

**CLOCK THE TEA AND OTHER STORIES**

by

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**Dedication**

**For Jessi, who always made time to read my stories.**

## Abstract

*Clock the Tea and Other Stories* is a collection of three stories that employ divergent queer voices in order to suggest the multiplicity of queer experience while considering the role voice and form play in establishing community. In the first story, "Chicken Snatch" I satirize a gay man who wants to raise chickens in the backyard of his suburban home, while in the second story, "Sanitarium," I adopt a memoirist tone to complete the story of a woman and her transgender brother. In the final story, "Clock the Tea," I adopt a Camp voice to recount the history of a woman who founds a "gay-for-pay" pornography production company after the death of her gay son.

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## Chicken Snatch

### I

Don fell in love with the idea of raising chickens the instant he read the article about the little girl who had trained her pet chicken to step backwards. He wanted one bird, maybe more, so that night he held the newspaper open at the dinner table, quoting the most memorable lines. “Melody Tweeps—that’s the little girl—says it’s her chicken who should be celebrated, not her. Her genius chicken.” He rattled the paper at his husband, Will, who was busy reading a paperback thriller. He didn’t look up, so Don turned toward their daughter, Maisy; she had long since excused herself from the table and was now sitting nearby in a beanbag chair, also reading. “Maisy, did you hear me? This little girl’s only ten and she and her chicken are already in the newspaper. Her chicken’s name is Henrietta.”

Maisy, all of eleven, peered over her graphic novel and said, “Well, if you love chickens so much, why don’t you go and marry one?” Will sniggered and Don took offense. “What a rude child,” he said. It occurred to him that Maisy looked nothing like the chicken girl in the picture that accompanied the article. It was black and white, but Don could see that the girl was plump, rosy, and fair, her hair pulled into a neat French braid. She held her chicken in both arms, smiling proudly, either

unaware or unashamed that all of her teeth were crooked. Don guessed she had bright blue eyes, or maybe green, but either way, they weren't black like Maisy's. Maisy took her colouring and bone structure from her mother. Don had only seen one picture of the poor girl, entrusted to him by the adoption agency, but it was clear to him that Maisy had her mother's sharp nose and hollow cheeks. A man on the street had once said that Maisy had a haunted look, and Don, at this moment, could only agree.

"It says here that chickens are enjoying an increased popularity as pets," he quoted. Silence. Then, from further down, his tone a little angrier: "Suburban families, concerned about the globalization of the food industry, are adopting chickens for their eggs." Maisy rolled her eyes from behind her book.

"And what about Melody Tweeps?" Don asked. "You can bet your baby she's not sitting around the house all day, reading comic books and downloading anime."

"Anyone can teach a stupid old chicken to walk, Daddy."

"Anyone could teach a dog to heel, Maisy. Or make a cat to chase after a piece of string. But to train a chicken, to have it take measured, even steps, backwards no less, well that's something else."

Don swore he heard Maisy mutter whoop-dee-do under her breath so he stood up and slammed the newspaper down onto the table. "Don, don't antagonize her," Will said without raising his eyes.

Maisy had thrown her comic book aside and was staring at him indignantly. "You only care about pet chickens because I'm allergic to dogs and cats," she said. "You're always saying you had dogs and cats when you were a kid."

Don ignored her and carried his plate out to the kitchen. He scraped uneaten spaghetti into the garburator. Maisy couldn't be more wrong. When he was fifteen his greyhound, Milo, had got loose, run over to a neighbour's farm and throttled three of the hens. As an act of reconciliation, Don had been forced by his parents to dig the trio a mass grave and to pay fifteen dollars in restitution, two months' worth of allowance. That was the last time he had seen a chicken up close, for in the winter he moved with his family to the city. He had left the dog behind.

"You're wrong," he said, returning to the table, but by then Maisy had moved into the television room and Will was dozing on the living-room couch, his book resting open on his chest. Don felt like shaking him awake, but instead took out the red cashmere throw from the linen closet and laid it along his body. In the lamplight Will's grey hair seemed whiter, and Don thought the better of him for it. He looked like someone's grandfather, even though he was just forty.

Don returned to the kitchen and loaded the dishwasher, then scooted upstairs to his office with the newspaper. He sat at his desk and reread the article. Melody Tweeps' family was all through it. "We never thought of a chicken as a pet for our Melody," the mother said, "but when our neighbors, hippies you know, got a few hens for the eggs, Melody went chicken-crazy. We couldn't get her to shut up about it!" The father added, "She took a real shine to Henrietta from the moment they met. I'd come home from work and there'd she be, out in the backyard with her baton and that little clicker." Don's eye was again drawn to the picture of the smiling Melody and the caption underneath it explaining that Melody had got her first

chicken from [www.chickenschickenschickens.com](http://www.chickenschickenschickens.com), which catered exclusively to backyard hobbyists and even shipped live chicks anywhere in the country.

Chickens in the mail. Don wouldn't let himself believe it, he was so excited. He turned to his laptop and loaded the website. Under the welcome banner appeared a high-resolution picture of a mottled red-and-brown hen pecking at the grass growing through her wire-mesh run. In an instant the pictured melded into another: a white-and-black speckled rooster caught in mid-jump, his left wing extended as if offered in greeting. The picture shifted again: four chicks now stood atop letter blocks that spelt out "Love."

And then, in the bottom right-hand corner of the screen, a small woman materialized. She was wearing a dark red dress cut off at the knees and black tights. She said, "Raising chickens in your backyard is so simple you can't fail! With our coops, feed, and yes, even baby chicks, you'll have everything you need to become a Backyard Farmer today!" At first, Don thought her voice sounded cold and distant, even a little robotic, but then he saw that his speakers were not plugged in properly; once the cord was fully inserted, her voice was calm and warm: "Which chick is right for your coop?" she asked and answered herself: "We will assist you! Our scientifically researched Chicken Breed Selector Tool asks you six yes-or-no questions and, based on your responses, instantly recommends the appropriate breed!"

He began the test: Are you a beginner? No shame in admitting it. Do you prefer a hardy bird? Don hesitated for a moment, wondering if the question was meant to reflect on himself, then selected yes. Does your living area experience

frequent cold snaps? A definite yes. Do you require a dependable egg layer? It couldn't hurt. Docile? Yes, and not just because of Maisy. Will was sheepish around animals too. Would you prefer a fancy breed? Without wavering, Don selected no. In an instant the screen displayed a breed which he recognized. Rhode Island Red. Hardy and dependable. Traditionally valued for its meat, but treasured for its sweet disposition. Great for families with kids. It couldn't be simpler, and he couldn't believe the price: a steal at three bucks a bird (a dollar extra for hens). He keyed in his order.

The receipt arrived in his email within seconds. Don spent a frantic hour scouring the website for beginner's tips. When he came to the section about feeding he began to doubt himself. Weren't they planning on taking Maisy to London that spring? To see a musical on the West End? Who would feed the chickens while they were gone? Their neighbours were all unreliable yuppies who hated them. Well, Don reasoned, they probably hated them after the construction crew hired by Don's development firm had spent the entire summer pounding through the rock at the end of the street in order to make room for new houses. And more seriously, now that he was thinking about it, he wondered if the neighbours might revenge themselves on him by complaining to the city about the chickens. And where was he going to house them? Did he need a coop? Did he need a permit? He'd have to call his lawyer. Was it too late to cancel the order, send off an apology to whoever ran the website and plead buyer's remorse? Stop payment?

Yes. He was resolved. The flurry of questions had nearly overwhelmed him, but he was determined to see it through, if only for Maisy. He wanted to show her

that commitment and determination were virtues. That Maisy wasn't yet apprised of the scheme, and so couldn't know if he canceled the order or not, didn't cross his mind.

Later, Don sat with Maisy in front of her vanity. It was their usual routine: Don untangled her hair with his grandmother's antique comb while Maisy counted off the strokes, up to one hundred. He hadn't yet said anything more about the chickens; in fact, he hadn't really spoken at all except to say that he expected rain that night. With each stroke, he thought of Melody Tweeps. She was out there somewhere, probably pulling on her pajamas, unwinding the tight coils of her French braids after a productive day drafting up training schedules for her genius chicken. He usually spent this time imagining some bright future for his own daughter: often she was a model turned fashion designer, sometimes a Cordon-Bleu chef, or even a jet-setting diplomat's wife, and once, a battle-scarred general decorated with the Victoria Cross. These possibilities, each tinged with a certain incoherent glamour, existed in a far-distant, compartmentalized future in which Don assumed he and Will lived just down the street from their magnificent daughter. But tonight, Melody was the girl fêted by life, marked out by fate as the consummate individual, and he couldn't help but picture Maisy in her middle age, in a mustard-yellow sweater set and a pleated skirt, wearing too much foundation and beet-red lipstick, trapped in a loveless marriage a thousand miles away. She was an administrative assistant to the Dean of Science, a minister's wife, a girl in a call

center. He scanned her face in the mirror for crow's feet but, when their eyes met she only smiled and said, "Thirty-four."

Before she could speak again, one of the big bulbs on the left side of the vanity flickered and went out. "I heard that when a light bulb goes out," Don said in a cheery voice, "a fairy gets her wings." He tried to smile but as soon as he heard his own words he knew that he had made a mistake. Maisy laughed, but not with a childish giggle; her snorts seemed to be full of weariness. Don covered his embarrassment by standing up and saying confidently that he would replace it. While Maisy watched, he reached out with both hands and placed his palms around the wide circumference of the bulb. "Shit!" he shrieked. The bulb was flaming hot. Maisy laughed again, covering her mouth with her hands, and Don repeated to himself, Shit, shit, shit.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Don said. "Go brush your teeth."

Once Don heard the efficient whirr of the bathroom fan he took the quilt from the edge of Maisy's bed and, wrapping up his hands, he unscrewed the bulb, laying it near the edge of the vanity, folding a corner of the quilt underneath so that it wouldn't scorch the wood. The vanity was made of an expensive walnut and had come special order, back when Don had half a mind to enter Maisy into beauty pageants, though nothing in her disposition had suggested that she might enjoy parading around on stage for a panel of judges. Even at the age of six she was a shy, stationary girl. It was her cheekbones that had told him she had the makings a

champion, they were so high and well defined; her face could take a lot of makeup and still look natural.

Don had gone so far as to enroll Maisy in a pageant class, but he himself hadn't survived the orientation. One of the mothers had scared him off, and not with anything she had said. She was fat and wore a hooded sweater over wide hips swaddled in stretch pants, her hair stringy and blonde, brown at the roots. But even her ungainly appearance, held up to him like a mirror, had not spooked him. He had watched enough television to be inured to the fact that the mothers of pageant children would be as ugly as their daughters were beautiful. It was her hands. Her pristine white fingers and elegant nails, French-tipped and long enough to pluck out an eye, were so utterly unlike from the rest of her that Don had convinced himself that there was another whole woman living inside of her struggling to take hold of the body, the specter of a more glamorous mother, her busy hands always unspoiled and spotless. He had grabbed Maisy from the play area and drove straight home.

When Maisy returned from the bathroom she looked strangely apologetic. Of course, she had shown remorse before; she had always been eager to say sorry for the misdeeds common to all children—a lunchbox left in her locker, a torn winter jacket, a handful sweets eaten just before dinner time. Her apologies, depending on the severity of her crime, were offered through a veil of tears or with a coy smile. But now, from the way she looked straight at her bedclothes, busying herself with the duvet cover and stacking the throw pillows neatly onto the floor, her lips drawn in a straight line across her face, Don surmised that she had recognized, perhaps for the first time, that he even had feelings that could be hurt. That, with her words

alone, she could reduce him to the size of a grub. She climbed into bed and after a few moments asked about his hands. Don said they were fine. He had been sitting with his back toward her, watching her in the mirror. He swiveled around in the stool and asked, "Maisy, how would you feel about adopting some chickens?"

## II

Marietta is late to meet her mother. They had agreed on four o'clock sharp at the Tim Horton's in the mall, but on her way there, at a kiosk outside of a lingerie store, an Asian woman stops her by calling, "I love your make-up." Which is strange, because Marietta isn't wearing any make-up. Not even a lick of mascara, or her usual cinnamon-flavoured lip gloss. In fact, her hair is still wet from the locker-room shower she just took after volley-ball practice, before catching the bus.

"Your blush really goes with your shoes," the woman adds and Marietta looks down at her feet. She is wearing faded red high-tops smudged with salt stains, the laces hastily tied. Marietta thinks, Is my face red? She touches her cheek as if she could feel its colour. It is hot; she must be flushed. Suddenly she feels hot all over. A woman browsing in the lingerie store looks up from the rack and seems to be staring at her; a bead of sweat drips down her back; she remembers that she is late, that her mother is waiting. But the Asian woman is smiling at her warmly, inviting her to sit down. Marietta can smell her perfume: something flowery with a note of vanilla. Her beauty is inviting: she is short, her body is thick and her breasts are

large. There are five gold bangles on each of the woman's arms and her blouse seems to be made of silk.

"I love that shade of red, honey," she says. "So subtle, so natural." Marietta takes a step forward. It must be my natural glow, she thinks, her hand conspicuously grazing her stomach. This lady must have guessed.

"But don't you think your eyes could use a little bit of help? I'm Charlene."

Marietta slips onto the rattan stool and Charlene bends over her, inspecting her face. "You have such high cheekbones," she says, tracing the bones with her thumbs. "I bet all of your friends are jealous." She giggles and Marietta laughs along quietly. Her friend, Julie, the team's best outside hitter, has just told her at practice that she cannot come over to her house this weekend because of Marietta's situation. ("We can still be friends at school," Julie said. "What can I do? My parents are super Christian.")

"Not really," Marietta says. Charlene selects a light green eye shadow from the make-up counter, allowing Marietta to hold the tray for a brief moment: "To bring out the flecks of gold in your eyes." Charlene giggles again; her icy fingers take Marietta by the jaw and tilt her head up toward the fluorescent lights. Her voice deepens and slows as she applies the make-up: "But first—a bit of white—along—the crease will—really—open everything—up.

"And then," she says, speaking out of her cheek, "the green.

"Not too much though," (her pitch sharply returns to normal), "You wouldn't want to look garish!" Charlene cautions, releasing Marietta's face to cover her mouth with the back of her palm. Sharp, shrill guffaws barely muffled, her voice braying

delightedly. Marietta's eyes pop open. She has to think for a moment before she remembers that garish is another word for a slut. Isn't it? Hookers are garish, aren't they? Strippers? She's never seen either except on television and in movies, but in her mind she has a picture of a slim, red-headed woman in a black bustier, red hot pants, and PVC thigh-highs. Now that's garish, she's certain of it. She has never before considered what make-up this woman might wear, but it has to be a lot, right? Does she think I look like a slut? Marietta wonders, and then she remembers that her neighbour at home, Mrs. Skeffington, an old lady who cakes on her makeup and wears a bouffant wig, is also, by all accounts, garish, and nobody would call *her* a slut, would they? Marietta hopes that she is more like Mrs. Skeffington than a prostitute.

"Well?" Charlene hands her a small mirror and Marietta looks at herself. "What do you think?" Marietta thinks she looks tired; she can see the dark circles under her eyes.

"Oh, I know," Charlene says. She turns around and consults a small chart tacked above the cash register. Then she disappears behind the kiosk, where she keeps the hair products, humming along to Mariah Carey's "Heartbreaker," which is playing loudly in the lingerie store. Marietta wonders if it is all right that she has opened her eyes and then, holding the small hand mirror up to the light, she thinks she sees a tiny sparkle of gold in her left iris. Well, maybe. It could also be another trick of the fluorescent light that has also bluntly exposed all of her pores. Surely someone would have told her by now if she had specks of gold in her eyes. Wouldn't they? There was a time when, after her bath, Marietta's mother would sit her down

and take out a large comb, and work out all of the tangles in her thick, black hair, all the while complementing her on her natural red highlights. But she had never said anything about Marietta's eyes.

Charlene returns from the other side of the kiosk with a flat iron, the two metallic prongs held open like a hawk's beak. Marietta starts, her hands gripping the stool. "It's ok," Charlene says. "The heat won't damage it." Marietta jumps up; she has remembered again that she is late. The clock next to the till tells her that it is 4:36. She throws her backpack over her shoulder and begins to rush off, stopping short when she remembers that she hasn't bought anything. A small tube of lipstick is the first thing she sees. "But that doesn't match your skin tone," Charlene says, leaning over the display. "Let me show you a more complimentary colour."

Marietta can't wait any longer. She searches through her backpack for her wallet, plucks out her only Will, a five, and throws it down on the rattan stool, and walks away quickly through the mall to the Tim Horton's.

Her mother, also named Marietta, is sitting at the table farthest from the garbage bin, sipping her black tea. When she sees her daughter, she picks up her cell-phone, which has been set to the right of her hand, and places it in her purse. "Hello Maisy," she says. "I was just about to alert the authorities that my only daughter had been kidnapped by the Janjaweed." Marietta grins apologetically. "I thought we'd never see you again."

What Marietta dislikes most about her mother is her penchant for wearing outdated hats. Garish, Marietta thinks, is the best way to describe her collection of

monstrous haberdasheries. Today, it is an olive green number, domed at the top with a single strip of pink piping around the brim. It had once belonged to Marietta's grandmother, the Marietta for whom all others are named and who has just celebrated her ninetieth birthday.

"Where were you?"

"Julie wanted to tell me something. It's this whole big drama."

"Oh, good. And you let her do your face." Marietta Sr. likes Julie; she has, in her own words, "a lot of time for that girl." She values her, especially for the precision and force with which she strikes a volleyball, and even more so for her ability to date college bound boys without giving anything away. She has often told Marietta that Julie should coach her privately, although concerning which aspect of Julie's expertise Marietta has never asked.

There is a half-eaten danish on a plate in front of her mother, who slides it across the table. "No thanks," Marietta says. "I'm not hungry."

"Well, ok. How are things at Aunt Georgette's?"

"Fine." But that is not enough. "Last night we made perogies." Marietta, who has never before shown any interest in cooking, who is so careless in the kitchen, who once put a metal tin of brownies in the microwave hoping that they would cook faster, is now practiced enough to make perogies.

"I don't want you handling a deep fryer," says her mother. "Georgette's not letting you near it, is she?"

"No."

They sit for some moments silently, Marietta focused on the danish. The sugar crystals sprinkled on top are so large that Marietta can make them out individually. She could count them, if she wanted to.

“You know you can come home whenever you like,” her mother says. “We never put you out—your father wants you to know that much. Nobody said you had to leave.”

“I know.”

“You’re welcome to come home, at any time.” She repeats herself in a voice that is half-pleading, half-annoyed. She has not even taken off her jacket. “I’ve talked with him and we want you to know that we’re willing to help raise this baby. You don’t have to give it away.”

“It’s too late, Mom. I’ve already told the agency that I’ve narrowed it down to three people.”

“People?”

“Couples, I mean. Let me show you.”

She has arranged the photos in the binder strategically, so that the first picture her mother will see is of a fat man and his equally fat wife, smiling with their arms around one another. Seemingly well enough off, sure—he is an electrician and she keeps house and sells Avon, the profile says—but Marietta Sr. distrusts the overweight, Marietta knows; she believes that they are inherently sneaky and opportunistic, like oversized raccoons after everyone else’s scraps. The second picture is not a couple, but a single woman with stringy hair. Given, she is a doctor, but single and thirty-six. Who will take care of the baby? Marietta Sr. will wonder as

she quickly flips the page, silently shuddering at the thought of overcrowded and unsanitary daycares.

The third picture is of the two men Marietta has chosen. They look enough alike that they might be mistaken for brothers, although one is fleshier in the face and has grey hair and the other has bad teeth. But more importantly, Marietta believes that they look like her; either of the men could easily pass as her uncle. They both have Marietta's narrowly bridged nose and her brown, oval-shaped eyes, their lashes naturally long and dark. Their ears seem to protrude an equivalent amount and their lips are the same shade of deep red, with a similar tendency to be a little bit chapped around the corners.

"Huh," is all Marietta Sr. can muster looking at the glossy picture in the binder. She takes the photo out of its sleeve, flips it over, and silently reads their bio, the few lines which Maisy is desperately hoping will convince her mother of their suitability. One is a land developer—a profession of the wealthy, like doctors and lawyers, right?—and the other works from home, as a freelance journalist—a job easily set aside to look after children.

"There must be more," she says, shutting the binder. "They're can't only be these people looking for children."

"These were the three best choices."

"And which one is the best, Maisy?"

"Well—"

"If you're going to say Don and Will M—, you can just forget about it right now."

**“They look like me. The child will look like them, like she belongs in the family.”**

**“Is that your only reason?”**

**Marietta does not want to try and explain it—perhaps she can’t explain it—but even if Don and Will M had been blonde-haired, blue-eyed destitute buskers, she would have given them the baby without hesitation. For she cannot separate the picture of them from her due date—the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, 1999. If the baby is just a few days late, and her doctor has cautioned that first-time mothers should be, her child will be one of the first babies of the millennium, an ambassador, Marietta believes, to the new age. There is some dignity in this, she thinks, a pride to be taken in it, and these men are, in her mind, the couple most fitting to receive this small honour.**

**“It’s not enough, Maisy. Who will watch the baby?”**

**“The other one works from home.”**

**“Oh, who knows what he does.” Marietta’s mother slams the binder closed. Two men seated at the next table look over for a brief moment and then return to their conversation, their eyes smiling. “Let’s just put an end to this, full stop, Maisy. Come home.”**

**“No.”**

**“All right then, I’m leaving.” Marietta Sr. stands up from the table and buttons her peacoat. “Give the damn baby to whomever you choose.”**

**“I will.”**

**“Where did we go wrong, Maisy?” She stops a moment, her face flushed and her eyes stuck on the button that will not go through its hole. “A year ago you come and tell us that you are a lesbian, and we were shocked, but we didn’t yell, we didn’t tell you that we hated you. Your father nearly choked on his dinner roll, but he didn’t kick you out. All we asked was that you not tell your grandmother, because of her heart condition.”**

**“I know.”**

**“You’re sixteen, Maisy. How can you know? You are still a child. And then you come to us and tell us that you’re pregnant. Well, Maisy, what were we to do? Every moment it seems like you’ve got a different, equally upsetting story to tell us. And then you’re gone, without a word, without a note. Georgette had to call and tell me, and you know how much she loved that. She had the incomparable pleasure of telling me that you were safe at her house, but couldn’t come to the phone. ‘Why don’t you let her cool off?’ she said. ‘You’ve done enough.’ I’m your mother, Maisy. I want you to come home and we can raise this baby and those two men won’t ever know the difference.”**

**“I’ve already talked to the agency, Mother. I’ve made my decision. It’s too late.”**

**“Don’t be stupid, Maisy. You can always change your mind.”**

**Marietta wonders, briefly, if this is true.**

Don found Will already in bed, reading. He was wearing the pajamas Don and Maisy had got him for Christmas that year, sky blue with strawberry ice-cream cones all over. The gift had been meant as a joke, a cover for the real gift, which was an iPad. But Will had put on the pajamas immediately that morning and said that the silhouette complimented his hourglass figure, and after only an hour of reading he had thrown the gadget aside, claiming that the bright screen hurt his eyes. Since then, Don had often caught Will sniffing his books and saying that the smell of the page added texture to the story, like a well-placed ruffle on a silk camisole. Don, who only read magazines, had taken the iPad for himself and as he settled in bed he loaded up this month's *Home and Gardens*. Will asked if Maisy was tucked in. "Sure," Don said. He read his magazine for a few moments, and then added, "I put her hair in a French braid. Just to try something different."

"Wouldn't that be like sleeping on a lumpy pillow?"

"No."

"Besides, tomorrow her hair will be all crimped. And what's the first rule of hair care?"

"Never crimp," Don said.

They are in bed like this, gently arguing, eleven years before when they get the call that Maisy is on the way. It is after two o'clock in the morning and they have just come from a Christmas party that ended when Don shouted at a man for spilling a drink on him. Don answers the phone brusquely, "What?" expecting it to be the

guilty man, a friend of Will's, offering him an apology and a promise to pay the dry cleaning Will.

But it is a woman, a soft-spoken yet direct woman, who says, "I'm calling from Nepean Hospital," and Don understands immediately. The girl has gone into labour. Two weeks early.

"The baby is not here *yet*," the woman says and then explains that first-time mothers usually take a while to deliver. Don says, "Huh," as she carries on, snapping his fingers at Will, who is already up and riffling through the closet. "But you better get up here quick," the woman concludes, "I expect you have a long drive."

"Thanks," he says, attempting to match the nurse's coolness, but in truth, it is as if she has leveled a gun at his stomach and fired a round of buckshot. His insides sting all over with nervousness. They are two provinces away, in New Brunswick, and nothing is packed. The baby's room is ready, papered in bright yellow, but aside from that, all Don has are lists, scraps of paper scattered all over the house to remind him of what he has left to do, what is left to buy. A mixture of panic and frustration overtakes his nervousness. How could he have been so thoughtless, to not even have a bag of clothes packed!

Don hangs up and lets the cordless drop to the floor as he skips around Will and dives into the closet himself. He can feel Will behind him, vibrating with delight, dressing. "Who phoned?" he asks. Don looks at him as if to say, Of course, the baby's coming and Will says, "I mean, was it the girl who called? The hospital? The agency?"

"I think it was a nurse," Don said. "I don't think she said."

Nurses, he now thinks, are tricky, unreliable creatures. It was only one week before that a pediatric nurse, whom he had contacted for advice on how to prepare for the baby's arrival, had assured him that first time mothers never deliver early, and are often up to two weeks late, so there was no point in rushing around and to enjoy his holidays. He regrets being so trusting, stuffing underwear and shirts into his bag. Will is calmer, taking Don by the shoulders and reminding him that he might need pants and anything they forget can be bought in Nepean. "We'll eat on the way," Will says.

The car starts easily and still holds a trace of the warmth from the trip home that night. Don backs out, skirting out below the garage door before it is fully open and they drive out of their neighbourhood and through the city in silence. It is dark and snowing lightly. "She said something strange," Don says as he merges onto the highway. "Near the middle of the call."

"Who?" Will asks.

"The nurse. The lady who called. She said that there was an ambulance Will that will need to be paid. That the girl came in an—"

"Is she ok?" Will interrupts, his hand on the dash.

"Yes. Well, I don't know. She didn't say. I mean it was probably just a surprise. Delivering early, and all. Maybe she doesn't have a car. I don't know. The nurse would have said if there was something wrong, wouldn't she?"

"What did she say?"

"She said that there was an ambulance fee that needed to be paid, by the family."

"So? We'll just pay it," Will says, settling back in his seat and closing his eyes. But the nurse's steady voice had wavered, Don recalls, when she said the word "family" as if she wasn't exactly sure if she was describing a family or one of its known declensions.

"By the family," Don repeats. "Is it us? Or did she mean the girl's family? We aren't supposed to give her any money."

Will sleepily says, "We can only show them," and Don grunts in assent, moving on to how he wishes they could rig the new stroller's wheels with springs so that it won't get away from them while walking downhill. They live in Fredericton, a city of steep, icy hills. He says, "It's not rocket science, is it? I mean, the stroller already has an emergency brake, but what if the emergency is that the baby has rolled away down the hill straight into traffic?" He looks across the car and sees Will sleeping like a baby himself, his head lolling on his shoulder, his mouth wide-open. Don switches off the cruise control and strikes the brake sharply with his foot; Will jiggs forward, startled awake. "Sorry," Don says. "Thought I saw a moose."

They are led into a hospital room and told by the nurse to wait. It is not private, but that shouldn't be expected. Near the window, a pregnant woman lays stricken with an extended contraction, the man beside her holding her hand and she squeezes it, breathes in and out in sharp, purposeful puffs. It passes, finally, and she looks up, noticing for the first time Don and Will standing a few feet from her, shuffling around nervously and not talking. She signals to the man (her husband?) to

shut the curtain, and he complies. "Rude," Don whispers, turning his back to them, watching the door.

He has the baby's name narrowed down to either Emma or Julia. Will prefers Emma, but Don wants to look at the baby first and then decide which name suits her best. Julia, he has read, is a Roman name, given to aristocratic ladies without any other implication than that child is descendent of someone named Julius. A name without any real meaning then, a blank slate. *Tabula rasa*, he has often repeated to himself lately while driving alone or in the shower, just because it sounds so nice coming off of his tongue. Emma, on the other hand, means whole, universal. Everything in one name. Who was it that said that? He thinks that it's Shakespeare, and is proud that he has remembered. He wonders, What will her nose look like? A word occurs to him: "Aquiline."

And then a woman in a long, navy pea coat and a wide brimmed hat opens the door and says, "Are you the M—'s?" Her eyes are red and puffy, as if she's been awake for hours, or has been crying. She carries a small-handled purse in the crook of her elbow.

"Yes, that's right," Don says and Will, "Can we help you?"

The woman opens her mouth to speak but is interrupted by the cries of the woman lying behind the curtain. Another contraction has struck, another round of determined breath and gentle encouragements from the man beside her.

"My name is Marietta Jones," the woman nearly shouts and Don realizes that she is the girl's mother, his baby's grandmother. "This is a closed adoption," Don says. "This is very inappropriate." Another sharp cry from the woman in the next

bed over. More dogged breathing just as Don's breath leaves his body. She has come to say that her daughter has changed her mind, he thinks. The girl wants to keep it and they won't be getting the baby after all. He turns to Will, who stands beside him not understanding. They've come all of this way, Don wants to say, driven for hours, prepared for her arrival for months, years even, and now they will have to begin again. They've lost her.

Instead, Marietta Jones talks about her own mother, who has just died of pneumonia. Caught, she tells them in a matter-of-fact way, "After a bad fall."

"This is very inappropriate," Don repeats, unable to find fresh words. "We have a closed adoption."

"I don't care about that. My daughter is lying in a bed down the hall, weak and scared, and there are things we need to discuss."

"Like what?" Will asks.

"First, the baby's name. Every woman in our family is named Marietta."

"Marietta?"

"No way," Don says. "This is our baby and we'll decide what to name her."

Will asks, "Who are you again?"

Marietta Jones speaks directly to Don. "She doesn't want to give up this baby. She wants to come home. She is only wanting a little bit of sense. There is still time. I've talked to a lawyer and he says we have time to decide." Her purse has slipped from her elbow and she is now holding it in her hand. A gloved hand, Don notices, the glove made of a soft material like seal skin or doe. "Well?" she asks, and for the first time Don hears the desperation in her voice. She is lying. He knows this. She has

not been with her daughter. She has just come in off the street. She hasn't even taken off her coat; it is still buttoned up tight.

He says, "I'm sorry, ma'am, but you're going to have to leave. This is a closed adoption and we have—"

"Don, please," Will interrupts him, and he turns to Marietta: "Would you like to at least stay and meet her?" But his question was left unanswered as she swept out of the door.

Don said, "It'll save us money in the end." Will looked down to his book and then back at Don. "I guess so," he said.

"A lot of families are doing it. I said so earlier, but you may not have been listening."

"No, I heard you," Will said. "Eggs and a little girl's chicken walking backwards." Don couldn't help but elaborate on Melody and her genius chicken, but Will stopped him, saying, "It just sounds like a lot of work. We should think about it."

"Maisy wants them."

Will looked at him and laughed. "Does she?"

"Yes. She said she'd even weave us a basket to collect the eggs."

"She doesn't know how to weave a basket."

"We're going to learn together," Don said, returning to his magazine. "It can't be that hard. And then we can get Julia Child's book and learn to make omelets too."

They lay beside each other for a few moments in silence. Don kept quiet because he could see from the way Will stared just above his book that he was

coming around to the idea in his usual, meandering fashion. "Someone at work, Sandra, told me about this thing everyone is doing," Will finally said. "The hundred mile diet. You only eat food that comes from within a hundred mile radius. Maybe we could try that." Don thought he had never heard anything stupider. What if he wanted a mango? Or strawberries in December? He suppressed the urge to scoff. "We could go green," Will said and Don added, "Go greener."

"Good," Will said, and then, as if surprised by his easy acquiescence, he asked, "Where are we going to get chickens around here?"

"They're already on their way," Don said.

#### IV

The chickens came six weeks later, three Rhode Island Reds and three Black Maran pullets, dead in the box. Don wailed for Will, and he came running, followed by Maisy. She took the box from Don and set it on the hall floor. It was an open-air crate made of sturdy plywood. "Caution: Live Birds" was painted in big red letters on each side.

"Don't touch them," Don said. "They could be diseased." He pulled Maisy back and knelt down beside the box himself. It was packed half-full with hay, sectioned off by six indents that served as nests. A plastic food dish was nailed to the side, full of some kind of grain, and beside it was another dish, this one empty and cracked along the side. "All of their water must have leaked out," Don said and stood up.

"Shit," Maisy said, for the first time in Don's hearing, and Will put a firm hand on his shoulder and offered him his look. It was the same look he always wore when he meant to be supportive, his head titled to the left, his lips drawn in so they curved upwards, almost in a half-smile or a sneer. It was the same look he wore when he was playing his mandolin and when he was being fellated. A wave of relief washed over Don; he started laughing.

"What's so funny?" Will asked.

"What're we going to do with them?" He tapped his foot against the crate.  
"And now we have that fucking coop out back."

It had come by freight a week before, preassembled and made of light durable plastic rather than of an outmoded material like wood, but Don had chosen it because it came in teal. The day it arrived Don spent the entire afternoon disinfecting the interior, laying out the bedding of hay and alfalfa, and filling up the feed boxes and the metal water trough. He screwed the heat lamp in last, and when he flicked the switch, he sat under it until he felt sure it was warm. Will watched from the back porch, sipping his green tea. Don wondered if he was still a little upset that he hadn't been consulted, but soon he came down into the yard and started to offer suggestions about the coop's feng shui. Maisy was somewhere inside the house. She had woven Don a reed basket at Girl Scouts. "For collecting the eggs," she had said, but made it absolutely clear to Don that on no account would she be the one doing the collecting.

Now Maisy scooped up one of the pullets and cradled it in her hands.

"They're cute," she said. "More than I thought."

Don picked up the crate and held it toward her. "We're going to have to bury them, Maisy." He shook the crate a little to indicate that she should lay the creature back in its nest alongside the others, but she was examining the fuzzy thing she held. She brought it up close to her face and then turned her head sideways, placing her ear against the chick's chest. She listened intently, and then nearly dropped it when the bird twitched in her hands.

She said, "Dad, this one's still alive, I think." Don put down the crate and came around behind her for a closer look. He watched for a few moments and indeed the chick twitched without making a sound. Its eyes were closed but as the seconds passed, it twitched again. He took it from Maisy and it lay limp in his hands. "What're those?" she asked, touching the hard pins mixed in amongst the young bird's feathers. "Dunno," Don said. He worried one waxy spindle between his fingers; the casing fell away, releasing a puffy, ill-formed feather.

"Oh my god," said Will, peering over Don's shoulder. "We need to call a vet or something."

"No, go up to the bathroom, you two." Without waiting for their reply, Don went out to the kitchen and dug around in the odds-and-ends drawer until he found a roll of cheesecloth. He took the whole roll up to the bathroom where Maisy and Will were standing, Maisy cradling the dying pullet. "Give her to me," Don said, and he wrapped it in a length of the cheesecloth he'd torn off. Will bent over the tub, a mammoth clawfoot salvaged from his mother's house, and turned on the cold water. Don watched it fill up to four fingers deep then he bent over the tub alongside Will

and held the wrapped package under the water until, long after the chick had stopped twitching, Maisy said, "That's enough."

Will stayed in the house claiming squeamishness while Don and Maisy got two shovels out from the shed and dug a hole to the right of the small tomato patch in the backyard. Not two feet away, the coop loomed offensively, empty window boxes hitched on each side of the structure. They dug without speaking for near half an hour. Once it was deep enough to fit the crate on all sides, Maisy suggested that they stop and drop it in. Don looked at his daughter and saw that a line of sweat had broken over her brow. He had always thought that children only perspired after they reached puberty and he wondered if this was a sign that Maisy was about to start menstruating. She lowered the crate into the hole and started shoveling the dirt back over it.

They set the coop out by the curb with a sign attached to it that read "Free: Take Me," and as they turned back towards the house, Don saw that Will had come outside and was standing on the wrap-around porch, watching them. Will had his arms crossed but he was smiling pleasantly and he waved. "Lemonade's made," he said. "Good, because I'm thirsty," Maisy said. Don was about to ask for extra lemon slices in his when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He brought it out and checked his messages. He had a new email, and it was from Melody Tweeps.

Just after he had ordered the chicks, he had searched out the chicken girl online. He wasn't surprised to find the same smiling face from the newspaper

article, now in blazing colour, attached to the top left corner of a Facebook profile. He had been too embarrassed to straight out ask to be her friend, but he did send off a short message to the girl congratulating her on her feat and her genius chicken, Henrietta. He had also mentioned that he had just ordered his first chicks and asked the girl if she had any advice for a beginner. He read her reply aloud:

*hey*

*sorry it took long to reply but mom said I shouldn't as your a man and an old one at that so i had to sneak on. you should know Henrietta's been snatched right from her coop. some murderer came along and snipped through the run and stole her dad says it was some high school kids out for pranks and theres some chance shell be returned if we put up signs but I know it was a murderer because a kid at school said that a blue van was going around luring kids away with them and thats why I think they took Henrietta because she loved children best and always had time for them so shed make a good lure. you have to know how she was hatched because thats why she was a genius. Henrietta was a fancy blue silkie and that means she was supposed to be a blue chicken with blue feathers except Henrietta was grey. the day she hatched the lady called us up and said we'd soon have our pick of the whole clutch but only one egg hatched after all and that was Henrietta's because the rest were just duds. she said this chick's a splash and I didn't know what that meant but the lady said it was nothing to worry about, only that in Blue Silkies the colour doesn't always hatch true and she said she didn't have an explanation better than that. she said most will be blue but some will be black and the rest will be grey with only speckles of blue like*

*Henrietta and thats why she was called a splash and was special. the lady told me that I could wait another two months and they would have another clutch of blue silkies and I could get an honest blue one but I said I wanted Henrietta and i loved her on the spot but now she's snatched and mom says i'm cut up about it but really im just sad i ever met her.*

*melody*

## Sanitarium

I heard this story for the second time from a woman who I'm sure thought she knew Jeanine better than I did. They had worked together at the library for over sixteen years, whereas I had only been there for seven months when Jeanine died, quite quickly, of breast cancer. It went like this—three weeks before her diagnosis, Jeanine, a wife and mother of two adopted boys, had taken a holiday alone, and it had rained the whole weekend she was away.

Brenda, my co-worker, told the story as we all stood around the break room at a potluck organized by management as a memorial for Jeanine. The break room was bright and humid, full of thick, green plants donated by patrons who thought that their flowering eucalyptuses and aloes might find a home at the library, just like families leaving town ditch their dog or cat at a shelter. It was part of Brenda's job to care for them, and she took a lot of pride in it, labeling each of the pots with that plant's scientific name, and consulting large textbooks if she wasn't sure which variety it was. She was a short woman, her hair cut unfashionably in a pageboy, and that day she was wearing, as she did at least one day every week, a pink cardigan, a

long skirt, and dark leather clogs. Two other women started to cry along with her when she got to the part about the rain. Tissues were passed around, but Brenda continued to speak in her usual mousy yet sharp voice and with a tone of indignation, as if she were taking Jeanine's part in the matter.

"It makes me half sick," Brenda said, wiping the corners of her eyes, "to think of Jeanine by herself in that little motel room. The whole time, in her car, in shops, restaurants. Alone."

It was understood that Jeanine had run away, if only for a weekend, to escape her family. Her two kids were fourteen and fifteen, pimply brats we had all seen whipping around in between the stacks every day after school, shouting and ripping pages out of books. One time, they snuck onto a staff computer and downloaded anime pornography, emailing it around to everyone at the library. And we had all walked past Jeanine's husband Gary waiting in their car for her every night after work, never loosening his grip on the steering wheel. There were rumours that he mistreated her, and maybe even beat her, the stories exacerbated by the fact that he had a nervous cough that never went away. I once heard Brenda say to Laurie, the children's librarian, "As if a man couldn't go on coughing his whole life without turning mean." Laurie had replied, "There was this girl down in the States who couldn't stop hiccupping, for weeks and weeks. She was all over the news. And just last year, she got caught up with the wrong crowd and now she's on trial for murder." Brenda had clicked her tongue three times, shaking her head. "It makes a lot of sense," she had said.

“And the rain.” Laurie joined in with the other women crying, though she didn’t have anything more to add. She and Jeanine had never gotten along after what everyone talked of as “the canteen incident.” Just like Brenda cared for the plants, it was part of Laurie’s job to stock and collect money for the office canteen. She kept all of the change in a little red tin, and one afternoon when Jeanine was hungry she took a chocolate bar, but since she didn’t have any change she put a note in the can that said “IOU – 25 cents, J.” No one had ever done that before. And that was because, according to Laurie, it was against policy. There was a showdown in Jeanine’s office. Laurie demanded the money. Jeanine wouldn’t break a Will. They argued in circles. Brenda later explained to me the source of their animosity: Jeanine was fat and Laurie was thin.

We all stood along the kitchen counter where the food was laid out: a fruit tray, the strawberries and cantaloupe all eaten; half of a cheese ball rolled in pieces of walnut; a single, broken chocolate chip cookie next to a few ladyfingers dipped in jam; a whole tin of bran muffins. No one had spoken for some moments; I thought that everyone was just waiting for the first person to pack up and leave.

And then Brenda said something peculiar: “She must have known.” She said it to no one in particular, least of all to me, but everyone nodded along, myself included. Which was strange because Jeanine had told me herself the reason why she had gone to Alma, a small fishing village outside of Fundy National Park. It had nothing to do with her shitty kids, or her mean husband, or her health. Sitting alone in restaurants had been fun, she said. She thought it made her appear interesting, and maybe even a bit alluring, to all of the couples and families seated around her.

She wore a lace shawl she had netted herself and ordered a full lobster dinner, which she ate slowly, even slurping up the green roe dunked in butter. Moreover, she said that the patter of the rain against the roof of the small cottage she'd rented made her feel contained and safe. Cloistered, was her word, like a medieval nun.

I had assumed that she had told everyone at the library the whole story, like she had told me the Monday morning after she got back. But as I looked around the break room and saw that the all of the women had stopped crying, and that Laurie was watching Brenda with a keen look of nervous excitement, I knew she couldn't have. Or maybe she had. Perhaps we were all sincerely upset that our friend and colleague, at a time so soon before she died, had been alone and that it had rained, but what I saw was that we had all just finished playing out the weekend in our minds, and we had seen patterns, drawn conclusions. For us, the lonely motel room, for it had to have been lonely, and the grey rain were nothing but omens and auguries portending that Jeanine's tragic life was about to swiftly come to a more tragic end. Or was it a mercy? I don't think we knew.

I knew Jeanine's brother, Randy. I'd met him at the LGTB community center downtown, where I still volunteer a few nights a week running a resume workshop. This was several months before Jeanine died, when I had just started at the library after finishing my degree at the University. My duties at the library were dull and undemanding—shelving and ordering books, sometimes wrangling the odd bum away from browsing pornography on one of the community access computers—so I

wanted something that would put to use a fraction of the skills I had spent the past four years and nearly \$20,000 in student loans acquiring.

It was easy enough to get on at the Lambda Center. It was run by one of my professors, a man named Dr. Lehrer. He had encouraged me to volunteer after our first class together, but then I had made my excuses: I didn't have the time, I said, which really meant that I was too busy with my friends to care. But after I graduated, and most of my friends had moved away to grad school or to jobs in other provinces, I began to see the use of such a place as the Center. So I set up my little office on the second floor, lugging two solid chairs and a small card table up from the basement. The room was not much more than a broom closet, and I had been warned by Dr. Lehrer that I wouldn't be able to hold my workshops in the summer once it got to be too hot in there and that there was no money for air conditioning. Undeterred, I bought a small fan in expectation of the months to come and waited for what I was sure would be the deluge of jobless and desperate queers, having read and fiercely repeated to myself that people of sexual minorities are nearly always more adversely affected by economic downturns than their straight counterparts.

But I sat up there two nights a week for three weeks straight without meeting anyone. It wasn't that no one came to the center. Our Second Prom attracted over two hundred people, and the two clunky Internet-connected computers on the main floor were almost always in use. One night I even saw a woman browsing through an online job bank, but when I asked if I could help, she looked me once over and said no, she could help herself.

Randy was my first client, appearing one night just as I was packing up my laptop and planning my walk home according to which fast food restaurant I wanted to patronize that night. He was a stranger to the Center, a trans man just arrived back in town and looking for work. Full-time, was the first thing he told me. He needed a lot money for what he was planning. He said next that I would have my work cut out for me: he wasn't qualified for much, since he had spent the last four years as a squeegee kid living on the streets of Toronto. He had his GED, though, and he was just about to turn twenty-three.

I asked him why he needed so much money.

"I want to go to library school," he said. "Halifax isn't cheap."

"And that's the only place you can go?" There was also a program in town, at the university from which I had just graduated. I suppressed the urge to warn him off library science entirely, to tell him that every arts grad who wasn't in an education program was currently trudging through library school, to the point that soon enough there would be more librarians than people who use libraries.

"Halifax is the best," he said. It was also where his sister, a woman named Jeanine, had been trained, a woman who had paid for much of his transition, even though her husband had objected and thought of Randy as an ungrateful bum and a freak. "He's a controlling asshole, but don't get me started."

"That was nice of your sister," I said, taken aback by Randy's candour. It hadn't yet occurred to me that the Jeanine I worked with, the lady who rushed out every night at five and jumped into a waiting car, to the tsk-tsks of the women

watching her go, was the same woman Randy was now waiting for me to acknowledge as someone we both knew. "What was her name again?" I asked.

"Jeanine. She works at the library in town?"

"Oh, Jeanine," I said. "I work with her."

"I know," he said, laughing loudly at my awkwardness. "She was the one who told me to come see you. She didn't tell you I was coming?"

"No, she didn't," I said, flushed, thinking, She must know that I'm gay, and then: Well, what of it? I had never told Jeanine about myself, but neither had I tried to hide it from her. In fact, we hadn't really spoken much at all, as she then spent most of her lunch hours napping on the couch in the break room. I had mentioned my volunteer job only once at work, during a long afternoon standing beside Brenda, cleaning the covers of children's books with vinegar and water. I said it more out of boredom than anything, and Brenda hadn't cared to ask where or what the Lambda Center was. Even if she had, from the way she looked up from her work with an expression of both exasperation and vulgar curiosity that said, *I don't care to know more, really, but what you said somehow explains why we are different*, I probably would have responded with, "Oh, it's just this place downtown," in a way to stave off further questions. I couldn't remember if Jeanine had been in the room or not, but she must have been behind us, at the mail desk maybe, or by the phone. And she must have had enough sense to know exactly where I volunteered, and why.

Which shouldn't have surprised me, now that I knew she had a trans brother. For a lot of people, queer culture is entirely strange, in the more archaic sense of the word. *You are strange to me*, someone like Brenda or Laurie might say if they were

forced to articulate their feelings, unsure why they tense up at the thought of two men together or of a woman born in the body of a man, having only these abstract ideas on which they deign to hang this sense of alienation. But for Jeanine, who had taken her sister's strangeness and helped mold it into the familiar shape of her brother, it was easy enough to treat me as someone who wasn't strange at all, who didn't need to be inquired about or explained away.

Of course, I didn't guess all of this while Randy told me about his future plans to follow his sister into library science. In fact, I have to admit, the reason why I first couldn't connect Randy to Jeanine was that it didn't seem possible to me that the well-dressed, articulate woman I had briefly chatted with at work was somehow related to a person who had lived on the streets. But the family resemblance, at least, now seemed clear. Randy and Jeanine both had large, round faces and sharp, convex cheekbones that some people might correctly misinterpret as indications of a jolly disposition. They had the same brown eyes and wide-bridged nose. And they both laughed from the belly, loud enough that it could be heard through walls.

Randy got his first job in town as a janitor at the high school a few blocks away from the Center. He came back and told me he had been hired on the spot after only a short interview. Conducted by the principal, no less. He seemed impressed by that, as if she had somehow honoured him by taking time out of her day for the interview. He told me that she had given him a tour of the school, and was in the process of describing the clichéd hallways lined with group photos of past graduating classes when I interrupted him, wanting to know about the interview. The more I spoke

with him, the more I knew Randy wasn't a naturally shy person, but I assumed he must have been nervous wondering if and when the principal would bring up his gender identity.

"We didn't talk about it," he said.

"You didn't bring it up?"

"Should I have?"

"Well, no, not if you didn't want to."

"She didn't seem to notice."

"Who?"

"The principal."

"How do you know that she didn't notice?"

"Oh, I can tell."

Our exchange lasted only a few minutes—he had to be up at 5 a.m. the next morning and so was rushing home to bed—but it was troubling enough to leave me unsettled. I didn't know where he had heard of the janitor job. It was not one advertised through the Center, and for what I thought was a good reason: in a position of such low authority at a school full of teenagers, he couldn't possibly expect that his being trans wouldn't go unnoticed, or that he wouldn't be the butt of persistent school-wide jokes. Surely he wasn't that naïve, having dropped out of school himself, presumably because he was bullied.

I hoped Randy's emphasized shoulders, his thick waist and his severe, cleft chin, would help him pass, but if teenagers are good at anything, I suppose, it's

sniffing out differences. Within weeks the torments and the jeers got to be so loud and so frequent that the principal caught wind of the problem and Randy was fired.

It happened during the Remembrance Day ceremony. All of the kids were seated in the gym, watching disinterestedly as the elderly colour guard and the cadets marched around and stood at attention. Randy was just outside, mopping the same square of hallway slowly and deliberately because he liked bagpipe music and the school had brought in a professional player for the commemoration. Half-way through the ceremony, right after the recital of "In Flanders' Fields," Randy caught two teenage girls trying to sneak out. They stopped short when they first saw him, but after a shared glance, they turned around and continued down the hall.

Randy whistled after them, then called, "Hey girls, get back here." They stopped and turned but didn't walk back, so he approached them, his mop still in his left hand. "You have to go back inside," he said. "It's very disrespectful." As he got closer, Randy recognized the two girls from the cafeteria. Earlier that week one of them had spilled her pop all over the table and had been too amused with her own clumsiness to help him clean it up. These girls were almost always together, seated with a small group of friends distinctly apart from the athletes and popular girls, and even separate from the Advanced Placement kids, the theatre kids, the emos and the grungers. They didn't seem like misfits, exactly, but in terms of the social hierarchy of the school they were almost invisible, perhaps because of their perfect ordinariness. They were both short and not thin, always wearing a hoodie over their jeans, their eyes and lashes heavily lined in black. Randy had once seen them outside

in the smoking area, holding their Tim Horton's coffees and cigarettes aloof, as if the addiction was not to nicotine or to caffeine, but to standing apart.

"You have to go back," Randy said. "Come on, girls, you know that."

"They wanted us say the Lord's Prayer or some shit," one said, her head bobbing along to emphasize her point. The other added, "They can't make us pray. It's illegal." Both of them had their arms crossed, indignation covering their faces, sure of their rights.

"You need to go back in," Randy said, searching for a reason other than that he felt it to be right. "It's very disrespectful."

"Shut up, you stupid fucking tranny."

"Vagina dick."

The principal, who had spied the two girls sneak out of the gym and had followed them out, heard the insults but instead of hauling the girls to her office, told Randy to follow her down the hall. The girls stood by incredulously. They couldn't believe their luck.

Randy was to work for the rest of the day, the principal explained, but he was not to come back the next morning. He wouldn't be allowed back on the school property. She spoke quickly, nervously, and before she was finished, she waved a piece of paper in front of him and saying that he had to sign it, which he did. The principal was sorry, she claimed, but she wasn't about to "cultivate a hostile learning environment." Not in her school. And that was the end of Randy's tenure as a janitor.

I was livid. I said to Randy that we should go right up to the Legal Aid center on the University campus and talk to someone about filing a wrongful dismissal suit.

This was all too common, I said. It didn't matter that he had signed a stupid sheet of paper. Jeanine could help. Dr. Lehrer would know who to call. I picked up the phone and began to dial his number, but Randy asked me to put the receiver down.

"No," he said. "I didn't like it there anyway."

Even though it was just Randy who was fired, to me this seemed like admitting defeat, like we were ceding ground. So I said, "Even a small settlement would be enough to pay for library school."

He thanked me, but said that he would be fine, and then left.

I immediately picked up the phone and dialed Dr. Lehrer's extension at the Lambda Center. I could hear the phone ringing down the hall, but no one answered, so I tried him at home. Nothing. It was nearing 8 o'clock at night and so I thought he couldn't still be at his office at the University, but I dialed anyway. He picked up after the third ring, sounding tired.

I asked him if I could come and speak with him, in person. He took a deep breath that sounded to me like a yawn so I said, "Only if it isn't a bother. I don't want to trouble you."

"Oh, not at all. Sure, come along." He hung up before I had a chance to say I was on my way. It was strange for him to sound so unconcerned on the phone. He was usually interested in the problems of the people who frequented the Center to the point of overbearance. When the local community theater got a substantial Canada Council grant, Dr. Lehrer convinced the artistic director to give the Lambda

Center the theatre's rattier old costumes. We used them only once, in a gender-bending adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* that played to a meager crowd for three nights. The kids weren't really into it, and neither were their families, although everyone came to the cast party and thanked Dr. Lehrer profusely for all of his effort. Dr. Lehrer, for his part, worried that if we didn't have some kind of organized fun for the kids, they wouldn't show up. Of course, it was enough that we ordered pizza for them every Friday night and gave them a place where they could eat it, but that unsettled Dr. Lehrer even more. He wanted us to be working toward something, all together. What he wanted us to accomplish he could never specify, but he would look around at all of the kids lounging in the basement, eating and talking, playing video games, in pockets of two, or three, or four, and wonder aloud if they had anything in common at all.

I walked quickly up the hill towards the University, worried that Dr. Lehrer might leave before I got there. But I found him in his office sitting behind his desk with a pen in hand and his glasses on, looking over some papers. Only his green-shaded desk lamp was lit, illuminating the small area of desk on which he worked and casting shadows on the bookcases that lined the three walls of his around him. He looked up at me and smiled. Dr. Lehrer was a professor of German Literature at the University, specializing in the work of Thomas Mann and I often thought that he looked like the man he studied, with his rectangular face, small brown eyes, and his hair combed back with pomade, neatly parted on the left. He went without the small mustache, though, because he hated the thought of catching food in it.

"Sorry to disturb you so late."

"Not at all," he said. "Only you've caught me at a strange time."

"I needed to talk to you about Randy," I said, pressing forward. He hadn't asked me to sit down, but I did anyway, settling my messenger bag on top of my lap. "Did you know he was fired from his job today?"

"I am sorry," he said, "but I am just having a little bit of trouble remembering..."

"Randy," I said. "Kostelnick? The trans man at the Center? I was helping him find work, but then he got a job at a middle school without my knowledge. Not through the Center, I mean, and they've fired him."

"Oh," said Dr. Lehrer. He gathered up his papers into one pile and glanced over the top sheet before continuing. "I am terribly sorry to hear this."

"They fired him for being trans," I said. "We have to do something."

"And he asked you to come here?"

It then occurred to me that the papers in front of Dr. Lehrer were actually a letter he was writing to someone, in longhand on a heavy piece of paper, the letters dark and heavily stylized, like calligraphy, and arranged in neat blocks. He caught me looking at them and actually blushed, laughing nervously.

"I don't know why I should hide it," Dr. Lehrer said, smiling. "I've heard from Leonhard." He started to laugh in earnest.

Leonhard was a name I had been hearing ever since Dr. Lehrer first encouraged me to volunteer at the Center, after I had written a paper for him on *The Magic Mountain* arguing that the sanitarium, described by Mann, was actually quite glamorous.

*No, no, no*, he had written on my paper in his even cursive. *The sanitarium is representative of all of the ills of pre-War Germany. The extravagance, the sexual excess, the laissez-faire attitude of her citizens—all of which led to the Great War.* He gave me a B+.

Of course I was outraged. I hardly waited an hour before I went to his office to complain. I made an extensive list of what I thought were the paper's strengths—the word "perspicacity" kept rolling through my thoughts. I didn't yet know that Dr. Lehrer was gay himself and I confess I found his evaluation to be more than a little homophobic: it was just like a mean and pompous straight man to resent my arch and campy reading of his preciously serious literature. And I was going to let him know exactly what I thought about that.

He seemed to be expecting me when I arrived, with tea already steeping in a bone china teapot. Whether or not he offered tea to all of his student complainers, I didn't know, but there seemed to be some special ceremony in his delicate and precise hand movements in pouring the tea and his wordless offer of sugar and milk, as if he wanted to show me something before we had even said more than five words to each other. He was smiling the whole while and after we had both settled with our cups he finally asked me, "Now, Evan, how can I help you?"

I explained that I wasn't satisfied with my grade as confidently as I could, the ceremonious offer of the tea having done a lot to disarm me. My eyes wandered around his office as I spoke, lingering on the book-lined walls and the plump arm chair that took up most of the corner beside his desk, nestled under a tall floor lamp with a frilly, red velvet shade.

"There's nothing wrong with the writing, *per se*," he said, flipping through my paper. "See how few red marks I've made? The grammar was fine." He paused, and leaning back in his chair, took a sip of tea, holding the saucer below the cup like an old-fashioned dandy, his eyes over my shoulder as if he was struggling to articulate a thought. I didn't know if he expected me to speak, so I took a sip of my own tea and said,

"Well, if I had to die of TB, I'd much rather be wrapped up in a fur coat, sunning myself in the Swiss Alps, than stuck in a rank, old hospital bed at the Regional. And I bet I could find a million people who'd agree with me."

I said this to taunt him, to make him angry, but to my surprise he laughed. "I suppose you are right," he said. "But you're missing the point of the novel, dear." (He called all of his students dear, much to the ire of some of the women in the class).

His conclusion: "The grade stands."

I started to cry, and I was obviously not the first student who had cried in his office, for he then pushed a box of Kleenex toward me.

It was then that he first told me the barebones version of a story that would be fleshed out as I got to know him better. As a teenager, Dr. Lehrer had developed a serious bone infection in his left knee and had to spend three months in a hospital in Berlin. His parents were both bureaucrats, heavily involved in the reconstruction effort after World War II, and so didn't have much time for their sick son. All of the stories he told of his childhood eventually rounded their way back to his time in the hospital, and of the "well-formed youth" named Leonhard—an orderly, I suppose—who Lehrer claimed took pity on him and "nursed him back to health, and more

importantly, into sexual maturity." There was a small closet just around the corner from the nurses' station, where, after the orderly had loudly told everyone he was taking Lehrer for a stroll in his wheelchair, they would slip into and there amid the mops and buckets, old folding chairs, and disinfectants, they would have sex.

I would have never admitted it to Dr. Lehrer, but the whole story had a ring of falseness to it, especially after hearing it for the 20<sup>th</sup> time. Leonhard seemed like the type of man that a lonely, abandoned adolescent would invent while being scrubbed down by a gruff and rough-handed female nurse. Or maybe I doubted him because he always concluded the story with an outrageous and stilted wink.

But it now seemed like Leonhard was not just a masturbatory fantasy after all.

"I am not very romantic," Dr. Lehrer said. "But I have been working on this letter all night. Will you look at it? I've asked him to come."

I said, "I'm sure he will love it," and stood up. "I'll email you about Randy, should I?"

"Yes, yes," he said. "Sure. It will all come to good."

Randy stayed away from the Center for a few weeks, but when he finally came back, he already had a new job. It was at a call center selling death and dismemberment insurance, working the night shift from three in the morning until noon. Even though the hours were awful, and the product he was selling was not much more than a short con aimed at robbing the elderly and the stupid of their money, it

seemed like a much better fit. He said wryly that there were enough large bodied ladies there, loud voiced and sarcastic, with whom he could find common ground, including smoking weed before and during work.

"They encourage it," Randy said when I laughingly disapproved. "I think management thinks we're a bunch of rageaholics or something. But I'm still looking."

One night he came in with Jeanine and they looked over the job board together. She pointed to different postings, laughing, and he shook his head. I knew there wasn't much there: the best option was a dog walker for Dr. Lehrer's Maltese, Mira. I watched them for some moments before Jeanine turned around and noticed me behind the desk.

"See anything there?"

"You should know," Randy said.

"What's new since I last saw you?" Jeanine asked. It had only been a few hours since we had worked together at the circulation desk, sorting through the lost and found and dumping anything older than six months, including unclaimed wallets, dozens of batteries, a hypodermic needle kit, and even a bright pink pair of oversized snow pants that Jeanine had stuffed into the trash bag while retching.

"There is garbage in this pants," she had said in her best Eastern European accent, which she now repeated to me as I showed Randy an application for seasonal employment at Fundy National Park. I had been saving it for him.

"Whose babe is this?" I said while Randy read over the pamphlet.

Jeanine and I both laughed. We had become closer at work, chatting in the break room about the TV shows we liked, as young gay men and ironic middle-aged ladies are wont to do. There were even vague plans for me to come over some night and watch our shows together, but it never came about. One program we both especially liked was called *Repossessed*. Each week, the show gave a new house to a family that had undergone some horrible tragedy, like the out-of-work mechanical engineer Henry and his wife Bernice who had four foster kids, one of whom was diabetic and had just had his foot amputated. They were on their second mortgage and had black mold in their chimney. What set this particular program apart from similarly saccharine reality shows was that at the beginning of every episode the crew first pose as repo men, telling the punch-drunk family that the bank foreclosed on their house and sent this group of burly men to repossess everything inside. All of the family's possessions are then heaved out onto the lawn and hauled away in trucks, while the family is left to wail in their pajamas. The whole community is in on the dupe. Even the police department sends along a marshal in a squad car. It is only after everything has been hauled away when the host of the show appears, a white-teethed man named Monty, always in a different disguise every time. He could be a fireman, a nosy neighbour in dungarees, a clown offering to tie balloon-animals, a priest, anything, but we hated him because he was so earnest with his blond highlights, his white teeth and his inevitable tears at the end of every episode. Our favorite designer, on the other hand, was a beautiful, dark haired Croatian lady named Agata. She had a thick accent and no inclination to speak more clearly to anyone who didn't already understand her, although the producers added subtitles

when she spoke. Every episode she wore some piece of fur, ruefully explaining that it was fake "because of pruders in America," and while she was never overtly mean to the people her show was helping, she was caustic and a little rude. Best of all, she refused to hug the children, unlike all the other designers who were never seen absent a child in arms. Jeanine's and my favorite scene of the whole series came near the end of the second season, when some toddler, naked except for his loaded diaper, threw himself into Agata's arms, who said, "There is garbage in this pants. Who is this babe's parents?" I had made a video clip of the episode and we watched it on my phone, over and over again, laughing each time.

"What's so funny?" Randy asked, looking up from the pamphlet. "Is it the thought of me in dress browns?"

"Hardly," Jeanine said. "What is this?"

Randy read her the job description. The term was only four months, but the pay was decent enough to cover a year of library school, and it promised a second summer's internship in their archives. The park's director was one of Dr. Lehrer's friendly exes and so the job was pretty much guaranteed to go to Randy, who seemed to like the idea. Jeanine grabbed the pamphlet from him and read it over for herself. "This is perfect," she said. "Although I've heard their archives are kind of small."

"Dr. Lehrer told me the director is a really small man," I said. "So it fits."

"Randy?" Jeanine asked. "What do you think?"

"It sounds fine," he said, taking back the pamphlet. "Sign me up."

That night we went out for drinks to celebrate, and while Randy watched, Jeanine and I danced to Donna Summer singing "Macarthur's Park." Like most disco, the song starts out slow, and so we began in each other's arms, but as soon as the beat picked up Jeanine spun me away from her, and as she barrel rolled her arms around each other, I realized that this was the first time we had ever touched. She drew me towards her again and motioned for Randy to join us. He looked on, half-embarrassed, but before the song ended he got up and stood near us, his drink in hand, shaking his hips slightly.

About a month later, I was sitting in the break room eating when Jeanine walked in carrying her usual blue thermos lunch bag. She had just got back from her weekend visiting Randy at the Park. I was eager to hear all about it. She told me that she picked up Randy at the village-side gatehouse. Their plan was to drive through together to the rangers' station overlooking Point Wolfe and then have lunch somewhere before taking a hike. "Whose car is this?" was the first thing Randy asked after he climbed in, settling his wide-brimmed hat on his lap. It was a sleek sedan, with leather seats and satellite radio. "A rental," Jeanine said. "Gary couldn't spare our car."

"You'd think he'd want the nicer one."

Jeanine drove on, disappointed in the scenery. She thought that the park would be more rugged, that it would be more starkly obvious that they were in the middle of the wilderness. Just past the gatehouse, up the hill, was a freshly mown sloping field that dipped down into a pond that had to be manmade. There was a

even a tacky amphitheatre sat squat along its bank. Looking in her rearview mirror, Jeanine could no longer see the village of Alma, its many coloured homes nestled in the hills above the Bay of Fundy and along the coast, which had struck her as much more picturesque than this paved road bordered on each side by dull green trees. They passed by the golf course, neatly groomed, the carts lined up outside of the clubhouse.

“I was promised majesty,” Jeanine complained.

Soon Jeanine began to notice the hills in the distance, the road in front of them bisected by a river and a covered bridge. When they were children, each time they were driven through a wooden bridge like this one, their father would honk the horn and claim that the devil had loosened one of the planks. It wasn't meant to scare the children—the Kostelnicks were not religious people—but the sound had always disturbed Jeanine, as if the rotted boards would surely give way. She honked the horn as they passed through and Randy looked over and smiled benignly.

Point Wolfe's sharp cliff overlooks a stony beach completely submerged beneath the Bay at full tide, and when the tide is out, cut through with small but swift rivers that drain into the sea. There are wooden steps that angle down the long, slippery trail from the gatehouse at the top to the beach below, and parties of visitors are warned, when it is wet not to attempt the trail if they have children or the elderly with them. And it is nearly always wet, at the beach, bordered on all sides by steep rocks, acting as what's colloquially known as a fog bowl. Only on a

few days in high summer can a person put a quarter into the binoculars at the lookout and expect to see far out into the bay.

"Pointe Wolf really has the best view in the whole park," Randy said as they pulled up to a small A-frame building that served as the interpretation center. It was set precariously near the edge of the eroded cliff face. In fact, the deck attached to the back hung out over the air and had a big sign over it that said "Keep Off."

Just inside the house was information desk with no one behind it. "Huh," Randy said. "I wonder where Rita went." He rang the bell a few times. "I really want you to meet her. She's a real hoot." Jeanine felt a little embarrassed standing with her purse in her hands, waiting for a stranger, and even more so as Randy left her at the entrance while he poked through all of the rooms. "I guess she's on her lunch," he said, his assertion soon belied by the simmering pot of seafood chowder they found left on top of the small stove in the kitchenette. "You hungry?" he asked. Jeanine wasn't, but it smelt good and Randy looked at her so expectantly, that she couldn't say no.

"Is it ok to eat this?" Jeanine asked as Randy ladled the soup into two wooden bowls.

"Oh yeah, it's for everyone," he said.

They sat down to eat. The soup was hot, full of scallops, shrimp, and some sort of white fish that Jeanine couldn't identify, and even large chunks of lobster, the broth containing an unexpected hint of turmeric.

**"You're going to spoil my appetite," Jeanine said between mouthfuls. "Don't think you're getting out of taking me out for lobster tonight. I've been literally dreaming about cracking the shells."**

**When they were finished, Randy collected Jeanine's bowl and placed it within his. "We do our own dishes," he said. They set about it right away, Jeanine washing and Randy taking up the drying towel, since he knew where all of the dishes went.**

**Jeanine had just finished emptying the sink of water when they heard the front door open and a frantic woman calling, "Randy? Randy?"**

**"In here, Rita." Rita ran into the room, clutching her side and breathing heavily. She held her walkie-talkie prone.**

**She was a big woman, her long grey hair braided and then tied up into a bun that sat atop her head. Randy had warned Jeanine that Rita was a bit of a ridiculous figure around the park, believing in brownies, tree sprites and other fairies, even leaving them torn off pieces of bread soaked in bowls of milk. "Squirrel food," Randy had said.**

**"Oh good, I found you," she said. "We need all hands on deck."**

**"What happened?"**

**Someone's child had gone missing, Rita reported. A little boy, from an Acadian family. The mother was supposed to be in shambles, screeching at the park rangers, and the father had already threatened to sue. All of this told in the burst of a single breath. Where was he lost? The Dixon Falls trail, Rita said. Or was it Laverty Falls?**

Randy looked at Jeanine as if to say, *This lady, let me tell you.* "Oh, god," Jeanine said. "I can't even imagine."

Randy walked towards Rita who was motioning him forward and already had his hat, which he had hung on the coat rack near the door, in her hands.

"Of course," Jeanine said. "You go."

"You'll be fine?"

"Sure." Randy looked at Jeanine with concern, but without any sense of apology that their evening plans might be interrupted. "Hopefully it won't take too long," he said.

"Oh no, don't worry about me," Jeanine said. "I just hope you find the boy."

As they were rushing out of the door, she said, "I'll just amuse myself around the village." There was a little shop in Alma, next to the dock, that sold hand-knitted sweaters. That morning she had promised herself that she would only window shop. But now she had the feeling that she might buy.

She closed the door of the interpretation center behind her and made sure it was locked before turning down the mulched path to the parking lot. There were clouds in the sky and the air moist with fog.

As she climbed into her car, Jeanine had the sudden sense that she wasn't overly worried about the lost boy, or about Randy out there looking for him. The whole situation had startled her at first and she couldn't help but feel pity for the boy's poor mother, but it occurred to her that whole situation seemed perfectly usual, everything from the way Rita rushed in to cabin full of alarm, to the fact that it was a boy missing and not a little girl, to the way Randy had leapt out of his chair

and cancelled their plans with a note of both excitement and regret in his voice. Now when she thought of the boy's mother, and what must have been her blind panic at having discovered that her son was lost, it all seemed like a matter of course that a mother, camping at a National Park, would lose her child. She thought that she would have the same reaction if she had arrived at a public beach where no one was swimming because the day before someone's child had been swept out to sea by the undertow or some woman's husband had suffered a heart attack while snorkeling and drowned.

She drove back the way she came, across the covered bridge again and down towards the village. The greenery seemed the same, dull and thick, but about halfway down the hill she noticed a lookout that she had missed on her way up the hill. Its view was unremarkable, especially in the fog, except for the minivan parked at an awkward angle next to the picnic table. She should probably tell them to be on the lookout for a child, she thought. You never know who might find him. So she parked next to the van and rolled down her driver side window. She could tell that there were two people up front and what she thought were two squirming children in the back.

She called out, "Excuse me!" and when they didn't hear her she got out of the car and went up to their window and knocked.

"Excuse me," she said. The driver rolled down his window. She could tell from the way the man stared back at her that English was not his first language.

"Excuse me," she repeated. "But I just wanted to let you know there is a child missing in the park, just in case you see anything."

**"Your child is missing?" he said in a Quebecois accent.**

**"No, no, a child. A child. Not mine."**

**"Would you like a drive?" the man asked, his voice full of confused concern.**

**His wife was leaning over the dash, straining to hear and imploring Jeanine with her hands to get in the car. They both had grey hair and lines across the faces, too old to be parents of small children. What Jeanine had thought were children in the backseat turned out to be rolled up sleeping bags and some walking poles.**

**"Oh, no thank you," she said, and got back into the car.**

**She arrived back at her hotel room just as it began to rain. She still had a few hours before her dinner reservation, so she decided to take a nap. She had a long dream about Randy wandering in the dark woods, coming upon the lost boy in a bear's cave. At the sight of Randy, the mother bear reared up on her haunches and melded into herself and then she woke up. It was nearly five p.m. and they were supposed to have dinner at six. Jeanine checked her phone and there were no messages waiting for her, nothing from Randy saying that the boy had been found, or that he would not be making dinner. When six o'clock rolled around and there was still no message, Jeanine threw her lace shawl over her shoulders and went to the restaurant by herself.**

**"Did you hear anything about the lost boy? Did they find him?" she asked her waitress, but she hadn't even heard that there was a boy missing.**

**"We don't really follow park business," she said.**

**It was nearly nine o'clock when Randy finally called to say that the boy had been found safe. He was exhausted, Randy said, but everyone was relieved and that**

he was looking forward to bed. Jeanine had had a half-liter of red wine with dinner, and so she was pretty tired herself.

They met for breakfast the next morning at the small dinner attached to Jeanine's motel. It had stopped raining but was still foggy and grey, everything wet. The tide was way out, the fishing boats lined up along the quay resting on the muddy sea floor. Randy had all of the details ready as they sat down. Apparently the boy had seen a raccoon just off the trail and ran off to feed it his sandwich. His parents had been too busy identifying plants along the trail to notice, and by the time they turned around, little Claude was gone. He had spent a few hours wandering the woods, shouting for his parents and convinced that he would be eaten by a bear, but eventually he found the road and knew enough to walk down the hill.

"That's lucky," Jeanine said. "Who found him?"

"Well, I did," Randy said.

Jeanine's face burst open into a smile, but before she could say anything, Randy added, "I was actually just driving back to my cabin. They sent nearly everyone home because it was so dark out. It was a fluke."

"Still though," she said, "You found him. You're a hero."

"I nearly ran him over."

Randy had had to swerve to miss what he thought was a fawn, but in fact was the boy. He had then driven him down to the main ranger office and delivered him to his wailing parents. There was a big scene, everyone congratulating Randy.

Claude's parents tried to offer him a monetary reward, which he had awkwardly waved off.

"You must have felt so proud," Jeanine said.

"Not really," Randy said. "He was just there. On the road, right in the middle, almost as if he was waiting for a ride. It really was nothing."

"But his parents must have been happy."

"Oh, sure. They were crying. Someone had to fetch the mother's smelling salts."

"Really?"

"No. I was just kidding. She was relieved, though."

"Well," Jeanine said. "At least let me buy you breakfast." When they had finished, Jeanine stood up, hugged her brother, paid and drove home back to Fredericton.

Soon after Jeanine died, I was invited by Dr. Lehrer to a Halloween party at his house. The party was meant to welcome Leonhard, who had just arrived from Germany and was planning on staying for the foreseeable future. They were both waiting at the door, greeting guests, dressed as they might have been when they first met as patient and orderly. Dr. Lehrer was in nothing but a robe, seated in an antique wheelchair, and Leonhard stood with his hand on Dr. Lehrer's shoulder, in a uniform of loose-fitting monochromatic grey scrubs, a stethoscope looped around his neck.

I had just come from Jeanine's memorial at work and so I hadn't had time to put on a costume. If asked, I was simply going to say that I was dressed as a librarian. I had taken the tin of uneaten bran muffins leftover from the memorial and as I came through the door I offered it to the couple as a housewarming gift. Leonhard took it from me and held out his hand. He seemed only a little older than Dr. Lehrer, his hair white, but still tinged with blonde and he had a broad smile. He was a handsome man.

We made small talk by the door. I wanted to take Dr. Lehrer aside and tell him about Jeanine and Randy, but as the door opened behind me and another two men stepped in shouting greetings, I remembered that Dr. Lehrer didn't really know Jeanine and that he hadn't asked me about Randy since he got him the job at the Park, not even to check up. So I walked through to the living room, poured myself a glass of punch, and sat down on one of Dr. Lehrer's hard backed, embroidered chairs. Leonhard soon wheeled Dr. Lehrer in, laughing, and then he leaned down and kissed Dr. Lehrer, quickly, on the lips. They smiled at each other conspiratorially, as if they had known, ever since those few days decades ago, that their first meeting would lead to this one and that they had known it all along, known each other.

I want to know where Randy is, right now. What he is doing, who he is with. We spoke on the phone once after the funeral, and he said he could only talk for a few minutes because he had a whole cord of wood to chop through. He told me that he

was planning on staying on for the winter as the off-season caretaker, living in the cabin near the golf course.

In the spring I called again, and a polite lady on the other end told me he had left without letting anyone know where he was going. Which means that Randy must have skipped out on library school. Or maybe he just waited for the next semester to start and chose a school outside of the Maritimes. Either way, he is gone and I wonder about him sometimes. The last image I have of him, sturdy and full of brawn and wielding an axe, bringing it down against a thick piece of wood, is somehow unsatisfying. But then again, is it not proper that he is able to bring himself some comfort by the work of his own hands?

## Clock the Tea

Drake danced most nights at *The Lonelyhearts*. The club itself had all the ambiance of a steaming hot cup of urine, but in a city of winter like ours, one takes what one gets. The patrons possessed a similar charm. Grizzled hardly begins to describe the majority of the men trolling the back room. Drake, however, irradiated our dank hole. Yes, at the tender age of twenty-nine, he lit all our sad, little hearts with a golden shower of sex. His abs were taut; his jaw, chiseled; his teeth gleamed like reams and reams of pearls; and I, like everyone else, was in love with him. Or I was jealous of his spit curl, I can't remember which. It's been so long. Either way, Drake loved to show off, and from my dark, dingy corner of the club I would watch him gyrate about, sometimes in the Go-Go cage, sometimes on the dance floor with the luckiest queen of the night. I was still new in town, and hadn't yet slept with everyone, so imagine my delight when he asked me to dance. I'll never forget with what kindness he offered me the first snort of his popper, or with what gentlemanly

grace he grabbed my crotch and pulled me onto the dance floor. Never you mind that his eyes were stuck in the back of his head. Ignore it. Horse tranquilizers will do that to a girl. We've all been there. Dopamines aside though, for one night only I no longer had to pine after Drake from afar. I became the chosen. An acolyte initiated into his service.

Everyone at *The Lonelyhearts* worshipped Drake. Mostly on our knees. Oh he was the epitome of manliness. Except I have to confess, he had one fault. His beauty, though effervescent and angelically effulgent, was flawed. Now I hate to say this word aloud, so you will just have to imagine me whispering this horrible defect into your ear. *His nipples ... protruded.* The tips of his ... *nipples ...* were shaped most unfortunately like cylinders rather than spheres. What I'm trying to say is that they stuck out too far. They looked like tiny tins of Tab. The poor thing couldn't wear anything lighter than leather without letting the girls out. It was obscene. Certainly not appetizing taken on their own, no. But then again, no one seemed to mind his nipples when his eight inch cock was pulverizing their cylindrically shaped anus.

Oh as much as I might desire it, might crave it, I will never know that joy. Because he died. Hit by a car right in front of my eyes. I was the only one who saw it coming. From the sidewalk I shrieked and shrieked at him to look out for the swerving minivan, but he couldn't hear me. I've always told people that listening to their iPods on the street is ever so dangerous. And yet he seemed so happy right before the end, his eyes closed and head bobbing, without a care in the world. I imagine him listening to something cut with a steamy Latin beat, or an audiobook written but not read by the Dalai Lama. Something fulfilling and meaningful,

something to get lost in. Of course if he had been paying more attention he probably wouldn't have been hit by the van. Did I mention that even in death he was beautiful?

When the minivan struck him he arced through the air as gracefully as a swan. (The woman driver survived. Driving under the influence, wouldn't you know. Wacked out on ludes, no less. Typical. Or was that me?) I fluttered over to his crumpled body, and wrapped Drake in the pashmina I had been wearing everywhere that season. It was sky blue, made of the softest wool. Of course it was ruined. Nothing gets blood out. And now that I think about it, I nearly lost my Farah Fawcett wig as well while sobbing over his broken body. But thankfully I was able to dye it, shear it down into a cute, hip bob, and tell everyone it was a Gillian Anderson. I didn't mind the loss of the pashmina. When I wrapped Drake in my shawl, he looked so innocent in the blue, so much like a bloody Virgin Mary, that I started to count my rosaries. But the paramedics arrived before I could say even one Our Father and the moment was ruined. Drake was pronounced dead at the scene.

Life at *The Lonelyhearts* was never quite the same after Drake's tragic demise. People still danced, snorted, and fucked away, but they had a lot less fun doing it. The club now reeked of *ennui*. Luckily it closed down two weeks later after the bartenders were caught serving ice cubes made of frozen semen to an undercover policeman. I don't mind a little jizz in my margarita (it adds that needed saltiness) but the officer seemed to think it unsanitary, and that tyrannical Department of Health and Safety agreed. So we had to find a new place to dance. But as my mama always says, when God shuts a door, he opens up a window. And so no one was

surprised when *The Cat's Meow* soon opened down the street, offering drag bingo on Wednesday nights and half-price buffalo wings on Thursday. Twenty flavours. Naturally we forgot about Drake rather quickly.

That is, until his mother made her own dramatic entrance at the club a few weeks after the funeral. She looked, in no uncertain terms, a *hot mess*. I'll admit that in the past I have been known to maybe, perhaps, display the slightest error in judgment on matters sartorial. (I'm convinced that fur on pleather makes just the right statement on our consumer, capitalist culture, but no one seems to agree.) And I'll allow her a certain grace for having just buried her gorgeous son. The loss must have been immense. Enough grief to satisfy twenty withered Sicilian widows pounding on twenty caskets. Even so, the girl looked frumpy. Nobody had the heart to tell her that her crusty floral frock stained with what I hoped was gravy looked like wallpaper. Worst of all, her hair clumped together in the slickest strands I've ever seen. I was convinced someone would promptly escort her out back and offer to make her over (that's what we gays do best, right?) and maybe massage her scalp a bit, give her a fashionable up-do. Women love a little pampering, I'm told. But I was the only one in the whole club who seemed to notice her, and with only dry conditioner on hand I could only draw the poor woman into my booth.

She became quite the fixture at *The Cat's Meow*. It was about this time that I renamed her Marguerite St. Pierre. Her old moniker, Maria, or something like that, seemed far too virginal a name for a woman who I was sure had had a torrid past. Who's ever heard of a Maria wasting away under the burden of her own self-

loathing? Not me. But a Marguerite, especially a Marguerite St. Pierre, well you know she's harboring a dark secret or two.

Marguerite was beautiful, from the right angles. She had a heart shaped face, and a rosy complexion, but her jaw line was so severe, she had the unfortunate appearance, in profile, of an Easter Islander. But from the front, she was gorgeous. She had perfectly almond eyes, bright green, and a rhinoplast's dream of a nose. Her hair had been red when she was a girl, but since the age of thirty-two (not even a year after the birth of Drake, imagine that) she had been totally gray, but it was too her advantage. Always thick and shiny, it fell in loose ringlets which she usually tied in a low ponytail, always, after she met me, with a bright red crushed velvet bow. The gray of her only made her seem sophisticated, and, oddly enough, lent her a youthful glow.

We had our first argument on St. Swithin's Day. We spent hours discussing, sometimes heatedly, her age. She kept pointing to her hair, saying, "Look! Look!" I did look, but couldn't believe that a woman with such vitality was post-menopausal. "It doesn't mean anything, darling," I said, "when your hair doesn't match your *esprit du corps*." We went at it for over an hour, playfully at first, ordering vodka gimlet after vodka gimlet, she pointing to one "Look at these crow's feet!" and I'd counter with, "But the skin on your elbows! Smooth as a baby's bottom!" We only stopped when, after our fifth vodka gimlet, she shouted out, "I have a full grown son!" and she started to sob again. I conceded that yes, having full grown children lends a woman an aged mystique.

It was a Friday night and the place was packed with the usual crowd of colourful queens. Chandelier, the owner, was debuting a crystal-embossed bustier so tight it wouldn't have fit a Chinese figure skater. Everyone was fawning over it, even Gerard, the accountant who usually only goes for men who liked to camp in the woods. I was telling Marguerite how much I loved the new stools Chandelier had just installed on my recommendation. They were teak and upholstered in smooth leather, and had a little bit of a back for support. Marguerite couldn't tell if she liked the extra cushioning or if she wanted the old kind, the swivel seat tacked onto a tall chrome column bolted to the floor. "Every time I sit on a stool," she said, "I like to think I'm at a malt shop or a soda fountain—"

She was interrupted by the arrival of two men, looking completely lost and so fat I had to wonder how many pins it would take to fit them a dress. Not that they were at all stylish. In the crowd around the coat check they stood out like pimples on a hairless cat, with their starched black pants and white button down shirts tucked in at the waist, and each wore a black clip on tie. One had a beard to stir pot of soup. The other was thankfully clean shaven, but still wore a baseball cap down over his eyes.

I'm not one to pass judgment on people based solely on their looks. We are, after all, all God's children, each beautiful in his or her own way. I truly believe this. But these two uggos needed to be told. So I called out, "If you're looking for Bingo, it starts in about an hour. But I should warn you, first prize is a manicure from me, so you should probably just mozy on down to St. Mary's." St. Mary's was the reservation down the river. Games were held every night at the bingo hall there,

even Sundays, the numbers called out by Big Mike, who, in commercials shown on public access, entices his customers by fanning his four-hundred pound frame with thousand dollar Wills and promises of cheap cigarettes. Big Mike's game would have been a better match for these two wide loads, at least aesthetically speaking. I was just being helpful.

They didn't move, so I cupped my hands around my mouth and said, "There's no way I'm going near those ham hocks, so you might as well move on." The two men just stood there looking around, completely ignoring us. And then the one with the beard tapped the other on the arm and leaned in to whisper something. The other one nodded and said something back. "Excuse me, gentlemen!" I was now yelling, because they were still pretending as if I didn't exist. "But we don't serve you kind here."

Marguerite had been watching them along with me. Each time I spoke she pinched me. "Oh, be nice," she said to me. "We shouldn't discriminate based solely on beard length. They're just a couple of confused bears." She swiveled in her stool to face them and shouted over the music, "Ignore him. He really is harmless. Come have a drink." And to me, "Honey, pop the cork."

"I will not," I said as the men walked up to the bar. "For all we know, they're Mormon missionaries. Look at their little ties, and that champagne was supposed to be for us."

Marguerite whispered, "Fine" harsh enough to hurt my feelings, before turning to the men. "Banana daiquiris, on the house? Don't worry, we know the owner." She waved to catch Chandelier's eye, who was over at the far end of the bar

redrawing her eyebrows. She was deep in conversation with herself and wouldn't be disturbed. Marguerite, never one to be ignored, hopped over the bar, intent on mixing the drinks herself. Well, she nearly fell when she landed on the other side; she was already three martinis deep and wearing six-inch heels. The man in the ball cap, in an act of gentlemanliness unsuitable to his girth, lunged over the bar and tried to steady her. He missed, but she was fine anyway. She's got the blood of lynx, my Marguerite. The man, however, lay sprawled on top of the bar, completely winded, even wheezing a little, and his hat had fallen off. The bearded man helped him to his feet, and as he tried to catch his breath, Marguerite got the full view of his face for the first time. "Oh, honey," she said.

He was still wheezing. "What?"

"We don't serve your kind here."

By then Chandelier had noticed Marguerite on the wrong side of the bar and came running over. "What are you doing, sweetie, we talked about this." She looked over at the men. "She hasn't promised you free drinks has she?"

"Two Moose Greens, please," the man said still watching Marguerite.

"Six dollars," Chandelier said firmly. He handed her three toonies and took his friend by the shoulder and they disappeared onto the dance floor.

"Who are they?" Chandelier asked. "Haven't they heard of tipping?"

"None of your business," Marguerite said and Chandelier swept away in a huff. When she had left, Marguerite said, "I want to tell you something." She was staring straight ahead at the drinks board and all of her usual playfulness was gone

from her voice. She spoke straight ahead, without drawling her vowels, without *emphasizing* for effect.

"What is it?"

"Something I haven't told anyone. About Drake and one of those men."

"Ooh I just knew they were bad news," I said. "Did you see that one man's beard? I wouldn't be surprised if he had a warren full of rabbits nested up in there. It was so long. Do you think they were together? They seemed awfully close, more like brothers than lovers. Like they've known each other for a long time and so don't need a lot of words in to communicate. Just grunts. Or kissing cousins, maybe."

She said, "The one in the ball cap, his name is Fred. He knew Drake."

"Biblically?" I asked. "I'm warning you, sweetie, if it's juicy, of a salacious nature, I might not be able to resist telling everyone you know."

"No you won't, Peaches. You're my best and my truest friend and you won't tell a soul."

Well, here it is, God (and Marguerite) forgive me.

"My boy," she said, fanning herself and spilling her drink all over the floor, "was ..." She paused, searching for the right word. "Well, he sold himself ... to older men. Right under my nose. I promise, I didn't know anything about it at all. I swear."

Yes, Drake, her darling boy, the true apple of her eye, was almost a common whore. In fact, by the age of fourteen he had a client list of more than twenty men. He kept the names and phone numbers in a leather bound black journal Marguerite found one day while doing the laundry. Next to the names of his best tippers, he had put a gold star. Next to Fred's name, there had been seven.

Well, what was I to do with that little nugget of information? For the first time in my life, I was silenced. I had nothing to say, no repartee, no aphoristic flourish, only shock. And a little bit of horror. Marguerite ran off and I ordered twelve more drinks, and collapsed into my liquor. When I arose, I asked Chandelier if she had seen Marguerite, and she told me that Marguerite had been dancing with a man in khaki shorts and a ball cap. Well, I flew into a panic. I didn't know what to do. I ran all over the bar shouting her name, but she was gone.

I went outside without even stopping for my stoat. She was nowhere to be seen. I asked the smokers standing around outside if they had seen a woman in a frizzy orange wig run off with a fat man, but they hadn't seen anyone. It was snowing and windy, nearly 20 below. I screamed, "Marguerite! Marguerite!" over and over again until I was hoarse. And then, down the street, in a little alley out of the wind, I saw them.

Marguerite stood behind him and pushed him forward. "Honey, I've got someone I think you should meet. I've told him all about you and he's definitely interested."

"Me?" I said. Fred looked hesitant, and I was desperately confused. Marguerite kept pushing him forward, and as they came into the streetlight I could see that she had one hand in the small of his back and the other was holding our bottle of champagne. She was smiling between swigs and even offered him some. He passed it off with a wave of his hand.

"I don't do flamers," Fred said, looking me over, his eyes lingering on my white pumps and fishnet stockings. Don't worry ladies, I wasn't offended or

anything. For when he continued with, "You told me he was straight-acting—" , I interrupted him, saying, "Excuse *me*, honey" I said, pointing to his belly. "With a shelf like that, you're not going to be doing much of anyone. Unless you got a nine foot pri—" and Marguerite brought the champagne bottle down on his head. He grunted and didn't fall at first so she hit him again and the bottle shattered over his skull.

"Oh God, Marguerite, I think he's dead," I said, sidling up to his body. "Help me cover him with trash. We'll drag him over near the dumpster, they'll think his friend did it, lover's quarrel. Oh no, wait, he's still breathing. Here, let's drag him further into the alley. Help me, sweetie." He must have weighed a metric ton. I was lifting from the knees, my arms under his, lugging and tugging with all of my might, and the fat bastard just wouldn't budge. "Oh, we're going to need a back hoe to lift this leviathan! Sweetie, help me!"

Marguerite was still standing up against the alley wall. She hadn't moved or said anything, she just watched me struggle Well, I had had enough. I dropped Fred to the ground, his head clunking against the pavement, and went up to Marguerite and slapped her across the face.

"Quick," Marguerite said, stepping out of her shoes. "Rip my shirt open." She spoke so forcefully I did exactly as I was told without question. "And hit me again, with your fist this time," she said. Her lip split right open, blood leaking out. She wiped her hand over her mouth and streaked the blood around her face. "Again," she said. She had me clock her right in the mouth one more time and then she lay down on the ground. "My shirt," she said. "More." I ripped the collar clean off and

popped a few buttons. "And my bra," she said.

"Tit out?" I asked.

"Please. Now scream."

I've never been shriller. I screamed and I screamed until the whole bar came running out. Chandelier was holding a bat in one hand and her cell phone in the other. Gerard had lost his shirt. In fact, a whole gaggle of shivering men stood around us, just watching. Chandelier was already talking to the police on the phone, but I shrieked "Someone call the police!" anyway. "Marguerite's been attacked! By him!" I pointed to Fred lying on the ground. He was just coming back to consciousness. He looked like a baby seal, curled up on the ground. I could hear him groaning, he flopped his head around and tried to get his arms underneath him, and Gerard, the gallant hero, leapt over to him and held his hands behind his back until the police car pulled up. The lady officer took my statement, which I reproduce faithfully:

"I had a full-scale panic attack when I found out Marguerite had left the bar, I couldn't breathe. Ask Chandelier, I was so *worried* for my Marguerite. She has such awful luck with men, you know. *Always* picks the losers. No job, no manners, one of her men spit right in my eye once, it was red for days, it could have been infected. I was meaning to ask someone if that counts as assault, but maybe we should talk about *that* later. She met this little skag *online* if you can believe it. I didn't like him from word go—he mentioned his mother three times in his first message.

"But she kept talking to him against my better judgment, she said he was kind and had nice penmanship. How she could tell if he had nice penmanship over email

is what I want to know. You'll have to ask her once she's composed herself, I'm sure she'll explain everything. All I know is that I ran out here and heard them struggling out in this alley. He had Marguerite up against that wall there, and he was saying, "I'm going to fuck this bitch! I'm going to rip your pussy to shreds!" or words to that effect, grossly inhuman, nothing for a lady's ears. Well, I had to do something. So I bopped him on the head with this champagne bottle and he fell over. Plop, right on the skull, and I'm not the least bit sorry. I'm not exactly sure how he got all those cuts on his face, I don't recall the bottle breaking, but you'll have to forgive me, so much was happening at once. And you'll probably find some slight bruising of his right ribs, Marguerite did get a few kicks in afterwards, but surely you can't blame her, can you? After what he tried to do to her?"

The lady officer believed my story, of course, and so she stuffed Fred into the back of the police car and asked me if I thought that I'd be able to get Marguerite home on my own. The paramedics had wrapped her up in a grey wool blanket and she was sitting on the steps up to *The Cat's Meow*, smoking and looking statuesque and despondent. "Oh, I'm sure I'll manage," I said and she gave me her card in case I had anything else to add to my report. As soon as she had pulled away, lights blaring, Marguerite threw off the blanket and stomped out her cigarette, laughing uproariously. We walked arm in arm up to the patio, where someone had abandoned a pitcher half-full of beer and two empty glasses.

"It's our lucky night!" Marguerite cried, pouring us both a drink.

"There's nothing better than beer after a bar fight," I said.

She agreed and gulped down her drink. She had another, and when Chandelier came out to tell us she was closing up, Marguerite said she wouldn't leave until she'd had a whiskey sour. "Extra sour," I said.

"Then you better come in," Chandelier said and we did. Marguerite and I resumed our stools and I switched my order to a White Lady. It was as if nothing had happened. We gabbed, I fawned over Marguerite's rings.

A little after four she told us that we could stay as long as we paid, scout's honour, for everything we drank and didn't break anything. We stayed until dawn. At first Marguerite was as happy as she had ever been, recounting over and over how she had clobbered, her word, Fred's head with the champagne bottle. "His round, ugly head, like a macaque!" she wailed, "A champagne bottle!" holding it above her head like a trophy. She brought it down to her lips and threw back her head for a drink, but it was empty.

"That prick who put his prick in my son's..." She broke off and began to sob, clambering at my suit jacket for my pocket square. But the damn thing was sewn in. She pulled at it, crying in frustration.

For the next few days, she mopped around the house, chain-smoking and coming into my room late at night to discuss Fred. Of course, since he hadn't really hurt her, the charges weren't too severe and he was able to get out on bail the next day. Marguerite learned this when she called in to check up on him in the morning. I heard her scream into the phone, "But I am pressing charges!" Whoever was on the other end of the line hung up.

It was then when I realized that Marguerite needed a distraction, so I encouraged her to try hooking.

Rug hooking, that is. Don't you think that there is the most precious penitential mystique surrounding all of the weaving crafts?

Imagine, for a moment, a sad and forlorn woman pedaling alone at her loom, the fanciful and brightly coloured patterns emerging *only* in the reflected image of the mirror. Sad! Black-haired knights pass below her window, greeting the peasants in manly voices, blissfully unaware of the lily-skinned lady pining away for him, down to fuck. Melancholic! The weaver catches a glimpse of her own teary eyes in the her mirror just often enough to remind herself of the depth of her melancholy. Perfect! Of course, Marguerite didn't have a loom. I'm not even sure what kinds of materials a girl might need to start rug hooking. Thread? Hooks? Who knows. And Marguerite never found out either, because she only went to the first class. After she came home with Eddie, she was interested in a different kind of project.

I can't say that I was surprised when she waltzed through the doors with a strange man in a ripped parka. She had the worst habit, especially when depressed, of bringing back homeless boys, feeding them soup with crackers, and then sending them back out into the night. A charitable gesture for which no one, especially me, would dare fault her. She was, after all, still in mourning for her son.

Eddie would never have rivaled Drake in beauty. His face had the texture of sandpaper, and he had a slight pot-belly. But he had Drake's broad shoulders and Drake's long torso. He wore a ball cap supporting the Calgary Flames, which I'm told was some sort of ice hockey squadron, worn low over his eyes.

“Marguerite, honey, who’s your friend?” I asked, and she answered simply, “Eddie.” I assumed from his name that he was some sort of trick after us for drugs. You can always tell a trick by his name because you’d never catch an Edward, Kenneth, or Daniel in some back-alley sucking dick after dark, would you? But Eddie, Kenny, Danny, are dime a dozen out there, and just as cheap.

I asked him, in the tone of a protective father, just what his intentions were for *mon petit chou*. Marguerite leapt to his defense. “He’s the worst kind of alcoholic,” she said, even though he was still standing sheepishly by her side. “Eddie takes the free classes at the Y whenever they’re offered just so he can stay out of the bars. And we’re going to help him.”

Unconvinced, I asked him to sit down next to me on the couch while Marguerite busied herself in the kitchen making tea. I gave him a good, long sniff. He reeked like a quart of whisky, sure, but I couldn’t detect a whiff of self-loathing about him. The jig was up. After only the lightest of interrogation he readily admitted that he wasn’t in AA at all. He was just into mothers.

“Marguerite?” I asked doubtfully, and he added, “The grannier the better.”

I kept mum while Marguerite fed him, and even stayed quiet while she extracted a promise from him that he would head straight home and call her immediately if he felt any urge to drink at all.

After he was gone, stopping at the door for a quick kiss (he aimed for the lips but got only the cheek), I told her the dirty on her new beau. To my surprise, she said, “I already knew *that*. The whole cab ride home, he kept massaging the small of my back, asking me how many kids I have, how many grandchildren. Can you

believe it? I lied and said two each!" Marguerite picked her purse up off the floor and began rooting through its contents.

"I'm glad you made a friend, sweetie," I said. "But do tell, how exactly are we going to help this hapless mother lover?"

"Oh we're not going to help him at all. He's going to help us." Marguerite pulled out a digital camera from her purse. "I stole it," she said. "Last week at Futureshop. The poor boy helping me left the key in the display case when I sent him off for some tissues for my purse."

Marguerite shifted closer to me on the couch, leaned the camera towards me, and pressed play. The shot was dark. On screen two formless blobs fumbled over each other, one nuzzled in the nape of the other's neck. But I could hear Eddie panting plain enough, his heavy breathing almost sweet in its tenderness:

*I want you bad baby, Eddie huffed. What's your name? No, don't tell me.*

*Marguerite.*

*I want you bad Marguerite.*

*How bad?*

*I wanna be jaw deep in your pussy baby.*

"Pardon the interruption, darling," I said, reaching over to tap the pause button. "Just how deep is jaw deep, anyway?" Marguerite only hushed me, and started the playback again.

*Yeah? You wanna be jaw deep?*

*Yeah, I wanna be jaw deep.*

*And I want you to be jaw deep honey, but you gotta tell me, baby, once your down there how'm I supposed to know you've got the skills to drive me over the cliff?*

*I'm like Jacques Cousteau baby. Once I take the plunge, you're pussy's mapped out for life.*

*Yeah? I've got miles of uncharted territory down there, honey, but you gotta prove you're worth it before I let you try on the wetsuit.*

*Oh no, sweetie, she said, her voice now stern and inflexible. You're gonna have to do better than that.*

The next evening Marguerite met Eddie at the door to our apartment while I, like a maid in an opera, hid in the linen closet, watching and listening through the slits in the door. I had the camera out, recording everything as she welcomed him with a big, smacking kiss and led him back through the living area. "You actually came!" she sang, the coy minx. He had already emailed her twice that day to say that he was masturbating to her in the tight red dress she was wearing the night they met.

"I'm so relieved you're here!" she said. "Oh, let me take your coat!" She led him by the hand over to the loveseat and zippered down his jacket. He slipped out of it like an eel, not saying anything, but trembling a little. Marguerite could barely keep her composure when she saw what he was wearing underneath it. I had to stifle a gasp myself. Get this: he was wearing a faded red sweatshirt, washed so often that it had turned a dull pink, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. I imagine that he got it riffling through bins at a second hand store. His arm hair was long and dark, too. And oh he had on carpenter jeans, the cuffs trampled to shreds by his work

boots. He took off his cap, and underneath it, widow's peaks past his ears! We couldn't have outfitted him better if we had a whole costume department working underneath us. He was the Working Man, par excellence, our perfect subject.

He didn't seem to know whether or not he wanted to touch her, so Marguerite took his hands and placed them on her waist. Then in an instant, he ten grew confident and swooped in to say hello with a kiss..

"Oh," she said, sidestepping his lips and holding up his jacket. "Let me hang this up. Then we'll get right to the business." Assuming correctly that he wouldn't know the difference between a linen closet and any other type of closet, she folded open the door and stuffed the jacket on the shelf above me. I clicked my tongue three times, to lend her moral courage.

"What was that?" Eddie asked.

"Just the house settling," she said, turning back to him. "Hungry?"

She came back with the tray of food I had prepared earlier, nothing more than a few pieces of *amuse bouche*, really, bruschetta with crumbled goat cheese, doused in olive oil and some crab cakes.

She held the tray in front of him. "What stinks?" he asked, laughing at himself as he picked up a piece of brushetta and sniffed it.

"That would be the goat cheese," Marguerite said, and he took it in one bite. She looked over to the closet, where I'm sure she thought I was sitting fuming mad, my cooking being famous far and wide for its delectability. But I was bent on holding the camera steady. There would be no time for reshoots.

“Not bad,” he said. He reached for another, but Marguerite took the tray and set it on the little table at the opposite end of the couch.

We had been watching a lot of amateur porn in preparation for Eddie’s shoot. Most of it was the work of vain men who couldn’t decide whether they want to show off their pretty conquest or themselves, and by that I mean their butts. One video we saw proudly proclaimed it’s title to be “Fucking my best friend’s girl,” but all we, the audience, were treated to was a white, saggy ass rising up and down, the girl’s smothered (and exaggerated, to my hear) moans escaping from behind the lumbering man.

“Unsexy,” Marguerite had said, covering her eyes.

I agreed. “There’s something haunting about a man looming over top of you like that.”

There was one video of a man we both especially liked, a man who kept flipping the camera around and pointing it at his face, talking to us. “You want me to fuck her a little harder?” he asked, as if we were sitting in the corner of the bedroom right there with him. You could hear the woman moan, Yes, Yes, but for the most part he kept the camera on himself and continued to talk to it. “Now I’m going to flip her over and see those titties flop,” but all we saw was the heave of his chest and his white smile, which was really more of a smirk. It was like he was courting the audience, that we were in the bedroom right alongside side him, or underneath it.

We both agreed that Eddie’s soot should be kept as natural as possible, that what really was on display was his lust. We needed low lighting and grainy film. Thankfully that was all we could afford.

He sat on the love seat without even being asked, plopping himself down on top of crisp, white towel I had laid out earlier. He didn't seem to notice the towel, which I thought typical of a straight man, and even if he had, I don't think he could have guessed its purpose. I wonder what he would have done if Marguerite had told him, then and there, that the towel was meant to protect our beautiful suede couch from his skidmarks. Some advice for any budding porn producers: Amateurs lay towels, professionals douche.

Marguerite, ever the businesswoman, nevertheless had prospects for that towel. She was looking far ahead, to a future in which Eddie had a legion of fans desperate for a piece of him, clawing at our door for an autograph. She would do them one better and offer them that browned towel to some poor scatological-minded fan for thousands. She also planned to steal Eddie's underwear.

Marguerite poured him a whiskey and water; he shot it back and asked for another. She shook her head, smiling. We wanted him to be a little tipsy, enough to lose his inhibitions, but not so drunk that he wouldn't be able to perform. He thought she was being coy by refusing him a drink and so he got up and snatched the bottle from her hands and poured himself another. "It's ok, darling," he said, "'cause I'm already high. This won't do much."

I panicked and clicked my tongue again three times, but if Marguerite noticed, she didn't say or do anything except move over to the electric fireplace, smiling at him with her hands on her hips. Trying to entice him, really, swaying from side to side, a little too obviously. But Eddie was not so discerning. He leaned back on the couch, his legs wide open, watching the show. The fire was on, and so

Marguerite was lit from behind, a healthy glow that brought out her finest features: her hourglass figure, carefully trimmed with hours of leg lifts and back bends, and her grey hair, majestically monochromatic, worn loose and slightly curled. He started to rub his crotch.

He lit a cigarette, smoking it to the nub and then lit another, holding it between his fingers, which shook slightly as if he had some kind of palsy. Marguerite passed him an ashtray and sat on the arm of the couch, rubbing his shoulder with one hand while with the other she smoked a cigarette of her own. Marguerite had told me that she was going to start off slow with this man, and so she began to talk about the weather, the benefits of the unusually cold winter we were having, how there is very little slush to ruin a good boot with salt stains. but she soon she steered the conversation around to Eddie, and how he kept himself busy in the wintertime. Movies? Action, adventure, he loved Indiana Jones. Books? He read the odd Western, Louis L'Amour. "Harlequins for men," Marguerite said and laughed.

From the beginning, Marguerite wanted a man whom she might pass on the street without even noticing him. "No one of impossible beauty," was her rule of thumb, later repeated to the boys with sculpted pectorals and white teeth hoping for an audition. She wanted hairy nipples and harrier pubes; she hated a trimmed bush. She wanted dirt under the fingernails, or better yet, black thumbnails that had been caught in a doorjamb or underneath a hammer. She wanted the wiry leanness of a country boy roustabout, or barring that, the bulk of a tradesman, his hard mass of flesh just on the cusp of turning soft.

It was only after she had stripped him and sat him down on the love seat when I made my entrance, carrying the camera and the tripod. He had worked himself up to a raging semi, but when he saw me, he wilted completely.

Marguerite, who had been standing next to him, no doubt whispering little encouragements into his ear, said, "Keep going," before dashing over to where I stood and took the tripod from my arms. "Do we have a problem?" I asked. Eddie held his cock motionless in his right hand. "Give it time," she said. "It's only a little anemic." We were speaking in stage whispers, which is probably how Eddie heard us. He snapped his head around and stopped jerking. He reached for his underwear and lay it overtop his crotch, like a doily. "Who are you?" he asked. He spoke as if I was some prowler, or worse yet, a voyeur who had snuck into the apartment just to get his jollies off watching them go at it. As if .He needed to be set straight. "I, sir," I said, my hand grazing my chest, "am your future."

"My what?" He was angry and probably ready to fight. He stood up and the underwear fell off his crotch. He blushed I made eyes at it and smiled. He said, "Get out of here," and moved towards me. I growled. I'm not normally a violent person. But there was something about tousseling around on the floor with a naked man that enticed me, what can I say. I bore my claws.

"Peaches, stop." Marguerite was standing between us. "Eddie, I asked Peaches to be here."

"I just wanted a little something that I could watch back, after you've left and had forgotten all about me." She grabbed him by the shoulders and navigated him back towards the loveseat. He sat down again, still naked.

"I would never..." he began and then he remembered that I was standing there. He turned towards me. "Who are you?"

"No one," I said, although my outfit told another story. I remember I was wearing a poncho that night, military themed—a little camo never hurt anyone—to match my undercover mission in the linen closet. I had on gold boots, too, and so was clearly somebody.

"Hush up. You're frightening him," she said to me before turning to Eddie. "Darling, don't worry about it." She looked at him, right at his crotch. "I won't lie to you and say that it happens to everyone, but still, it's nothing the right kind of encouragement can't fix." She walked over to where he sat in the loveseat and crouched back onto her heels beside him. She stroked his ear. "Tell me what's wrong, what's keeping you down."

"You said this tape was for us, to watch back later."

"It *is*, sweetie." Marguerite moved her hand along his chest, down to his crotch.

"Then why is he here?" Meaning me, of course.

"Someone has got to run the camera, isn't that right?" I said. Marguerite scowled at me and stomped over.

"Don't worry about him. He's totally sexless, like an eunuch."

Through the lens I could see them both, Eddie with his eyes closed and his head back, and Marguerite sitting on her heels to his right, smiling at the camera as she jerked him off. Every now and then he let out a little grunt, "Faster, faster. Come on, jerk it," but mostly he kept quiet, his mouth open and his eyes closed.

Marguerite smiled every time he spoke and looked over at the camera to give me a little wink. She continued on for a few minutes and then the little minx began to move out of the frame, even though she was never one to give up center stage. I adjusted the lens so that the only part of Marguerite still visible in the lens was her disembodied arm. It was then when I noticed that her fingernails had been trimmed back entirely; the Cherry Bomb nail polish which I had applied so carefully for her that morning had been wiped clean off. She had even applied a light coating of mascara to her knuckle hair to make her hand seem gruffer,

With the rest of her body out of the shot, her hand was perfectly anonymous and androgynous twisting up and down that shaft. Eddie twitched and moaned, oblivious to everything else other than the hand. He came buckets.

As soon as we had finished filming, Marguerite confessed to me her desire to become an online madame, a purveyor of virtual smut. After seeing the tape for myself, I concluded that Eddie's scene could be what those in the advertizing biz term a prime selling tool.

Oh, it was a miracle!

It has been said that women are much more likely than men to suffer bouts of nervous exhaustion, but I explain Marguerite's behaviour with a searching expiation of her long love affair with guilt.

Yes, after several years of anything goes, it was as if someone had taken a hoe to her brain like a farmer to his field and scraped out a full acre of uneven rows. But instead of sowing something reliable like rutabagas, he planted wildflowers. And not

the good kind of wildflowers found peppering the ethereal meadows of a young girl's fantasies. I mean the kind of wildflowers mustached foreigners sneak in through customs undetected. The kind that strangle the native plants out of existence. Stinkblossom. Harebeard. Meadowsnatch. Pussyweed. Hardy plants that are more staunch than beautiful, much better at surviving than distinguishing themselves from weeds, just waiting to take root and bloom uncontrollably. Marguerite had finally yielded to the inevitable overgrowth, and her mind became a tangled mess of wild guilt (Dead Drake at the root of it all, no doubt.). Ever so slowly, she regressed into the Marguerite I first knew, the woman whose eyes were so baggy that all of the concealer in the world couldn't hide the sallowness, the woman who wouldn't have known which end of a two-headed dildo went into either hole. Maybe I was a bit rash in indulging her every craving, but I stand by my decisions.

The end only came after one of the new boys told Marguerite he wanted his porn name to be Drake. Marguerite couldn't handle that, no sir. She started to wail right then and there, even though the camera was still rolling. Her howls could be heard throughout the whole warehouse, through the concrete walls even. I was in the back room putting the final stitches into a pair of red velvet curtains, and when I heard her I came running, trailing fabric. Marguerite had fallen off her heels and was pounding them against the hard floor, sobbing. The scandalized boy, naked and standing over her, bolted as soon as he saw me, leaving me entirely alone to console my Marguerite.

Not that I minded. Marguerite and I were the closest of bosom buddies, more intimate than sisters, so I had absolutely no problem tying on my apron and

headscarf whenever Marguerite needed me. Only it was a shame to lose him, the Boy Who Could Have Been A Star. I can't remember what his real name was, probably something entirely banal, like Trevor, or Michael, but he really was the perfect bottom, with fawn eyes and long eyelashes, slender, milky doll hands, and thighs that could crack a nut. We had an endless supply of boys emailing us for an audition (men, really—we *did* check their IDs. We were always a legitimate operation in that respect, I promise). Enough to populate a village, or at least a small shantytown. And as much as we would have loved to film every video as a full-on, bacchanalian orgy, some needed to be culled, and that's where Marguerite shone. Marguerite's eye, you see, carried an incisive vision that cut deep down into man's soul, to expose whether he was, *at the very core of his being*, a suitable bottom. Everyone thinks they can do it, but it takes talent, a certain openness, if you will, uncommon to most men. And Marguerite had been sure that *this* boy would be *It*, the next Big Bottom. We had hopes for him. But he wanted to be called Drake. Then Marguerite couldn't see anything in him except for the svelte outline of a certain perfectly toned shade she would have liked to forget.

So the boy fled, hopping into his blue jeans without stopping to put on his underwear, and now that I think about it, without even muttering a thank you for the opportunity, or a it was pleasant meeting you, not anything. Talk about rude.

I said to Marguerite, "He just came in on a bus, honey. He didn't know. He couldn't have known. Talk to me, sweetie." She moaned.

"Someone needs to let him know he's fired," I said to the air, as if it were my secretary. "Call him up and tell him. He's fired, honey." I ripped my pocket square out of my jacket and used it as a hankie, wiping the tears from Marguerite's face

I could see she was in the mood to claw somebody so I grabbed her wrist. "You're in a delicate state, Marguerite," I said. She wrenched herself free and got up, stomping a little ways off before collapsing into the Recamier couch. We had been working on a series of films, you see, which recreated encounters between famous painters and their subjects. That boy, in a wig, was to be the perfect Madame Recamier.

I turned to Marguerite, whose hysteria had settled into the occasional blubbing, and said, "Honey, he's banned for life, from this studio, from this whole industry." She scoffed, as if to remind me and that we were in no position to set industry standards.

"What are you talking—" Marguerite began, until I put my hands over her mouth. "It's true," I said. "I'll already called everyone we know." Which was no one, really. We were it. The only game in town. Marguerite knew that. But the thought seemed to console her. She even looked at me and seemed to be smiling with her eyes. Encouraged, I made the mistake of adding, "He'll never work again. He's dead in this town."

Girls, let me tell you. A little bit of advice. If you ever find yourself confronted with a hysterically grieving mother, and you are trying your level best, your absolute darndest to comfort her, never, never, speak D-E-A-D in front of her. It will only

bring out the worst. Like low, deep moans and spastic convulsions, drool everywhere all over the upholstery of a fine antique.

I said, "You go to all the trouble, all the expense of getting these little shits here, and they don't even know the rules. The one rule. The Golden Rule!" Marguerite did nothing but gurgle up a bit of spittle. "That dumb little shit," I said and she looked up at me as if I had pinched her in the vulva. "Not Drake sweetie, that horrible boy."

After that, she wouldn't move. I had to lug Marguerite, all by myself, up the three flights of steps to our apartment. I installed her in my four-poster bed and I gave her a bowl of chicken noodle soup salted with crumbled valium. She fell asleep instantly.

I went back to the studio to collect our things and clean up a little. The broken vase was still scattered over the floor and the tulips had begun to wilt. Then I saw it, the camera on top of the tripod. It was still on. And even though it had been a few hours so that the memory card was full, I was sure that it had caught all of the drama on screen. Marguerite had only begun her interview with him when that clown decided he should be named Drake.

So I watched the tape back. You never know just where you might find a piece of art, waiting to be exposed to the world. And I was pleasantly surprised to discover that the scene could easily bring home the blue ribbon of any one of the countless queer art-house film festivals we gays love to put on. For your consideration: a beautiful boy grinning widely, his eyes only slightly crazed from the amphetamines we had fed him, thumbing his half-hard and oh so straight penis.

Then Marguerite's deep but still feminine voice, the voice of a true madam, rings out from behind the camera, asking him coyly, "My dear, the raging and horny hordes demand to know your name. How do you answer?" And when the over stimulated manchild shouts out, "DRAKE!" his grin breaks open for mere moments until he registers Marguerite's sobs. Then his innocent furrow, utterly perplexed by this unseen woman's torrent of tears, cut off by a black screen. So avant-garde. It would have been a shoo-in.

Unfortunately for me, after that episode I had little time for my own projects. I had a real mess to clean up. And not one of those fun messes that comes after a sticky shoot, but a woman distraught, hysterical even.

#### A Typical Day in the Neighbourhood: Morning

At 8 A.M. I come into her room without knocking, knowing full well that she's already propped up and sobbing over some silly romance novel. (Did she imagine Drake as the shirtless, long-haired lover? I never had the heart to ask her.) I set the tray of breakfast foods down on the mahogany end table and she places her book on the pillow beside her. I hand her my grandmother's antique comb and she begins to brush, while I saunter over to the ensuite bathroom and fill up the purple plastic washtub with hot water.

By the time I arrive back at her side, sponge in hand, her hair is tied neatly into a bun, her nighty on the floor. I scrub away the last night's dirt while humming some shanty tune. It takes about five minutes. She doesn't make a peep until I finish

washing her all over and slip a fresh nightgown over her head. Then she chirps, "All clean," like an oversized child and reaches for the breakfast tray, gulping down the chocolate milk first, the naughty girl, before finally moving on to the porridge, now cold, but still smothered in brown sugar.

### A Typical Day in the Neighbourhood: Noon

By lunchtime Marguerite transforms into a militant vegetarian demanding cucumber sandwiches heavy on the salt. Of course I indulge her. And after she's fed, I lounge patiently on the daybed in the bay window (I imagine myself in a silk kimono, but this sounds too good to be true) fanning myself, while she lectures on about the corrupt and crumbling state of the world. Soon enough she calls me over to her bedside and we watch all the new videos she has bookmarked on her laptop. Always the videophile, my Marguerite. But these little numbers, unlike our titillating productions, are not for the faint of heart. Tiny chicks dumped onto a conveyor belt, fed into a meat grinder. Rows and rows of cages stuffed with full grown hens, their beaks sawn off. And once, a spotted cow collapsed under the weight of her own distended stomach. Horrifying and grisly stuff, but she watches the videos over and over again until her rage boils over, and then she calls for a pad of paper and a pencil. The rest of the afternoon is spent writing letters to local political offices, demanding that the corporations exploiting her precious animals be made to pay for their crimes. And could I to argue with her? Someone needs to speak for the animals, and why not my Marguerite?

### A Typical Day in the Neighbourhood: Night

Marguerite writes herself out of her afternoon tizzy normally just about supper time. I carry up to her a tray of roasted meat, usually pork, but sometimes beef, along with a side of pasta in white sauce. Comfort food is what she craves then, something to remind her of her life before, when she used to have her own home. Not that she didn't have a home with me. I just mean back when she was the one who carved the roast and dished out the pasta, for her precious boy.

I clear the plates, and even though it's not yet seven o'clock, I tuck her into bed and shut off the lights. Guilt is exhausting, you know. Although I'm not sure if she always went to sleep straight away. Sometimes I'd hear soft taps and thumps coming from her room, as if she were choreographing her own Chorus Line-type requiem mass for Drake. But whatever phantasmagorias she dreamt up in the long stretch of night must have evaporated with the dawn, because by the time I came through the next morning, there she would be, reading over the same romance novels again, squawking for more chocolate milk.

Maybe it wasn't always this way. I don't want to give the impression that she was a crazy lady. The truth is, some mornings she was perfectly lucid. In fact, I remember once when, as I entered with the tray, she scrunched up her face, and grinning right at me, she said, "Does Mommy love me now?" in her deep, throaty voice, like she was old self again.

Marguerite had smeared lipstick all over the lower part of her face. I don't know where she got the tube. The specific shade was Magenta Sunrise, or maybe Harlequin's Farce. Either way, it was speckled with an orange that beautifully complimented the angles of her jaw. I laughed so hard that I nearly dropped the tray. Marguerite tapped the bed sheets alongside her and I hopped in. She nuzzled into my shoulder and asked, very softly, "What's the news? Give me the gossip."

"Eddie Rosenblatt's desperate for work. He's back from the Mirimichi and now he's hovering around the studio at all hours of the night. I went to let Trixie out last night (that's our cat), it must have been after three, and there he was, handing me a latte and asking for a meeting. Imagine, a latte! He didn't want to talk about his trip."

"But you got the story out of him, I'm sure."

"I had a pool going with me and myself, on whether he would bring back some broad or just a bag of STDs."

"Who won?" she asked.

"No one. Although he's rail thin now. Unhealthy, if you ask me,"

"Remember when we had him paired up with that sweet Michael kid, and Eddie said he wouldn't touch him with a ten foot dildo all because of a few acne scars? And the look on Michael's face."

"Crestfallen."

"Oh I could have plucked Eddie's eyes out with my fingernails."

"The best part is, he's totally broke now," I said. "I was able to get him into the sling for two hundred."

"I take comfort in the fact that I can always count on you."

I took her hand. "We're all waiting for your comeback. Your stage clothes are already cleaned and pressed."

She sat up again and rubbed her legs. "All this bed rest is doing nothing for my thighs," she said. "Atrophy, you know." For an instant I thought she was going to pull herself out of bed. Her thighs were her best asset, after all. "Tell Eddie to come see me. I need to scold somebody."

What was I to do? I hadn't spoken to Eddie at all. I had no idea where he was, or where he had been, except that it probably involved a gutter somewhere. I only told her that to spare her of the harsh truth, that, without her, our business was dying. I tried to keep up production during the evening hours, but without Marguerite everything started to slip away. First the boys, then our fickle audience.

So I said, "Honey, Eddie left town again right after the shoot today. He went back home."

"Oh."

Marguerite looked at me as if she was going to say something else. But then I guess she thought better of it and turned away, asking me only to fluff her pillow and fetch the purple wash tub. "But before you draw my bath," she said, "be sure to email Eddie. I bet we can get him back. That junky will do anything for a couple hundred."

"Sure," I said.

I have to say that my capitalist's heart mourned the loss of the business we had built together from the ground up. It's not a secret that I love money, that I love

*things*. And I'll do most anything to get either. My father once told me that to invest wisely meant to always, always put your money in securities that would only ever appreciate. Good advice for anyone. The best! And even though I'm sure he meant for me to invest in some stable commodity, like gold, or maybe even platinum, I think he would agree that the only things more stable than a solid pair of thick gold hoops is a gay man's lust for straight dick, and a breeder's willingness to perform. You can squeeze a lot out of a man, we discovered, for very little money. All caught on tape, no less. It's a real goldmine. And Marguerite was a natural behind the camera, always full of sage advice. "Watch it, honeypie," she'd say whenever one of the performers felt the spirit a little too strongly. "Fuck his face, darling, sure. But don't block the shot with your arms."

I could never do that. I stayed strictly behind the scenes, managing the sets. I had no input whatsoever as it pertained to casting. I have never had much to say to straight men. And besides, I could never tell if a man seemed straight enough on camera. Probably because I myself make absolutely no effort to pass as any such creature. I once asked Marguerite once what she looked for in her performers. The only answer she could give was, "Husky, with a side of brawn."

I've now watched all of our tapes back (out pure academic curiosity, of course), and the only common quality to the men that *I* can discern is how he sits in a chair. It seems so simple: the men Marguerite handpicked spill carelessly into their seats. Their arms stretch over both armrests, and their legs spread open wide with a delicious unselfconsciousness. Eddie maybe the least conscious of them all.

In my view she died the moment that young boy dared utter "Drake" in her presence. Now that I think about, I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner. Drake is such an awfully common porn name. But that's neither here nor there. On the morning of her sixty third birthday, I found her dead, stiff in the sheets. I wish I could say that it was her fondness for a flowing scarf that killed my Marguerite. But the actual event was not quite so glamorous. A private party, with three guests: Marguerite, a bottle of pills, and a quart of vodka.

Marguerite is buried next to her son Drake, and I visit her grave every Tuesday morning without fail. *Requiem aeternam dona eis, Domine.* Ahem.

## Critical Afterword

### Graceful Structures: Absurdity and the Queer Voice

#### 1

“...The need to resist theorizing. If an artist is a theoretician, his art will be subservient to his theory; it will exist to demonstrate theory....”

-Joyce Carol Oates, journal entry dated January 8, 1976.

“Explain yourself!”

-Mothers everywhere.

In *Clock the Tea and Other Stories*, I use three different, but always unmistakably queer, voices to tell three widely diverging stories. *Clock the Tea and Other Stories* is, on one level, my attempt to show that queer voices and experience are as varied as queer people themselves. However, my research was, in a sense, a searching for form that often led me away from queer texts and toward more canonical short story writers, including Flannery O'Connor, Joyce Carol Oates, and Alice Munro, and then adapting those forms to tell queer stories. I believe that, as Oates suggests in the first epigraph, it is difficult, and often useless, for a writer to expound on the significance or meanings in his or her own completed work. Thus, this critical introduction will track the formal concerns and personal experiences

that went into shaping the characters of my stories, rather than reading my stories as a disinterested critic might.

If I have any sense of humour at all, I surely owe it to my father and our time spent watching television together when I was a child and teenager. It was with him that I developed a keen sense of the absurd, following the travails of the Walton family with those of *The Simpsons* or the kids from *South Park*, or by pairing an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Xena: Warrior Princess* with the language-focused comedy of George Carlin. What my father taught me was that humour and drama are never that far apart, and indeed, that the one nearly always contains the other. I was never required to make value judgments that separated the serious from the frivolous, either. Each was parceled out in equal measure, according to our only god, the TV Guide.

It may seem strange that a childhood spent watching television would lead to a career of writing (hopefully) literary fiction. But, as I like to explain it, in the few hours I spent not glued to the television screen, I was busy reading. *Babysitter's Little Sister* was followed by *The Baby Sitter's Club*, which was followed by *Nancy Drew* (which, in the character of George, contained my first encounter with lesbianism.) My second encounter with lesbianism came in the form of *Little Women*, and *Little Men*, which I threw away after reading the first few chapters. Even at the age of eleven, I knew it to be a cheap and derivative sequel not even worthy of Lucy Maude Montgomery, let alone Louisa May Alcott. My journey to the writing workshops at the University of New Brunswick thus forms a full, perfect circle, much in the same way that *Ursa Major* looks like a bear.

It was also from this time that I drew the first inspiration for “Chicken Snatch.” One Saturday afternoon, flicking through the channels, my father and I came across an unnamed documentary on *PBS*. On the screen, a woman sat in a maroon-velvet upholstered Cadillac, clutching her Blue Silkie Bantam, recounting how it had once almost lost its life while defending its young against a chicken hawk. That lady in the bouffant wig (honoured in my story, if only for a brief moment, as Mrs. Skeffington), along with the woman who revived a frozen-solid chicken with CPR, and the man who kept over one hundred roosters in his back yard much to the ire of his neighbours, captivated us and made us laugh, just as we were horrified by the “Lopper,” a machine used to streamline the decapitation of commercial-grade chickens.

The documentary, we later found out, was called *The Natural History of the Chicken* and it became a fixture for us, or at least a constant point of reference, even though we never saw it again. The title is a bit misleading in that the documentary is more interested in exposing the idiosyncrasies of the American people who consume chickens in one way or another, rather than providing a “natural history” of chickens *per se*. But the idiosyncrasies of character are precisely the material of the storyteller, and what fascinated me then, even though I might not have been able to explain it, was that something as mundane and common as a chicken could help tell such vast and varied, but always unrelentingly funny, stories.

My father and I were not the only viewers captivated by this documentary. Susan Orlean, author of *The Orchid Thief* and frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, was so moved by the documentary that she was compelled to adopt chickens

herself (and, perhaps unsurprisingly, to write at length about the whole ordeal). In the “The It Bird,” Orlean does what *The Natural History of the Chicken* does not: she tracks the rise of the chicken as a pet in middle-class, twenty-first century America. When Orlean first found herself interested in raising chickens as a hobby, she asked her farmer neighbours if they would sell her a hen, but, as she reports, “no one was interested in parting with any; a mature hen who is a good egg layer is too useful to give up” (28). That she should have had to turn to the Internet to satisfy her craving to raise chickens a-la-Marie Antoinette’s *Harneau de la Reine* should surprise no one, given the Internet’s unique ability to link people of every niche interest imaginable. As Orlean explains, she soon found “dozens of online chicken groups and websites—such as Chickens 101, Housechicken, Cotton-Picking Chickens, Yard Poultry, and My Pet Chickens” (29) and even became “one of the forty thousand members of the BackyardChiekens.com forums” (29). It may surprise some readers of “Chicken Snatch” that Don is able to order a brood of chicks with the click of his mouse, but his method is modeled after the streamlined ordering process, including the “Which Chicken” breed selector tool, created by the webmasters at [www.mypetchicken.com](http://www.mypetchicken.com).

Orlean argues that “chickens seem to go hand-in-glove with the post-feminist reclamation of other farmwife domestic arts—knitting, canning, quilting” (29). And while her assertion is certainly true, I wanted to use chickens as a metaphor to help express the complications of gay parenthood. The process of becoming parents is especially tricky for gay men, given that the method they must go about “getting the child” will always involve some sort of artificial delivery process. For gay men, the

Stork is not a euphuism offered to curious children by their bashful (and no doubt straight) parents, but a harsh reminder that their children will always be delivered to them by some outside source over whom they can exert very little control. It will involve contracts, glaringly high fees, and perhaps even a trip to a hostile foreign country, and much more waiting than nine months. Lesbian mothers, at least, have the luxury of delivering the baby themselves.

Don is, in a sense, haunted by the idea of motherhood and the appropriateness of his role as a parent, triggered by the lengths to which he must go in order to even become a parent. He is constantly trying to prove to some unknown force that he is worthy of having a daughter, and is always worried that this disapproving force will somehow “snatch” away his daughter. Instead of farming, to express Don’s motherly anxieties, I chose a more humorous (and a bit gayer) phenomenon of parenting anxiety: child pageants. Having watched (and loved) hours and hours of *Toddlers and Tiaras*, it is apparent to me that the child star’s often ugly parents do not simply want to “be” the beautiful child on stage, praised by the judges, but that parents of both genders have clearly invested much, if not all, of his or her self-worth into the abilities and success of their children.

My initial drafts of “Chicken Snatch” suggested all of these anxieties, but they lacked a satisfying form until I began to read them against the literary grotesques and absurd characters in the short stories of Flannery O’Connor. I was fascinated by O’Connor ability to structure her stories around absurd, often comic acts of violence, acts that she terms “grace.” Indeed, “Chicken Snatch” owes much of its form and tone to the stories of O’Connor, signaled by the character of Melody Tweeps, who,

like O'Connor herself, becomes a local celebrity after teaching her pet chicken to step backwards. The opening paragraph of "Chicken Snatch" mirrors that of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," in which the grandmother stands over her son Bailey, hectoring him with a newspaper, and Bailey's daughter, June Star, sits in the corner reading comic books, mocking him. "A Good Man is Hard to Find" is O'Connor's most widely read story, perhaps because it so encapsulates O'Connor's literary aesthetic, as she explains it:

Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them. (*Mystery and Manners* 65)

In the final scene of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," after The Misfit has shot and killed the grandmother's entire family, the grandmother experiences a moment of grace, echoing the apostle Paul's proclamation that "we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another" (Romans 12:5) in her own realization that The Misfit is "one of [her] own children" (132). The Misfit, emblematic of the Devil, recoils from the grandmother's grace-imbued touch "as if a snake had bitten him" (132) and then shoots her three times in the chest. The violence that O'Connor believes naturally follows moments of grace is summed up in The Misfit's final speech: "She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133).

The Misfit's violence forces the grandmother to understand the full significance of the Body of Christ, much as Don's violent drowning of the last chick allows him to appreciate the completeness of his own family. And yet, "Chicken Snatch" draws directly on O'Connor's delivery of grace through more absurd, rather

than strictly violent, acts, as in "Good Country People," a story about a female PhD who has her wooden leg stolen by a Bible salesman. The girl, Joy, has chosen a new name for herself, Hulga, that is purposefully ugly. Her new name is meant to mark her as more intelligent and less vain than the "good country people" surrounding her. I do not mean to suggest that Don's role as a gay parent is superficially comparable to Joy-Hulga's ugliness. I only mean that he has invested a lot of anxious pride in Maisy, symbolized by the chickens, just as Joy-Hulga is proud of the ugliness of her leg. Don's veneer of pride is easily penetrated by Will's carefree attitude, by Marietta Sr.'s disapproving glare as she examines his picture, and by Don's own encounter with an ugly mother's pristine hands, just as Mrs. Freeman is able to look through Joy-Hulga's ugliness, "as if Mrs. Freeman's beady steel-ponted eyes had penetrated far enough behind her face to reach some secret fact" (275), and as Joy-Hulga's wooden leg is ultimately snatched away.

Like the theft of Joy-Hulga's leg and the Misfit shooting the grandmother after her moment of grace, or even Freddy Kruger's inevitable resurrection for one last kill at the end of all of his movies, the disapproving force (which, if I had to name it, would be a heterosexist society) that Don fears returns once more at the end of the story, in the voice of Melody Tweeps, a surrogate for O'Connor. A "pervert" has snatched Melody's prizewinning chicken and is using it, so she believes, to lure children away from their parents for purposes unknown, but no doubt of a sexual nature. O'Connor's brand of violent, absurd grace is thus not limited to telling religious, allegorical tales, but is in fact a secular dramatic structure amenable to the queer, if only because the queer is so amenable to the absurd.

2.

IF YOU'RE CORNERED AND YOU **HAVE TO TELL THE TRUTH, AND THE TRUTH IS, WELL, SLIGHTLY BITCHY**, put a positive spin on it, then quickly follow it up by giving three reasons why you're even worse. **FOR EXAMPLE:** "Sure, Michael is a monster—but **look at that flawless eyeliner!** How many monsters do you know hat can wield liquid liner **LIKE THAT?** Besides, I have anal fissure. And I just love Captain Lou Albano. Oh, do I have bad breath? Here, smell..." Works like a charm.

That's' what I leaned when I was fabulous.  
What does it mean? Not much.  
It qualifies me to be a hostess at Denny's.

--James St. James, *Party Monster*

"Tea," or as it is sometimes written, "T," simply means the truth, and to clock it means to record it (or to beat someone over the head with it, depending on the clocker's mood). It's similar to the "readings" performed by the drag queens of *Paris is Burning*, but it is not always derisive, meaning essentially to get to the bottom of a situation. Peaches Belmont, the narrator of "Clock the Tea," clocks Marguerite's tea by relating her history without pulling any punches or sparing the reader any grim or raunchy detail.

"Clock the Tea" draws its inspiration from various sources, both literary and personal, including the Atlanta video blogger Quaadir Howard from who I have adopted the title (with permission). But it could not have been written without the work of James St. James, an ex-New York City club kid turned auteur and

celebutante. His memoir *Party Monster* articulates the aesthetics and formal concerns of the Camp voice (summarized neatly in the epigraph to this section) just as it relates the murder of fellow club kid and drug dealer Angel Alvarez by erstwhile scene queen Michael Alig.

James St. James uses bold, italicized, abrupt line breaks, and capitalized text to mimic his own speech patterns, effects that I enjoy, but are not part of my own aesthetic. I hope to have captured a similar effect by paying extremely close attention to the rhythms of my prose. Dialogue in a Camp text is tricky to write well, as Camp texts nearly always read as a dramatic monologues, as if the reader were the narrator's best friend sat down beside her, ready to dish. Any formalistic contrivances, including the conventional form of dialogue, risks breaking the intimate atmosphere created by the narrative voice, if only because it slows down the voice of the narrator. Dialogue in "Clock the Tea" is contained, then, whenever possible, within the block paragraphs of Peaches' narration, and is often limited to the speeches of either Peaches or Marguerite. The non-Camp characters rarely speak, for, on a metaphorical level, they are unfabulous and therefore unimportant, but also on a formal level because their words would be glaringly un-Camp, the effect being that they would seem to be stilted versions or parodies of real people. A story, even a Camp story, can only sustain so many parodies before it becomes stale, and therefore, unfunny.

I am interested in portraying Marguerite's progression from mother into porn director as a reverse metaphor for the history of the representation of gay men in literature and popular culture. At the end of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*,

Prior Walter, a character whose name subtly points to the history of gay men and their culture, declares directly to the audience: "We will not die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward, we will be citizens. The time has come" (186). Perhaps as the result of a misreading of Kushner's call for citizenry, many of the expressions of gay popular culture which have penetrated into the mainstream attempt to solidify the political position of gay men by representing them explicitly as normal/men. Consider the popular television show *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003). Here, the gay character Jack McPhee's storylines (after his tortured coming-out) nearly always show him attempting to integrate himself into hyper masculine groups, first into a football team, and then later, into a fraternity. He comes to terms with his gayness by assuring himself that he is still a man, and a masculine man at that. Groundbreaking television series like *Queer As Folk* (2000-2005) and *Will and Grace* (1998-2006) challenge this reinforcement of gender stereotypes with Camp characters like Emmet (*Queer as Folk*) and Jack (*Will and Grace*), but they are both supporting characters arguably overshadowed by the less flamboyant gay characters in their respective programs. By immersing my story in the language of Camp I hope to link the overvaluation of masculinity and domesticity in the gay community with Marguerite's production of pornography, explicitly of the "gay for pay" variety in which men claiming to be straight engage in gay sex acts for the pleasure of a homosexual audience.

However, a Camp reading of "Clock the Tea" requires a reformulation of Camp, for—as I see it—the term has become bogged down by queer theoretical frameworks and overdetermined critical discussion. Indeed, reading through Fabio

Cleto's massive anthology *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject* cannot possibly give the reader an accurate sense or an appreciation of Camp, if only because the articles contained within the anthology do not adequately address Camp as a form of queer humour. What one finds, unfortunately, is a bevy of critics attempting to define Camp, and failing admirably. Caryl Flinn calls it "ironic nostalgia" (Flinn 438), ignoring the fact that the Camp canon, like the Universe, is constantly expanding in all directions and across all timeframes. Andrew Ross argues that Camp relies on the "recreation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labour" (Ross qtd. von Moltke), forgetting himself that Camp is also present in material that has sustained mainstream popularity over time (*The Wizard of Oz*, *Gone With the Wind*, *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*), and in material lifted from contemporary popular culture. Mark Booth argues that "to be camp is to present oneself as being committed to the marginal with a commitment greater than the marginal merits" (67), incorrectly implying that the relationship between the observer and the Camp subject is based on cynicism rather than enthusiastic play. Camp enthusiasts really do like subjects Bette Davis as Baby Jane or Miss Havisham from *Great Expectations* even as their reaction often plays off the Camp subject's ridiculousness. To banish these Camp heroines to a margin of questionable merit even to extricate them from it seems like a betrayal. Booth also argues that "Camp is primarily a matter of self-presentation rather than of sensibility" (69), but he forgets that before one might present oneself as Camp, one must learn to appreciate it, must cultivate its sensibility.

Moe Meyer's anthology *The Politics and Poetics of Camp* represents an even more vigorous attempt to reject Camp as a comic sensibility, and to reclaim it as a radical political praxis. In the introduction, Meyer claims:

Camp is political; Camp is solely a queer (and/or sometimes gay and lesbian discourse); and Camp embodies a specifically queer cultural critique. Additionally, because Camp is defined as a solely queer discourse, all un-queer activities that have previously accepted as "camp," such as Pop culture expressions, have been redefined as the appropriation of queer praxis. (1)

After reading Meyer's almost militaristic assessment of Camp, in concert with those listed above, especially in succession, one might forget that Camp is first and foremost meant to be funny. Camp is not ironic nostalgia, but it is a *form* of irony which speaks directly to a certain group of people, most often homosexual men, and when it speaks, it makes them laugh. Gregory Bredbeck admits that critical formulations "that overtly desires a determination and a degree of definition betra[y] Camp itself" (52). When pressed to define Camp, he admits that "[his] own Camp response would be: *only her hairdresser knows for sure*" (52). Interestingly, Bredbeck's own Camp instincts lead him away from the theoretical and towards a joke based on a tag-line from a Clairol ad which first aired in the 1960's. This is vitally important. Susan Sontag argues that "Camp proposes a comic vision of the world. But not a bitter or polemical comedy" (288). If Camp is political at all, it is so only because it can facilitate moments of recognition between two or more observers of the Camp subject. If these persons recognize in common that an object, person, work of art, or even a literary character is Camp, then that Camp subject provides itself as an organizational force that generates community. To say that Camp, the key element of which, even in Meyer's estimation, is stylized silliness, can

do anything more than provide the entertainment at these events, is the height of ridiculousness. It is a Camp statement, in and of itself, if only because Meyer intends Camp's political efficacy to be taken seriously.

The failure of these critics to accurately articulate the spirit of Camp requires a return to Sontag, as much as she is reviled by these same critics. Indeed, the mention of Sontag in the affirmative will, undoubtedly, ruffle more than a few feathers on more than a few feather boas. Nevertheless, I hope that my critical reassessment of Camp, specifically in relation to my work, has shown that Sontag's "Notes on "Camp"" remains the most authentic and true-to-form portrayal of this unapologetically and specifically comic sensibility. For Sontag, "the essential element [of Pure Camp] is seriousness, a seriousness that fails" (283). It is comic play. Booth objects to the naming of Camp subject in Sontag's essay, arguing that by including "a definition of camp that includes Tennyson, the Goon Show, Dali, de Gaulle and children's cartoons, [Sontag] is obviously casting the net too wide" (68). Yes, Sontag *is* casting the net too wide, but she does so purposefully. Indeed, her form is deliberately chosen: "the form of jottings, rather than an essay (with its claims to a linear, consecutive argument), seemed more appropriate for getting down something of this particular fugitive sensibility" (276-77). For Sontag, the consequences of veering away from her "tentative and nimble" (276) form is disastrous: "one runs the risk of having, oneself, produced a very inferior piece of Camp" (277), and the project is ruined. It is helpful to keep in mind that there is a difference between the Camp subject and the Camp voice, even though they are often conflated. In the simplest terms, the Camp subject is observed by the Camp

voice, but both are required for the successful production of Camp. Academic readings of Camp often fail because, while they observe the Camp subject, they fail to embody the voice.

It is the Camp voice that energizes “Clock the Tea,” whose narrator is bent on treating the entire world as Camp. Peaches’ voice is by necessity at once entirely self-aggrandizing and self-deprecating, and is wholly unwilling to make moralistic judgments on otherwise reprehensible actions. This is no doubt because he believes himself to be more than just “comic,”—he attempts to be laugh-out-loud funny and nothing spoils a joke faster than stopping to excuse yourself or to ensure that everybody is following along.

At the same time, Camp is by no means a *simple* form of humour. I am tempted, at this point, to attempt my own definition of Camp and why I identify with it, but the project seems doomed to fail. Although it seems clear that Camp developed against the marginalization and persecution of gay men throughout the last century, its particular boundaries remain fuzzy. Turning to another marginalized and persecuted community may provide the answers as to why. In her book *In the Belly of a Laughing God: Humour and Irony in Native North American Literature*, Jennifer Andrews notes Cherokee writer Thomas Kings’ unwillingness to provide a definition of Native humour:

In the last five years or so, Native humour has become a minor subject of discussion—not so much on reserves or in urban centres, mind you, but within the academy, where the creation and explication of such subjects is encouraged and where it can lead to publications and promotions ... And in this regard, two things have happened. One, we’ve decided that Native humour exists, and two, we’ve come up with a general definition. Or description. Or good guess. (King qtd. in Andrews 8)

King goes on to say that “I’m, not sure that a valid definition of Native humour exists” (qtd. In Andrews 8) and that if Native humour can be defined, it “change[s] with performance” (qtd. in Andrews 8). Thus, while, as Andrews notes, the humour of marginalized communities can certainly “challenge dominant paradigms (and reinforce new paradigms)” (19), to attempt to define it seems beside the point because it is ephemeral, entirely contained in the moment of performance, whether it be a drag queen on stage, lip-synching for her life, or two friends discussing why it is absolutely necessary that they watch *Dark Victory* for the twenty-seventh time.

That is not to say that Camp should be entirely free from scrutiny. Why, readers may ask, is St. James so interested to convincing his reader that his party monster is not monstrous after all, and what are the consequences of adopting a voice that treats violence, especially violence connected with sexuality, so flippantly? Turning to my own work, “Clock the Tea” begins with Drake’s death and ends with Marguerite’s suicide, and both are purposely treated rather frivolously. After Drake is run over by a van, Peaches is much more concerned with the state of his scarf than Drake’s broken body, and when he finds Marguerite dead in her bed, Peaches sincerely wishes that she had died just like Isadora Duncan, who choked to death when her long, flowing silk scarf became caught on the rear axle of her car. The scarf imagery at each of their death scenes is meant to suggest more than just Peaches’ interest in the material goods that are the components of glamour; this imagery also highlights Peaches’ cruel disregard for the people he supposedly cares the most about. For Peaches, there is a thin line between obsession and complete disinterest, the quality that is the Camp voice’s most disturbing characteristic.

To help explore the dark side of the Camp voice, I turn to the master of filth, John Waters. In "Outsider Pornography" Waters interviews two relatively obscure amateur pornographers, Bobby Garcia, who videotapes himself performing oral sex on straight Marines, and David Hurles, who does the same, except he prefers convicts and drug-addicts. More interesting than Waters' repeated assertions that each of these men is a "goddamn genius" (2671-76) on the level of Andy Warhol (in fact, Waters recently helped stage a showing of Hurles' oeuvre at a gallery in New York) is the language Waters' uses to treat these men as figures of ridicule just as he lauds their artistic prowess. For instance, after Waters learns that Hurles has settled down with one of his tricks "and this happy couple has been together for the last twelve years" (2786-92), Waters cannot help but ask the obvious:

"Is he a drug addict?" I sheepishly question. "Yes, sure," David instantly admits, amazed I'd even have to ask. "Speed," he explains. But as for all Americans these days, the economy is an issue. "We can't afford for him to be a speed freak." (2792-98)

Any sheepishness contained in the initial question is lost in its reportage: Waters is unable to resist an opportunity to show his sophisticated awareness of his subjects' ridiculous unselfconsciousness, or to put it more bluntly, to go for a laugh. Similarly, Waters describes a man in one of Garcia's films as a "a horse-ish oaf with a beer-can dick who either looks retarded or sexy depending on your taste," a statement that is on the one hand exceptionally funny, but on the other, exceptionally cruel, essentially dehumanizing a desperate, probably drug-addicted man, in order to get a rise. At the end of "Outsider Pornography" Waters provides the Camp solution to anyone who has suffered serious trauma:

Who wants to be “even” day after day? If you just killed three people in a DWI accident, you should feel bad. If your whole family molested you in a giant basket on Easter morning, you have the right to be grumpy every once in a while. But feeling down can make you feel up if you’re the creative type. The emotional damage may have already been done to you, but stop whining. Use your insanity to get ahead. (2824-30)

Ironically, this advice is meant for people who have suffered little or no trauma at all, abandoning Garcia and his marines and Hurles and his convicts to their private miseries.

And yet, the cruelty of the Camp voice, implicit in its humourous overtones, continues to fascinate me. Thus, while creating a piece of Camp myself, I wanted “Clock the Tea” to track what would happen if someone took Waters’ advice seriously and put her insane grief to work producing outsider pornography similar to Garcia and Hurles’ films. I wanted to show that Marguerite’s motivation was a real, nightmarish trauma, what she believes to be her role in facilitating Drake’s careers as a teenage prostitute, but without compromising Peaches’ voice. Thus, Peaches is absolutely silenced by the story of Drake’s rape, if only because I knew that Peaches’ narration could not stop to dwell on the fact that, even at the age of fourteen, Drake is still a child, and indeed, would focus on the details that would cast the scene as outrageous, even twee. I am hoping that the consequences of Drake’s rape are made plain enough that the reader can see through the glib language down to the essential horror of the situation: Drake becomes a drug-addled go-go boy, Marguerite, stricken with guilt, commits suicide, Fred, although he is beaten, escapes relatively unscathed, and Peaches, potentially the most monstrous of all of the characters, lives to tell the tale and laugh at their expense.

3.

This happy event--supposing it to be such--could only have occurred at an unpremeditated moment. We will not follow our friend across the threshold. He has left us much food for thought, a portion of which shall lend its wisdom to a moral, and be shaped into a figure.

- Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Wakefield"

"And when I think of the slanting, patched roof and the stove-top pipe, the house as a marvelous, solid, made, final thing, I feel that I have somehow betrayed it in a story to be extracted this way, as a bloodless symbol"

- Alice Munro, "The Colonel's Hash Resettled."

Comic actors often say that they dream of playing serious roles, like a King Lear or a Desdemona, but no one will hire them because of their silly voices, or their silly faces. In this sense (and only this sense), "Sanitarium" is my *Hamlet*. (On the other hand, "Sanitarium" is spelled the way that it is because of an episode of *South Park* in which the boys visit a planetarium headed by a man who cannot pronounce the "t" in planetarium. Take that as you like it.). "Sanitarium" is in many ways an answer to "Clock the Tea" and "Chicken Snatch" in that it was my attempt to prove to myself that I could write queer characters who are neither satirized nor outrageous, for the comic approach to character is not always the most satisfying.

"Sanitarium" thus has to do with my own frustration when writing about the inner lives of my characters. I knew that I wanted to write about a transexual man named Randy who worked at Fundy National Park, but I had a lot of anxiety about writing him as a living, breathing character rather than as an allegorical figure, the Trans Man. I did not want him to teach any characters any lessons or to make other

characters feel more comfortable about themselves for having known him. I was transferring a lot of these concerns onto the unnamed narrator, who, of all the characters in this collection, is the most like myself. His campaigns to get Randy a job seemed to me to be about asserting Randy's real place in the world, as if he were anxious to reassure himself that *transgender people* have a real and valuable place in the world, and that it is his place to prove that value. For the narrator, Randy, as a character who populates his world, is ultimately inscrutable. In the queer community, we talk a lot of about inclusivity, hence the growing number of letters attached to acronym LGBTQI, but we sometimes forget that the queer community is made up of individuals, each possessing a consciousness that is shut off from the collective, queer body.

The inaccessibility of character is a theme commented upon by authors of all eras. Charles Dickens, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, finds it "a wonderful fact to reflect upon, that every human creature is constituted to be that profound secret and mystery to every other" (10). Joyce Carol Oates, in *The Widow's Story*, recalls the 19<sup>th</sup> century psychologist William James' comment that "a man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognise him" (72). Alice Munro, in "Cortes Island," asks the reader to consider the question, "Did you ever think that people's lives could be like that and end up like this? Well, they can" (115). The temptation to slather meaning onto those who we cannot understand, is, I think, a very human impulse, which is how I see the sanitarium itself working as a metaphor in my story. A sanitarium lends itself to an easy allegorical interpretation of its inhabitants, essentially because people go there to either die or recover from a deathly illness.

Each person comes to a sanitarium with the same goal in mind, that is, to “recover,” but each possesses his or her own private illness that needs curing. A sanitarium is like a crucible and is often used as such: Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, a novel about an “ordinary young man” (3) who plans to spend a few weeks at a sanitarium in the Swiss Alps and ends up staying for seven years, is one of my favorite novels. (I should, at this point, confess that I find sanitariums to be extremely glamorous, which has to do, once again, with my history with *The Waltons*. When Michael Learned, the actress who played Mama, or Olivia Walton, wanted off the show, the writers sent her character to a sanitarium for TB. In a later episode, John goes to visit her at this sanitarium by the sea, and it seemed like she just sat by the beach all day, not even coughing, which appeared to me to be a much better fate than all of the work Olivia had to do on Walton’s mountain.) I love all of the characters in *The Magic Mountain*, especially the irascible Setembrini, even though I have read that they are considered by critics to be all more or less allegories for modern ills or the answer to those modern ills. Nevertheless, for me, the critical act of reading the characters in *The Magic Mountain* as allegories seems to be in fact a mercenary act, or an attempt to extract value that overlooks how the characters speak, dress, and act as expressions of character, i.e. their humanity. It struck me as somehow cruel, even though these characters are not real people. I see this motif working throughout my story--Jeanine at the library, Randy as the “Transgender Man,” the LGBT Center itself and its production of a gender bending *Romeo and Juliet*, and the episode of Randy at the middle school, are all meant to suggest the inscrutability of these characters just as the people in their lives try to

extract meaning from their existence. I wanted to work against this impulse by completing the story of Jeanine's trip to Fundy National Park hinted at the beginning of the story, in which the story of the missing boy represents Jeanine's realization that the tragic is really so commonplace that to allegorize or moralize the tragedy's victims is in part a way for casual observers to ward off the horror of that banality.

As I have already mentioned, at the end of *Angels in America*, Prior Walter says, directly to the audience, "We are not going away. We won't die secret deaths anymore. The world only spins forward. We will be citizens. The time has come" (182). Prior's speech point to the fact that, despite the overwhelming silence surrounding the AIDS crisis which resulted in the needless deaths of hundreds of thousands of homosexuals, its aftershocks resulted in the final solidification of the "homosexual" as a political entity. The proof of this phenomenon is ironically contained in the federal political actions taken against homosexuals in the nineties: Don't Ask, Don't Tell (1993) and the Defense of Marriage Act (1996) both suggest that while homosexuals and their allies were still outnumbered by their homophobic counterparts, homosexuality itself was being discussed in the public square like in no other time in history. Those speech acts continue today, and in many ways, the tide has irrevocably turned in favour of queers and their allies. The queer voice itself may be as varied as queer people themselves, but in speaking honestly with our own voices, we assert the validity of our existence. In this way, I hope that *Clock the Tea and Other Stories* offers something of value, and maybe even a few laughs.

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## **Awards, Distinctions and Fellowships**

### **Graduate:**

- Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Joseph-Armand Bombardier Graduate Scholarship 2009 (\$17500)
- UNB Research Fellowship 2010-11 (\$10000)
- School of Graduate Studies Board of Governors Merit Award 2009 (\$3000)
- Lambda Foundation C. Landry Memorial Award in Graduate Studies (\$1000)
- David H. Walker Prize in Creative Writing (\$1000)

### **Undergraduate:**

- Ben and Millie Guss Scholarship 2008 (\$2000)
- Carlton C. Covey Scholarship 2008 (\$1400)
- Captain Royal A. Carrick & Marjorie Oatey Carrick Memorial 2008 (\$1100)
- Rabbi David Spiro Essay Prize 2008 (\$500)
- Muriel Miller Award in Creative Writing 2008 (\$280)
- English Department Essay Prize 2008 (\$100)

## **Research Interests**

My current research extends to the pre-Stonewall era of queer American literature, especially the critical writings of Gore Vidal and his evaluation of his contemporary queer writers in contrast to his political essays on American life and politics. I am interested in tracing the current "Americanization" of queer culture back to the literature of this era.

I am also at work on a novel that blends together the language of Camp and the production of pornography with the gay bar scene of a small town in Atlantic Canada, and so am interested in the role of pornography and raunch within queer culture.

## **Publications and Presentations**

- "Heterosexism and Marriage in John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes*." *Journal of Student Writing* 30 (2009).
- "Reasserting Difference: Chrytos and the "american" Queer." Paper presented at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences as part of a panel organized by the Canadian Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Society at Concordia University, Montreal, QC. 2010.

## **Research Experience**

**Research Assistant**, Department of English, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, New Brunswick 2010

- I read submissions of poetry and fiction to *The Fiddlehead*, Atlantic Canada's premiere literary magazine.
- I produced and edited podcasts, interviewing various writers in the community including the writer-in-residence, the poet John Barton, on the status of LGTB poetry in Canada.
- I authored a manual on podcasting for future editorial assistants.

## **Teaching Experience**

**Teaching Assistant**, ENGL1144: Introduction to Short Prose Fiction, Department of English, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, Winter 2011

- I lead a tutorial comprising 20 undergraduates once a week towards the development of essay writing and grammar skills.

## **Community Involvement / Administrative Activity**

- I am co-editor and the fiction editor of *Qwerty*, a literary journal run by the graduate students of the University of New Brunswick. It is one of the only graduate student-run magazines in Canada to have achieved Genuine Magazine Status from Magazines Canada.
- In 2009, I represented the MA students of the English Graduate Student Society in the Graduate Student Association, successfully lobbying for an increase in departmental funding for *Qwerty*.