, and you'd been the one trying to keep her alive, would you have had the emotional wherewithal to go to college, get a good job, fight off the world and your personal demons? Would you have your beautiful life, or would you be working in a warehouse and hating yourself?"

He stared at me for a while. Finally he said, "How long have you been waiting to say that?"

"Forever, fuck face."

"Aren't you just a sad, lonely narcissist?"

Comments like that can only be made by people you love. Only someone you love knows how to make you hurt like that. It's natural to want to hurt them back, and that's what I tried to do, in a physical way. He put me in one of his wrestling holds and kept me in a sort of homoerotic body lock that made me feel naked and defeated.

"Are you done?" he asked.

"No," I said, and he squeezed my ribs until a wisp of air forced itself out of my nostrils. "Yes. Please. Put me down."

It took me a while to regain my composure. The lack of oxygen had made my brain constrict in an unnatural way. I

eased myself back into the wall and slid down it like a gob of spit until I reached the ground.

"Two things," I said.

Nicholas sat down next to me.

"What?"

"Do you think mental illness is hereditary? And does Tina have a secret twin somewhere who could love me?"

Getting on in years as we were, we sometimes talked about genetics and D.N.A., what sort of fuckedness we'd inherited. The first psychiatrist our mother had seen diagnosed her as manic-depressive, the next called it narcissistic personality disorder. That same year, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* removed narcissistic personality disorder from its pages. It just ceased to exist. So she went back to schizophrenic.

Sitting against the funeral home, Nicholas and I discussed whether one or both of us would, or already did, suffer from a genetically inherited form of mental illness.

"People whose parents are depressed are something like twice as likely to be depressed," I said.

"True. But this is circumstantial." He

meant that the trauma Mom probably had experienced as a little girl had been the cause of her instability.

Over the course of our shared childhood, our mother had attempted suicide, stolen cat food from stores, had sex with someone who wasn't our father. Some days she was beautiful, just a gorgeous person, a gorgeous presence in our life. Ukrainian isn't a particularly melodic language, but you would weep to hear her read poems from her homeland.

But there was also the ugliness, the cracks in the fresco that was her also. One time we were even taken out of school by social workers because Mom had crushed up some of her anti-psychotic medication and put it in our orange juice.

Nicholas reached over and put his hand on mine.

"She has a friend," he said, and at first I mistook his meaning. I thought he meant Mom had a friend. He clarified that Tina had a friend who might be predisposed to liking emotionally damaged adult-children.

"You'd hit it off," Nicholas said.

"What kind of rear end are we talking about?" I asked. "I'm in the market for

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## UNDER A BILLBOARD AT BATHURST AND EGLINTON

Under a billboard at Bathurst and Eglinton  
Using nothing but my eyes  
I bought some clouds—  
Because they were big and self-sufficient

But I bought them too for protection—  
Since a friend of mine  
Once safely walked this same street  
Under similar clouds

They passed over the same sidewalks she passed over  
But the past can't be touched, and you can't touch clouds  
And there's something wrong inside me  
And the clouds might solve it . . .

I bought them also because they're grey without being depressing—  
And slow, but not in a way that makes me impatient  
Because having nowhere to be or go  
Doesn't stop them from being or going

They travel like jokes  
So I accept them as natural  
See how they activate my wit  
Without taking credit

Because they ask nothing  
And pull me gently away from  
The great loneliness  
To which no one gets accustomed but the clouds.

—JON ARNO LAWSON

asses shaped like globes.”

“The kind that belongs to a woman.  
That's all you need to know.”

While we were outside, Mom had one of those moments where she left the world of human beings and entered the world of animals. She fell down in the middle of talking to a truck driver who worked with Dad.

The driver said, “He had a picture of you, from when you first met,” and then he showed it to her.

Mom was in a bikini, Dad was without a shirt. Luminescence bounced off them three feet in every direction. Mom's fall was like a crumbling Doric column, just crippled her from the toes to the shins, up the legs, knees, pelvis, spine, until she was a collection of pieces on the floor, wrapped in that black dress with the makeup smears.

“Can you take her home?” Nicholas

asked, and I nodded, buoyed by the moment we'd recently shared outside. I felt my perception change. Instead of being angry that I'd swallowed all of his trauma along with mine, that his life had eclipsed mine in all-important categories, I suddenly saw him as an example for me to follow. I was like a tram that just needed to align myself on the same rails he rode on.

Mom got into the car and I buckled her seat belt.

“I almost married a gay Jew,” she said. “But your father fixed my car and took me away from my world.”

I drove her back to her apartment, the place she hadn't left for weeks before her estranged husband had died, driving a truck.

“Come up,” she said, pressing the elevator button.

She told me she had been seeing the ghost of one of her dead neighbours, that she sometimes thought there was a worm

in her ear, inserted via a bloodless surgery by someone malevolent, and which she tried to soak out with Epsom salt baths. By the time we got to her door, I had a glimpse of what it was like to be her, living alone in the apartment.

To even the confessions out, I told her I hadn't been with a woman for three years, and that for a while I had developed a substance-abuse problem.

“Cocaine, mostly,” I said, mentioning that I'd checked myself into a detox facility, where I dreamed I was my brother. “Sometimes I think he dreams he's me. That's for a good laugh.”

We got to her door. I had the sense the words she had spoken to me, and those I had spoken to her, had pressed together like palms.

“I'll visit more,” I said.

She shrugged. “If you think I'm going to commit suicide over this, you're kidding yourself.”

It was shortly after this that I decided to visit my uncle Joseph, probably to kill him, or at least do something irreversibly damaging to his face with my fists.

I tried to enlist my brother, since two nephews are mightier than one.

Nicholas nixed the visit.

“He'll cripple you,” my brother said.

“Not if I cripple him first.”

Joe had spent part of his youth in the Soviet Union, back when the Soviet Union was still the Soviet Union. He had been hardened under extreme, politically dangerous circumstances. I was under the impression he'd once killed a man with his bare hands. My brother and I were only the sons of immigrants; the hardness had been lost between generations. Some residual hardness perhaps existed in my brother, which accounted for why people respected him more than they respected me.

Tina also vetoed the decision. I'd wanted to go do this thing together as brothers, in a Shakespearean way.

“Think of it as destiny,” I said.

She shook her head at me.

“Don't ruin things,” she said. “You just want to destroy him the way you destroy yourself.”

Walking me back to the car, Nicholas told me not to take what she said to heart.

“Her hormones are all janky. We're trying to have a baby.”

I stopped.

“You didn't tell me.”



## MATTHEW DALEY: ILLUSTRATOR

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My brother looked at his hands, fiddled with his wedding ring. It shone in a way that was somehow light and sound, a shockingly bright “ting” that made me blink. He seemed to be beaming the reflection from the gold band directly into my retina.

“I didn’t want to depress you,” my brother said.

“Depress me? I’m going to be an uncle. How is that depressing?”

I smiled and waited for Nicholas to smile.

“She told me she saw you take the knife.”

I had taken one of their knives, intending to carve a new hole in our uncle.

“Your wife is a liar.”

Nicholas sighed. He could see the outline of the knife against the inside of my pocket. Without looking him in the eye, I handed it to him, pinching the blade and giving up the handle.

I hadn’t seen my uncle for years, not since the psychiatrist unearthed the sordid details about him from the Pandora’s box of Mom’s subconscious. He was, to use a very Nicholas term, a *persona non grata*.

It took a while for me to drive to the apartment complex where he lived. On the way, I wondered to myself whether I would, in the end, be capable of killing someone else. I waffled. At a stoplight, I conceded that breaking my uncle’s ribs might suffice, maybe break a few things of his. “You will vacate your place in my dreams,” I told my dead father, who always appeared to me in my sleep, asking me to avenge all the wrongs committed against my mother.

A tired-looking teenager let me into Joseph’s building. Walking down the hall, I noted a piece of the paisley wallpaper curling and, with impotent anger, pulled as much of it off the wall as I could.

I knocked and a woman came to the door.

“Is Joseph here?” I said in English. She looked at me blankly, so I repeated the question in Ukrainian. “I’m his nephew.”

“He’s out,” she said. “He should be back soon. How do I know who you are?”

I showed her my licence. She nodded and moved aside. I followed her to the living room, to the television set.

“Are you his girlfriend?” I asked.

Instead of answering, she said, “No smoking in here. We’re trying to quit.”

She sat on the couch and turned on the television. I walked to the kitchen and poured some water into a Mason jar I found on the counter. Particles in the water

swirled like the flakes in a snow globe.

“That’s a very nice suit,” she said when I rejoined her in the living room. I was still wearing my suit from the funeral. “What kind of work do you do?”

I told her I worked in finance, with money.

“It’s very lucrative.”

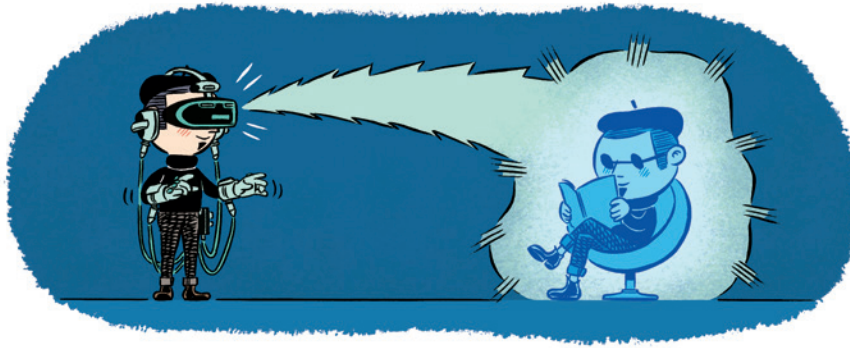
The best revenge I could think of, to enact both on Joseph and a universe that could allow him to exist and do the things my mother said he did, would be to make love to this woman. The thought was ugly and, for that reason, compelling. I waited for an hour, with her, this woman who had some kind of relationship with a monster.

She switched the channel to something about nature and plants. The odour in the room developed pungency, a mix of both our scents. The program was describing a fungus that took over the brains of ants and brewed an insanity of such magnitude that the ants kill themselves. Excusing myself to go to the bathroom, I took the long way, through the kitchen, even though she’d instructed me on how to get there. I passed by several serious-looking knives, attached to the side of a cupboard by two powerful magnetic strips.

Any one of these would do Joseph in, particularly if he never saw it coming. I decided to wait until after I had pissed to select my weapon. Relieving myself, I thought of the ants, of the fungus, of my brother’s unborn baby, with whom I could fashion a version of myself that was utterly unlike my current sense of identity.

I could be funny, make jokes, bring him gifts to win his affection. I could also try to develop a closer relationship to my mother. I finished peeing and made all of these resolutions with an optimism I had no right to have. The woman in the living room didn’t get up when I left the apartment. I’m pretty positive I passed Joseph in the hallway. The parking lot had expanded to the extent that it took me a long time to find my car.

My brother’s light was on when I drove back. Through the window, I could see dinner in progress. He waved at me. He took the napkin from his collar, all spread out to catch any food that spilled, and folded it with alarming delicacy. Before he opened the door, I willed myself, on the level of my D.N.A., to mutate. When the door opened, I believe I became, at least for the moment our lungs swallowed the same square foot of air, a very good thing. ☪



# THE DIGITAL POSTSCRIPT



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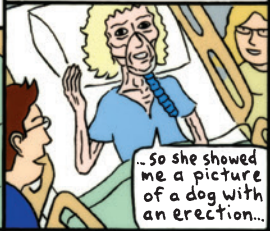
It starts with a damned email. Mom's got cancer. Stage 4 pancreatic cancer. A month ago she was still shovelling her driveway.



Lucky for me I had a whole month off from my teaching duties. I planned to go back and forth to London to see mom as much as I could.



At first it was like sitting around mom's kitchen table. Family and friends chatting away with mom in her hospital bed.



The drugs would come and shake mom out, but she'd become almost peppy.



Our routines revolved around shifts of visiting mom in the morning, afternoon and night until ten. The idea was to not leave her all alone for too long.



Mom would be kind of 'out of it' in the morning, so I never went to the hospital before 1:00p.m. I also needed the whole morning to psych up for every visit.



For two weeks mom was very alert and my brother, sister and I were able to take care of all of mom's business affairs...the will, life insurance, investments, bank accounts...



Mom played the piano at Michael's on the Thames for 25 years. We brought in her coffee tin with all her tips in it... she wanted us to split them 3 ways.



Eventually we got the doctor in there and persuaded him to give us some kind of time frame for mom.



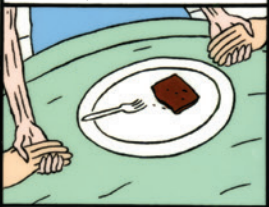
While on the bus back home to Toronto I'd stare out the window looking for a sign from the crows.



I did my teaching in Toronto and took the bus back to London. My ill 88-year-old father picked me up. We went to his apartment where I took out 17 bags of garbage he'd been too weak to remove.



Mom had now been in palliative care for 3 weeks and she made it to her 76th birthday. She could hardly eat any cake...she was hardly eating any food.



Every night after the hospital I would stay alone in mom's house. Her cat would meow and meow until I brushed her. It always spooked me when she'd turn and stare at me.



Mom was getting weaker and weaker. Her head constantly drooped and her skinny arms twitched... somehow she summoned the strength to get in a wheelchair and go outside.



Getting out of the hospital into the fresh air and sunshine raised mom's spirits more than anything. I decided this could be a small goal for all of our visits.



So much of the time in the room was spent holding mom's hand or watching her sleep or catering to her tiny areas of control...another tissue box, her newspapers, a sharpened pencil, her notepads...



When I wasn't in the room I logged kilometres wandering the hospital hallways in a daze...repeating trips to the bathroom, coffees, butter tarts and that damn sterilizing hand foam.



Mom held on for my 50th birthday. There was no better gift than hearing her little bedtime prayer.



Mom continued to hold on until we had the chance to get all 7 grandkids to visit. This was mom's 5th week. That night my brother gently said to mom-



By the sixth week mom had been reduced to a sentence here and there... We tried hard to interpret some of the random things she said... some weren't so random...



On Monday mom was desperately trying to eat... I tore tiny bits of salmon sandwich and fed them to her... she was trying to stay alive until my brother returned on Wednesday.



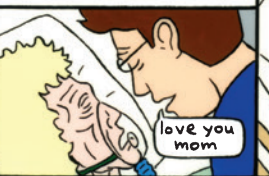
On Tuesday afternoon the nurses gave mom a catheter, morphine and laid her on her side... her breathing was so shallow. I asked her if she'd be able to go outside... she said 'no' and it broke me.



For Tuesday night the nurse had suggested that my sister and I sleep in the room. Throughout the night I could see mom looking at me and Donna and I kept thinking 'she's okay, she's okay.'



Wednesday morning I leaned close to mom and heard a crackling sound in her breathing. My sister assured me she'd heard it before, so I went out to the washroom...



...by the time I came back mom was dead. I stroked her hair and caressed her forehead...she was still warm.



# “THIS..."

doesn't try to be hip,  
it just is.

It never ceases  
to make me think,  
question things  
and get angry”

*—Sarah Polley*



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