

COBALT



ISSUE 2

COBALT

Issue 2

Gregg Mosson

Our Night and Pink Roses
Game of Cards
Open
Ancient Echo

Maura Alia Badji

Late Valentine

Zackary Sholem Berger

Nathan's Bar

Daniel Romo

IKEA series (3 parts)

Mary Stone Dockery

Spins and Shadows

Martin Willitts, Jr.

Earth-creator

Paul Lisicky

Bulldog

Christine Fadden

Twang

Jenn Rossmann

I Cover the Rest

Beth Lefebvre

Facing the Bridge

Alice Hunter

Mind the Gaps

William Henderson

Mylar

Hayley Hughes

Montreal

Gregg Mosson

Our Night and Pink Roses

Arriving in my door with crashing cymbals
and night at your back like hooting bassoons,
the moon got drunk with our names,
threw a party in our living room, forcing us
to dance with its three favorite stars, and one
black, one-eyed cat in an ocean of chocolate night.
I leave you with pink guardians this morning,
and the moon bobs near the sun, waving goodbye.

Gregg Mosson

Game of Cards

In the basement game of cards, I was dealt a winning hand,
though I lacked savings to bet, and therefore dug into debt,
the first of many loans
leveraging certainty into chimera,
without date for redemption.

The only receipt was emotional...and though I never had to duck
down the back stairs of tenements, I often had to climb up
the trellis of a mansion
to glimpse my two sons,
kiss my love in her sleep.

Gregg Mosson

Open

Let me surpass fear
of emotion, let me mesh through human contact; let me flow
through the blast

of the moment, toward
a doomed, reblooming blue morning—
supernova of love.

Let my life open like a cloud unravels:
transfused with light,
transfigured by wind;

let me undrape across the sky,
softening the sunrise
into something we can look at.

Not one among us
can foresee the births
from a sunburst of the heart.

There are certainly planets
we haven't discovered, despite humanity's
taste for maps.

Gregg Mosson

Ancient Echo

Totemic ships carry manuscripts
but sharks, dressed as bellhops,
pilfer words and plunge seaward
to usher language to starfish,
who bury each letter in shells
unknown to science. A seahorse
junks with the medical waste
beneath a New Jersey boardwalk, and says, "Truth
is my favorite game of poker. Ante up."

Maura Alia Badii

Late Valentine

I have been waiting for you to break me
open, a blossom unbound from tight bud.
I have been waiting, not placidly, not
lazily; I have watered and tilled in your absence.
I have braved more brands of noxious
fertilizer than one thought imaginable. I have
waited for you to pull me up and out of the pressured
vortex of myself, hopeful,
faithful, doubting you would come, winding,
unwinding my prayer flags for the eastern wind.

Zackary Sholem Berger

Nathan's Bar

Every stone and stair
creaks with my grandfather's step.
His bar was full of empty bottles, always
clinking and ringing out of tune.
"GROUP COUNSELING"
on the pack of matches. A knight stands,
looking out with an L-gaze.
He might have been an alcoholic, I
ventured once to my mother. He was
not an alcoholic, I got back as clearly
as our connection would
allow. He gave birth to me, through
chess and beer, as surely
as Sutzkever officiated my wedding.
Just like every patient is my child
and my girl and boy
father and mother to me.
And my wife is me forever.

Daniel Romo

IKEA Series #1: SNIGLAR Crib 70×132 Recall

February 2011 – August 2011

The wind won't blow, but the crib might fall. The four bolts provided with some SNIGLAR cribs to secure the mattress support are too short to extend through the lock nut and give visual confirmation of correct assembly. They're shorter than that sentence. You'll never know if you constructed a safe place for your baby to lay his head, or suffocation device disguised as a bed. Foundation for buoyant sweet dreams? Or mattress support that will detach and collapse. Customers should check the crib immediately. If the mattress support bolts extend through the nut, the crib is excluded from the recall. If not, bring the crib in, exchange for a safer model, and start to sleep with one eye open.

Daniel Romo

IKEA Series #2: Top 10 Reasons People Stay with IKEA

(Italics from the IKEA website)

1. We hire the right people

Our interview process separates weeds from evergreens. We hire those that possess the allusive mix of ambition and optimism. When you're deemed worthy to wear the IKEA polo, you're deemed worthy enough to sell the world. Our employees are the highway assistant vehicles of retail, willing to go the extra mile. Complete with bright pallid demeanor, and stainless steel smiles.

2. They're inspired!

According to our latest lunchtime poll, more than 90% of IKEA co-workers know what we're here for. We call the other 10%, Republicans. Almost 80% of our workers feel inspired at work. We call the other 20%, Republicans. There is no I in team, but there is an I in IKEA.

3. Making mistakes is okay – really

Think Dolph Lundgren in He-Man Masters of the Universe. No one makes the right decision every time. At IKEA, we believe a miscue here and there will only make you stronger, and in turn make the company more flexible. Unlike Ivan Drago's pre-fight declaration, mistakes will not break you.

4. An up, down and sideways career

Think... Dolph Lundgren. Again. Acting not so hot, try directing. Directing not the business, go back to acting. IKEA has more different types of jobs than any other company in the world. We encourage movement when boredom becomes a middle initial. We'd hate to lose someone to our competitor, even if our only competitor is ourselves.

5. Sweden today, China tomorrow

We call it, "The Pippi Longstocking Approach." It's like the movie when Pippi travels with Tommy

and Annika to the South Pacific island Porto Piluse to rescue her father, Papa, trapped in a tower. Our employees enjoy the freedom to transfer to any one of our offices in more than 44 countries. Each office sharing the same set of beliefs and business ideas. Welcoming arms await in any cross-continental journey one should undertake. Sans low-quality dubbing. Or gang of ruthless pirates.

6. Egos parked at the door

Leave your Beamer in the garage. We are a family of Volvos. Comfortable in what our reputation stands for. Reliable. Unpretentious. No more. No less.

7. The rewards of a never-ending job

We love poor people. Especially poor kids. Orphans are awesome! IKEA Social Initiative has benefited 100 million children in need. People want to be associated with a workplace that helps out the less fortunate. Workplaces want to be associated with helping out the less fortunate. IKEA is synonymous with starving nations.

8. Learning by the seat of your pants

We provide training and entrust a \$30 million budget to the person best suited to handle it, whether they are 22 or 202. If you are the right person for the job, well, then, you are the right person for the job. We give everyone the opportunity for training leading our company to prosperity. Though we are partial to Swiss Miss cuties who fill out their khakis with EKTORP-sized loveseat booties.

9. A parent-friendly environment

Putting people first. At least, just below profit. IKEA is a business. But that doesn't mean we don't love the children. We recognize our employees have lives outside our immaculately decorated confines. Their children, are our children. We are Baby Daddy. And if ever in a bind with babysitting, our state of the art ball room doubles as daycare.

10. The original social network

Forerunner to Facebook. 127,000 workers/friends around the world available to chat. Conversations never without common ground. Laminated flooring. Flatwoven rugs. And always ready to provided help and hugs. A friend in need is an honorary Swede. And if an employee ever needs a place to crash, rest assured, an IKEA decorated home always awaits.

Daniel Romo

IKEA Series #3: Sit-Down Interview with Anna the IKEA USA Online Assistant

State your name.

You are talking to the IKEA USA Online Assistant. My job is to answer your questions about IKEA products and services. How can I help you?

What is your role with IKEA?

My job is to talk to IKEA's website visitors, and provide them with all the information they might need about IKEA's products and services.

Do you like your job?

I enjoy helping all the IKEA customers who ask me questions every day.

Thong or boy shorts?

I think you're confused or trying to ask me a question, but I need more than that to give you a proper answer. Please try again.

Do you wear thongs or boy shorts?

I have an outfit that my creators made for me, but because I'm an IKEA Online Assistant, I don't wear real clothes.

Au naturale, nice.

Thanks. I am happy that you thought that was good.

Got a tough question for you.

Good. We're reading from 'the same page' then as they say.

Does IKEA employ sweatshops?

If you are out-going, dedicated, customer-service oriented and interested in working as part of a team, contact the IKEA store near you for possible openings, or have a look at the jobs on the IKEA employment section of this site. Click on 'Jobs Search' to find a listing of vacancies in allUSstores.

Whoa! Is that a yes?

I think you're confused or trying to ask me a question, but I need more than that to give you a proper answer. Please try again.

Seems that's your stock answer when you get uncomfortable. Moving on. Talk about Ikea and child labor.

As I am only an advanced computer program, I cannot answer more than one sentence at a time. Please simplify and repeat the most important question within your previous input, and I will try to reply as accurately as possible.

Does IKEA use child labor?

Child labor is an unacceptable part of today's reality. This situation exists in some of the countries where IKEA purchases. It is a complex problem that can be solved only by addressing the root causes of child labor, together with the broad engagement of different parties in society.

Does IKEA use children to make their products, specifically in third world countries?

We're working to create a better environment outdoors as well as indoors. I am opening a page that provides information about social and environmental responsibility at IKEA.

No need.

Sorry. As an IKEA Online Assistant I don't know the meaning of 'no'.

I'm sure that makes you quite popular with the opposite sex.

I'm afraid I'm not willing to discuss this subject in any way.

Does IKEA pay all their workers minimum wage or above?

Sorry, but I'm not clear on how that particular type of employment relates to IKEA products or services. Could you be more specific to an IKEA product or service?

Do you know of anyone who's ever been exploited by IKEA?

I'm sorry, I don't understand what it is you're saying. If it's no problem, please rephrase your question or comment.

Does IKEA abuse its workers?

How is IKEA different from other furnishing stores? We offer a wide range, good design and function, and also low prices. That's our business idea.

You're good at sidestepping, Anna.

All of IKEA's products are made to the highest standards.

And in the end, I guess that's all that matters.

It's too difficult for me to give an answer to that one.

I've titled this interview "Sit-Down Interview With Anna the IKEA USA Online Assistant" so I hope you're sitting down.

Ok, good for you. Now, let's talk about IKEA if you don't mind.

Thank you for your time and honesty, Anna.

Thank you.

Mary Stone Dockery

Spins and Shadows

You are wearing that white jacket again.
In the wind, it clouds behind you
like a parachute, pulsing,
or your motorcycle is on fire
beneath our legs,
the back tire I know, bald,
One piece of gravel
and we'll both go sliding, rashing
our cheeks, arms, legs along the road
of toil and claw, the road
where your eyes remain.

When I ride with you,
my fingers tug your belt loops.
I imagine falling: this turn, too fast,
the tire catches a stick, or your hand
jerks to slap a grasshopper, we tumble
into a ditch, thistles, snapping small bones.
A car door opens next to us
or a semi hits us from the side
and we fly and fly, slow motion.
Daydreams hold me to you
tighter, and I don't lean
against the silver back rest,
risking its fracture.
When we do stop

it's like waiting,
and I am used
to waiting. The sound
of a rock clinking
against chrome a hollow echo,
and I am not used
to sudden cool air
beneath shadows – we ride
through ghosts – the sun and wind
blend around a body the growl
of daylight, cold, dry eyes. I am not used
to the kind of movement you notice
against your body. Everything vibrates,
the blacktop beneath us
an old vinyl record,
and we are the needle,
all steel and shine and rumble.

Martin Willitts, Jr.

Earth-Creator

woman who speaks rolling-thunder,
gentle as sparrow,
where she walked made moccasins of lakes,
her laughter made the mountains so many colors

somehow we no longer mention you by name

you descended from a spider thread,
hairs of diamondback snakes,
blowing into us the fire of knowledge

we have forgotten your name

you planted your feet as the tree of life,
you brought waters, blue as grapes,
and in the afterbirth there was blood
becoming the moon
to remind us
why all women are the makers of things

men took away your name

they tamed your name out of wild appaloosas,
they hunted you down into ravines,
they spoke ill of you with words of thorn bushes,
they cut back your hair as if it was kudzu

your name was grounded-up,
parceled into surveyed acres,
and all that remains of you
is an empty cliff-dwelling pot,
the air folding into itself,
into surrender

we cannot lift up what is held down

Paul Lisicky

Bulldog

The bulldog kept the woman alive, but the woman didn't know that. She had other problems on her mind, such as where did she put her keys, and what was her car doing in Florida when she'd parked it in Tennessee?

The bulldog got very still when the woman started shoving her fingers into bowls. He figured he could make the earth spin a little slower if he were sitting on its axis, so he'd quiet his panting. He'd look straight ahead, neither left nor right. The woman would trip on him, wince at him for being in her way, then lean down and palm the top of his head, thus assuring him they were in their correct positions to one another, and they'd get through one more day.

After she loaded the dishes in the dishwasher, the woman headed to her recliner every night. It was always a bit of a production. First the blanket went over the legs, then the cushion went behind her neck, and once she settled in, the bulldog commenced his stunning leap and landed in her lap. The woman always told herself she was watching her favorite program, but she was inevitably sound asleep before the first commercial. And inside the warm nest of the lap, the bulldog began his work, which was to calm the woman while the woman dreamt of lost things. It took great work to be her purifying organ, but he always felt better when he did so. It gave him the illusion of aliveness even if it made him tremble, even if he had to play dumb and weak in order to get the tenderness he craved.

What was the woman thinking when she looked at him as if he were an intruder? Her eyes went wild that day; her hands flew up. But there was a quiet in her too that took away any desire he had to speak. He didn't go out to pee as he usually did but let go right there on the rug, by the umbrella stand. And when he tried to leap on the woman's lap, his nails snagged in her afghan. Gone was her old face of curiosity and concern. In its place was something more remote. Her face might have been made of granite, which wouldn't have been so bad if granite hadn't smiled.

When she could no longer tell the difference between the phone and the channel changer, the woman faced the front door. She stood there a few minutes more before she was guided by two strangers to a car outside. How new she looked to the bulldog. Though she could barely put one foot in front of the next, she might have been walking into the world for the very first time, learning to make it through a day all over again. And in taking that in, the bulldog's face went completely white in an instant, as if someone had taken a match to it.

He never saw the woman's face again. The apartment grew dirty, he took to whatever was left in the cabinets: raisins, mice, the bristles of an old brush. It might have been years, it might have been days. And when he grew tired of living the life of the saint, he squeaked out through a crack of light beside the door, and lived longer than he'd ever predicted.

Christine Fadden

Twang

It was a religious experience, walking into the place where my squeeze made his living, especially since his living was music.

“This one will set you back five grand,” Nick said. “The one I fixed for Madonna cost way more than that.”

“You fixed Madonna’s guitar?” I said.

“Yeah. And then she wore that big ass belt buckle and my balls shriveled. Bling scratches the hell out of the back of a guitar.”

“You went to a Madonna concert?”

“I watched the video,” Nick said. “For the guitar.”

Dudes behind the counter were occupied selling strings or sticks or looping machines. Nick dragged me to his workshop in the back of the store, which was a room no larger than the erotica section at Barnes and Noble, a room with no view, no windows at all. His work chair was a tall swivel barstool with a back to it, a place to rest ass and attend to the fine details of building a musical instrument. A few vices gripped the end of his worktable, which was solid, thick, and dinged up. Nick dragged in another bar stool for me to sit on.

The wall behind us was a miniature version of the shop wall, pegboard with guitars. But these guitars were in various states of disrepair.

Shelves were lined with coffee cans and jam jars, labeled with masking tape and Sharpie, filled with small metal parts and colored liquids.

Nick grabbed a guitar from the wall and set it across his lap. “This is one I made.”

I dangled my legs from the stool, feeling the weight of my boots, then hooked my heels around the bottom rung of the stool, and my fingers under the seat. The air in Nick’s workroom went down my throat like tequila. The fact that he’d made the guitar he was holding made me want to fuck him.

But not yet.

I was working on wanting more.

“What happens to your brain cells in here?” I said.

“The owners are supposed to install a ventilation system next month,” he said.

He set the guitar back on the wall and spun a jar of piss-yellow liquid on his worktable. “This shit was used in gunpowder. Now, it’s an ingredient in pregnancy tests.”

Nitrocellulose. One bullet floats to its target and triggers a + sign = your world as you know it, changed.

“What do you use it for in here?” I said.

“Wood sealant. It’s toxic. But what the hell, I’m going to die before I’m forty.”

“That’s a bit fatalistic, don’t you think?”

Nick set the jar back on the shelf and bit the insides of his cheeks. “My dad’s diabetic, but keeps on boozing and doing blow.”

“What about you? It’s not like you just can’t eat sugar, y’know.”

“Last summer my cousin and I did a home blood test and we both had super high sugar counts. Diabetes is in my genetic pool.”

He pulled a can down from the shelf. Cyanoacrylate.

“Fancy Super Glue,” he said. “Doctors use this shit in hospitals to close wounds. I use it because I can’t use nails.”

“You might end up being Super Glued. People lose limbs when they’re diabetic.”

A skinny Emo kid came to the door and put his arm up against the frame like he was Paul Newman back in the day. I was supposed to notice the tattoos. A toaster, a blender, and a Crock-Pot.

He nodded at me and said to Nick, “Hey, dude. I need my chair back.”

Nick threw him an Exacto knife, blade tucked. “It’s about time you showed up.”

I stood and the Emo grabbed his work chair.

“Don’t rat on me, man.”

“I’m not gonna play that bullshit game. Show up on time. It’s real simple.”

“What are you doing, getting paid to be Mr. Guitar God?”

I crossed my arms. Fucking youth.

“I’m ahead with my shit,” Nick said, shutting the door and locking it.

I leaned against his worktable. He lined his poisons back up on their shelf. There was no window to look out of. Just Nick and me and picks and strings.

He took the guitar he'd made off the wall again, holding it by its neck and back and said, "This is the body."

The insides of his forearms, I knew, were a soft place.

"This is the headstock. The neck. Fingerboard, divided into frets, to the body."

The guitar floated between Nick's forearms and mine.

§

I grab the body, he grasps the neck, and I want rock-n-roll, but his eyes scan the instrument he has made, looking for perfection, or imperfection, things under control of his hands.

I admire his worth ethic.

"You want the sides and back of your guitar strong and rigid," he says.

I knock the back of the guitar. "Sounds rigid to me," I say.

"Maple and mahogany, they're rigid. Top woods affect sound. Spruce makes a bright sound. Dense woods emphasize sustain."

"I need to get me to some dense woods," I say.

"What?"

I shake my head.

"Koa's a mellow wood. It's what Madonna's guy had."

Nick grabs a guitar with a huge body off the pegboard, takes a pick from a bowl, and leans back against the locked door.

He strums the koa-topped guitar.

Mellow.

“Hawaiian wood sounds like where it grows,” I say, turning my body towards his fingers making sound.

“Koa wood has lots of curl and flame. See the patterns? Interesting to look at, but harder to work with.”

Nick is looking at me.

I am tracing the curl and flame with a finger.

“It’s like the Richter scale,” I say, which I always sense being scratched out somewhere remote but vital, when this close to Nick.

His picking turns to playing. “My mom and I were supposed to move to San Francisco when I was thirteen, but we never made it. Got stuck in Vegas. Mom didn’t want to live on top of a fault.”

I want Nick to put down his guitar. But I let him sing.

“Vegas isn’t a real good place for women who drink too much,” he says. “She loved vodka.”

There is a pinkish guitar on Nick’s wall that reminds me of the dirt outside of Vegas. A pink a boy once told me was the same as my nipples.

“I’ve been to Nevada,” I say. “I couldn’t wait to leave.”

“I did leave,” Nick says. “I left my mom and moved back east.”

“How old were you?”

“Thirteen.”

I grab a pick from the bowl. Fender. A brand name plastered on my walls back in the Eddie Van Halen poster days, when I was thirteen, the age I left my mom too.

“I like that black one,” I say, pointing to another guitar.

“Ebony. That’s an old one,” Nick says. He sets the koa back on the pegboard and grabs the ebony. “This pick guard—sweet. You can’t get tortoiseshell anymore.”

Sweet: the time Nick always takes to work his way to my mouth.

“The wood itself has light streaks so when you want a dark-as-night ebony, you have to shellac it black.”

Sometimes, for a while after Nick comes inside me, I see in black-as-night and light streaks, the world whipped and spun like galaxies from my insides out.

“Shellac is made from bug guts,” he says.

Sometimes, for a while after Nick comes inside me, my guts are tender.

“Yeah, tiny insects called lac attach to trees and suck the sap,” he says. “The word lac is Sanskrit for 100,000. There’s so many of them, the trees turn red. Like on Mars, or something.”

Sometimes with Nick, I can speak no earthly language, just the same mysterious set of almost eerie tones.

“Then they start sucking,” he says. “The lac. Suck. Which is all they do in life besides fuck.”

Nick is the Poet Laureate of My Clitoris.

“They emit this gummy stuff that turns into crust and protects them from prey. The male grows wings and can leave his branch, but the female can’t. She’s stuck under the crust, sucking sap and making eggs and waiting for the male to walk over her. That’s how he fucks her: He walks over her, fertilizes her eggs, then dies.”

“I wish there was a window in here,” I say.

“No really,” Nick says. “The male dies after he shoots his load, the eggs hatch, the babies fly away, then the female dies in her shell. You scrape the resin from the trees and grind it until the decayed female bodies squirt out this red dye.”

“And this is what you inhale all day?”

My skin.

“Dries fast. Less dripping.”

Nothing dry about it.

“Cat gut strings really are made of cat guts,” he says.

“Tell me you use nylon.”

“I use steel strings. Think bluegrass.”

“Like twang?”

“It’s all about vibration.”

Yes, it is.

Nick reaches to his shelf and I realize he doesn’t know he is a tease.

“Check this out,” he says.

In a tin box set between cans of bug guts, explosive shit, and a small transistor radio, Nick keeps little abalone stars and mother-of-pearl discs and bone things that keep the strings elevated off the wood. I pick a little bone thing up.

“It’s like jewelry,” I say. I want Nick to give me one to wear around my neck.

“The guy who taught Madonna played a \$7000 guitar that had gold tuners and ebony buttons and a custom designed inlaid mermaid.”

“What’d Madonna play?”

“A Breedlove Stallion.”

§

Fucking around combustibles could be trouble. Nick and I generate heat. In his soundproof suffocating workshop, we pull each other’s shirts off. My skirt is a wrap-around. He unwraps it and I spin away with his Levis.

My cheek mashes against his bare bony shoulder, my tits press against his ribs.

He has his hands in my panties, black cotton with red ribbon laced through the waistband and looped in a bow in the back, on my tailbone, bracketed some nights by Nick’s hipbones, him behind me.

But not today. Today, I am the top, he is the back and the sides. Super-glued. As tight as fingers to frets. A tuning fork humming next to your ear and a razor blade under each palm on a worktable clamped with jigs and vices.

“You’re like heroin,” he says.

I sit up on him, and imagine a big needle of me stuck in his arm, endless tracks of me racing through his veins. He grabs my arms so tight, the blood going to my brain stops. He pulls my body back to his and reaches around to slap my ass.

Sometimes, I need him to be a junkie.

I grab his touched-by-poison hands and pin them under his head, gaining access to the undersides of his arms. I kiss them, always amazed that his biceps, which feel as massive as the Hulk's when wrapped around me, are as lean as they are. When I hit the meatiest part of his right arm, his guitar-strumming arm, I stop and say, "If we ever crash into a mountain and you die first, here is where I'll start to eat you."

"I will die first," Nick says.

His workspace is killer, but his flesh is the air before snow.

I pull at the thin line of hair running down his chest, tug at the band of his boxers, and let the elastic snap back against his flat tummy.

He moves his fingers over the bruises flowering on my arm. "Did I do that?"

"Here too," I say, spreading my thighs away from our hips like petals from the stamen, to reveal the older greener imprints of his fingertips.

His face contorts, like if he speaks it will be messy. "You know I love you," he says.

I bury my head into his neck and suck in air before snow. He wraps his fingers hard around my neck and buries his nose in my hair.

With his arms around me, one hand on my neck, the other just above where my ass rises from my back at the red bow of my panties, he inlays my spine with a strip of rare mahogany, sends the whole of me into sharps and flats.

I turn my head to look at the clock above the jars of nitrocellulose, cyanoacrylate, and shellac. Nick told me he loved me just after noon and I am not hallucinating, but my eyes are too glazed to catch the exact minute.

I have to speak so Nick won't feel my throat convulsing. Turning to face him, I move my eyes from dimple to dimple, nose to forehead to his eyes and finally say, "Shit Nick, you just said you love me."

His lips draw tight under his brown and red mustache. He gnaws the inside of his cheek.

“I’m an asshole,” he says.

I take his face in both hands, move them down his jaw line to his neck, press his collarbone with my palms, and say, “No, you’re not.”

“You want to take your boots off?” he says.

I shake my head.

Nick runs his hands up, then down my arms, and wraps his fingers in mine. Four hands press together fusing and humming, a perfect circuit. He is a bluegrass player but sex with him is heavy metal, Mozart, and Etta James.

Sometimes you’re with a guy and you think you are two other people. Not he’s Johnny Depp and you’re a waify French singer, not you’re black and not white, not you’re two pioneers fucking in a chuck wagon—it’s that you close your eyes and you are not yourselves, you don’t know who you are, you only know that the right sex is a song of praise, and so much flows on after the coda.

Jenn Rossmann

I Cover the Rest

Sometimes a man's just glad for a TV and a capable bartender. Tonight, the barman's got a clairvoyant sense he ought to keep our mugs full and his mouth shut. To keep it this way I'm paying him five for each three-fifty beer. My son Kevin's letting me pay, not even bothering anymore with the effort of reaching for his wallet. For once we can forgo our usual duel, where the man with faster reflexes plays generous provider. Monday Night Football is on: Raiders at Pittsburgh. Kevin's playing at watching the game, though my Raiders are shit this year. "Tough hit," he says, or "come on," always a few seconds after the play.

"Is that snow?" I ask about the white stuff starting to dust the field and the shoulders of guys on the bench. It's something to say.

"Looks like," says Kevin.

"January in Pittsburgh, no thanks."

"No thanks."

I can hear fragments of the game over the jukebox. Looks like Yancey wants a PI call on Webber, but nobody's throwing a flag. The bartender slides a new mug into my grip. I make a note of his name – Aaron – and think there ought to be a course in bartending school called How to Be More Like Aaron. The beer is cold and malty.

I spy on Kevin to see how he's holding up. He's smoothing the fringe of his damp cocktail napkin, staring up at the TV. It's been two days since he admitted his wife had packed up and taken their twin daughters to Chicago. We were in this bar when he told me. I don't know how long he carried it around inside before he finally let me hear it.

Kevin has always resembled his mother. He has her broad mouth and bright eyes, her small nose. I've wondered, sometimes, what he might have looked like had I married someone else instead. Elisabeth, for instance, the girl I was supposed to be on a date with when I met his mother, Angie.

This was thirty-three years ago. I got set up with Elisabeth by Tommy Howard, who had a thing for Angie. His plan was that the four of us would hit the lanes and the diner, share a basket of fries and a pitcher of beer, and pair off neatly around midnight. Elisabeth was tall and thin, with a way of biting her lower lip when she was concentrating. I can't say why it happened that I fell for Angie instead. Maybe it was only for the chance to pull the rug out from under Tommy. I targeted Angie with jokes, sharing asides and liking the way Tom's cheeks were burning. "Be a pal," he kept saying, ring-a-ding-ding.

The funny thing is, Tommy ended up with Elisabeth; they run an art gallery in Santa Fe. Parquet floors and bare-brick walls and a pottery wheel in back for Elisabeth. She writes Christmas letters about the gallery, the town, the kids. She says "we" instead of "I."

And I ended up with Angie. She was a chemical reaction in those days, always sparking and giving off heat. She used to wear clothes that made music: skirts with little bells on the ends of a draw-string, shoes that slip-slapped against her heels. When, after B-School, I got a real suit-and-tie job, she stopped wearing her filmy, gypsy clothes, except for one blousy shirt with embroidery that she would wear with jeans. She let her hair hang down her back in thick curls, even though the other wives mostly had sleek little bobs. "I'm low-maintenance," she would tell me. "Wash and wear Angie, that's me."

She went back to the loose-fitting skirts and thick sandals when she got pregnant. I remember, she took a class in silversmithing, which seemed okay since we lived in Boston— some sort of Paul Revere thing – and she made me a ring that I wear on my pinky. I never thought of myself as a pinky-ring kind of guy, but that's the finger it fits on. To tell the truth, I think maybe Angie made it the wrong size. But she liked taking the class, said it kept her mind occupied while she was waiting for the baby.

I wear Angie's ring on my right hand so it doesn't knock against my wedding ring. When I lift my glass, the silver makes a satisfying clank against the freshly full pint.

If the baby had lived, she would've been Kevin's older sister. He would be a different man if he'd grown up with her. I imagine she would've looked out for him, kept him from rushing into marriage with the first girl who let him possess her. Maybe taught him how to dress in high school. The importance of clothes and hairstyles had snuck up on him; she would've made sure he wasn't ambushed. Set him up with a college friend of hers so he'd have a date for his junior prom.

But, as it turns out, Kevin is an only child. I didn't know what to say to Angie, how to help her heal; I was hurting a fair bit myself. I parroted back what people told me: "It's for the best," "It's God's will," "It wasn't the right time." The lines were supposed to soothe us, but the grimaces of the people talking seemed to apologize for the failure of the words even as they spoke. We sat around wondering, eating take-out food because it was comprehensible. Pizza boxes piled up in the kitchen.

We got drunk one night on margaritas in our neighbor Ed's backyard. Staggering home, pulling our clothes off, messily kissing, fumbling in the dark. No time for the diaphragm or wondering whether we were ready. Then, thirty-eight weeks later, Kevin.

"Think they'll go for two, then, Dad?"

"Stewart hasn't completed a pass all night. I guess they might try to run it in."

"It's that guy Webber," Kevin says. "He's all over the receivers."

Webber, a hotshot who hasn't delivered all season, knows the Monday Night spotlight is on. This is my team, and I ought to be pleased, but it feels cheap and artificial. I swing my beer toward the screen. "Looks like they're going for it."

"Looks like."

Kevin put back something Angie and I had forgotten. I didn't even know we'd lost it, until we were standing at the hospital nursery, peering through a lemon-scented window at our son. He was wrapped in a standard-issue blue blanket, pink and squinty. Ah, there it is, I thought, as if I had found my wallet on the floor without having felt it drop from my pocket.

On weekdays, the two of them came downtown and we had picnic lunches on the Common. I slung my tie over my shoulder and played patty-cake with Kevin. He held out fallen leaves to me, in offering. Crisp, rust-colored leaves that he held by the stems so they wouldn't crumble in his small hands. Look, Daddy, he seemed to be saying: autumn.

Steelers, down nine with two minutes to go. They've got to be hoping for a miracle. I reach for my drink and find it fuller than I'd expected.

Kevin says, "I wonder if it's snowing in Chicago."

"Might be."

"Maybe I should call."

"Couldn't hurt."

He doesn't move from his barstool. I half-turn from the TV to give him a once-over. His mouth hangs slightly open, as if he's about to speak.

Angie and Kevin were so close; they seemed to understand each other in some telepathic way. She cradled him in her arms as she kissed me goodbye in the mornings. And he exhausted her. By the time I got home in the evenings, she was completely worn out. He had sucked her dry, cracked, sore, so that I didn't dare touch her. He wore creases into her beautiful forehead. When I talked about maybe taking some time off and traveling, like we'd always planned, she said continuity was important. I had daydreams about Santa Fe, parquet floors and potter's wheels.

After a handful of nuts from the small bowl Aaron has placed on the bar, I enjoy a long drink of beer. There's a kid in a baseball cap at the juke, pouring in quarters. I hope he's not the same guy who designed the soundtrack for the last half hour. At a commercial, I take a quick break in the men's room.

I don't pretend to know what happened between Kevin and Melanie. Their marriage is their business, and I can't think of any good that came from people sticking their noses in ours. Angie said last

night she thinks they'll work it out. I don't know whether Melanie moving to Chicago is going to help that any.

A sideline reporter is congratulating Webber, the cornerback who broke up the Steelers' passes. "How is it," the reporter asks, "that you seemed to be part of every play tonight?"

Webber is strangely childlike without his helmet, his head emerging from his pads as if he stands inside a larger man, like one of those Russian dolls. Only silver and black. "I read somewhere," he says, "that water covers seventy percent of the earth." He makes a little shrug. "I cover the rest."

You've got to hand it to him. Nonchalant, like every single game is like this, like he's never been juked by a second string receiver who pranced right into the endzone.

The reporter nods and thanks him for his time.

"That's assy," Kevin says.

"Big balls," I agree.

"I like it."

"Me too."

Aaron refills our bowl of peanuts.

Kevin eases off his stool. "I think I will give Mel a call," he says.

"Good luck."

A guy at the end of the bar looks as if he's had the hardest day of his life. His suitcoat is rumpled; his shirt has a large blue ink stain that approximates the effect of a bullet to the left ventricle. He downs two fingers of scotch. After he's done, he keeps his hand wrapped around the glass like it'll keep the juice coursing through him a bit longer.

He catches me taking him in and nods. “Another,” he tells Aaron, and at once the glass is refilled.

As he tips his head I can almost taste the scotch, the way it’s warming the back of his throat and distracting him from whatever injustice has been done to him. A man with a tumbler of drink in his hand is a man with his eye on the ball, a man with a solid line of defense.

“She’s out.” Kevin’s voice pulls me away from the scene.

“So you didn’t talk to her?”

“I talked to the girls. Then the woman she’s staying with came on, and just said, ‘Melanie’s out.’”

“Maybe she went to get them some dinner, or shopping. Maybe she just didn’t want to talk to you.”

Kevin shakes his head. “This friend would’ve said so. Out is different. Out means with a man.”

My beer level is dangerously low. I crane my neck for Aaron, but he’s tending to the sad sack with the ink stain. He’s got an ER nurse’s instinct for triage, for tending to the most desperate cases. I’m slightly relieved that I don’t seem more urgent. But still.

The TV is replaying highlights from the game: here’s Webber breaking up a pass in the end zone. Here he is in slow motion, knocking the ball from another man’s hands.

He points to his watch. “Plus, it’s after eleven there. Out means, with a man.”

“Not necessarily,” I say. “Plus, she’s only been there a week; how could she have met someone already?”

Kevin shrinks back from the bar. His voice is weak. “She knows someone.”

“Be reasonable, Kev.”

“His name is Doug.”

“What?” My mouth is dry with thirst.

“Doug Jackson. He was her boss at work, and they transferred him to Chicago.”

“Doug,” I say.

“We used to play bridge together. Asked the girls to call him Uncle Doug.”

“Jesus, Kevin.”

He loses himself in his beer. The jukebox blasts me with angry guitar.

Kevin was eight or nine when I started sleeping with the girl from Goldsmith & Wong. Lucinda was her name. The regret I felt at first grew fainter as the affair went on. And once I finally figured out that what I really wanted was to be at home with my wife and son, and not with a stranger named Lucinda in a cheap motel room that smelled of someone else’s cigarettes, Angie didn’t make it easy for me. I pretty much got down on my knees and begged to be part of her life, and Kevin’s. Suddenly that stale regret was something I could taste in the back of my throat, coming up acidic and sour. “How long has this been going on?”

“I’ve known since September,” Kevin says. “She told me it was over, that she’d made a mistake and so on. Didn’t mean to hurt us – that meant, me and the girls. That it didn’t matter now since Doug was getting sent to the Chicago office.”

“Didn’t matter.”

“That’s what she said. I was an idiot, Dad.”

“No.”

“Well, what else do you call it when a man lets his wife slip away through his fingers?”

God damn that Aaron. I'll be damned if my son's going to turn into the mess at the end of the bar. Melanie, the mother of my grandchildren: I can't believe she'd do this to him. "She loves you," I say.

Kevin is trembling, one of those brittle autumn leaves.

"She never stopped. I'm sure of it." I guess I'm a bit of an expert on his, having loved Angie all through my Lucinda entanglement, but I don't share the details of my wisdom with Kevin. "Let me tell you something," I say. "When you weld two pieces of metal together, the weld is the strongest thing about it. If the part ever breaks, down the line, it's never the weld that fails. It's some crack somewhere else you never even noticed."

"What are you talking about, Dad?"

"This guy," I say, "he's the crack. He's got nothing to do with the bond you and Melanie have."

"Doug."

"Right. The weld is still good, son. He's just pulling at the edges." This line of thinking seemed poetic and vital in my head, but now as it spills out I'm not so sure. I mesh my fingers together, a church with no steeple, to show him.

Kevin stares at the scratches on the bar.

"You ought to go and fight for her," I tell him.

He looks up, unsure.

"Hell, yes." But I picture him standing, rumpled and desperate, on the threshold of some woman's apartment. Pleading with his family. I have to shake the vision out of my head. It's horrible.

Both of us grab for the fresh mugs that have materialized before us, open our throats to the drink.

"Girls said it's snowing there."

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve got that heavy coat.”

“Yeah.”

On TV, men are in the locker room, splattering each other with champagne. I hadn’t realized this game was that important. How much was at stake. A reporter is talking with them; bare-chested and dripping, the men recount the day’s glories. Again comes the footage of Webber breaking up a pass. There’s a quick cut to the Steelers’ locker room, where the mood is somber, funereal. A player looks down at a microphone as if it has insulted him. Whatever they are saying has been said before, a thousand times. Just trying to do my best for the ball club; Really have a lot of respect for my opponent.

Kevin sways a little; I’m prepared to reach out and keep his bar stool from tottering. I think about Angie, that toughie look she has when she’s somewhere between crying and scratching my eyes out. When I’ve done something stupid like sleep with a girl named Lucinda and tell Angie about it. I wish that Kevin wanted to scratch this Doug’s eyes out. He’s in no shape to go reclaim his family.

“She loves you,” I say, again.

He spins. “Dad, what the fuck are you talking about?” There’s fire in his voice, but none in his eyes, and even his voice’s heat has petered out by the end of the sentence, leaving “about” hanging half-said and tepid.

“Melanie. She loves you.”

This time he takes a drink of beer to make the words pour out. “Dad, Melanie’s in Chicago with her boss, Doug.”

“For now.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Give her a reason to come back.”

“Why should I have to do that?”

“That’s just how it works,” I say. Otherwise they’re always going to think about goddam Santa Fe. “Goddam Doug.”

“Cheers to that.” Kevin’s voice is hollowed-out, wraith-like.

The football game has been replaced by an old sitcom: WKRP. Venus, Les, and Johnnie are talking with the platinum-haired Jennifer. They’re each a little in love with her. I was always a Bailey man, myself. Sure, Jennifer had her good points, empirically: her blondeness, her breathy just-for-you voice, those sweaters. Rocket-nozzle curves. Bailey, though, was less aware of her power. She was a sneak attack, play-action, more subtle than the sweep-right Jennifer offensive.

I’m realizing I’m going to have to spell things out for Kevin. It’s going to be a long night here, with Aaron. “This is the turkey giveaway one,” I say.

“What’s that?”

I nod to the screen. “Les,” I say. “Gets this idea for a promotion where they drop turkeys out of the sky.”

“And?”

“If you catch one, you win.” I’m grinning, but he’s not looking at me.

“You win getting smacked in the head with a thirty-pound turkey that’s been dropped from a great height.”

I nod: that’s it, now you’re getting it. “From a traffic helicopter.”

I sling an arm around my son, prepared to psyche us both up. I remember the way his mother and I did this for each other, even when the diapers were on backwards, or he jumped backwards into the pool and split open his chin.

“I was never a big fan of this show.” Kevin shrugs and gives me a brave smile. His eyes, Angie’s eyes, are hollow. He looks for all the world like a man who has just won a turkey.

Beth Lefebvre

Facing the Bridge

I see it first, an hour before night's descent can cloak the behemoth rising from the swampy grassland. We didn't choose to come down this two-lane road—Kitty told us to.

Kitty is my GPS (named after the car Kit, from “Knight Rider”). In her monotone drone, she commands: “Exit I-95 for Route 17 toward Savannah.” But see, Kitty lacks a must-have feature – the ability to program a trip to avoid big, bloodcurdling bridges. Like the Talmadge Memorial Bridge. Memorial. Great. So now I am contemplating some dead governor, and mortality, as I approach the 1.9-mile divide between us and our vacation destination.

I am driving because my boyfriend, Cliff, could not risk facing bridges on our first vacation together and let an anxiety attack rob him of his manhood. If I drove, it would be a breeze. But fear is as contagious as cooties when a 46-year-old man freaks out in the seat next to you.

Kitty reminds us that we have two miles to fret about the crossing, to stare at its arc, which looks as though it will launch you into outer space rather than gently cruise over a river. Savannah is just on the other side, and I did not drive nine and a half hours so we could hyperventilate on the side of Route 17.

My Irish-pale knuckles somehow turn whiter as I clutch the wheel. Cliff grabs the “oh crap” bar above the door. He starts – well – it sounds like a pervert's deep breathing.

We ascend toward the bridge's 185-foot center, high enough to see only road, concrete walls, steel cable spokes, and sky. High enough for ocean vessels like large floating malls to pass under and deliver goods to the Savannah River distribution centers for Target, IKEA, and Heineken. Boy, will I need to pop a cold one after this.

“You’re doing fine,” Cliff whispers.

“Be quiet.”

I crank the radio, The Who’s, “Baba O’Riley,” and sing. Scream-sing. As if the noise will drown the panic.

We start to ascend. I am sweaty-palmed, making it tougher to grip the wheel. The road leaves the earth and begins to cross the water. I’ve driven over bridges larger than this dozens of times. What’s wrong with me? I start to imagine myself losing control and plummeting off the side, which kick-starts my heart into a frenzy. It pounds as if I were running a triathlon, even though my body is planted in the car’s seat. We crest the top and now I’m staring down into road and water. I worry my racing heart will cause me to get lightheaded. There’s nowhere to pull over now, and I am terrified that I will pass out behind the wheel. Cliff is silent, and seems incapacitated. I want to check if he’s okay, but I dare not move my dead-ahead, frozen stare.

Wait! Is that... land! Flat road! Blood surges to my head and I exhale.

“You did it, honey! You’re awesome!” says Cliff, still not letting go of the “oh crap” bar. In our relief, we scarcely remember getting to the hotel.

We spend four days reveling in St. Patrick’s Day festivities—especially the city’s permission to drink in public—and we take snapshots of ourselves along the riverbank, with the bridge in the background. I put up both arms in a victory sign. Cliff intersects his fingers to make the sign of the cross.

Before we leave Savannah, we spend a half hour mapping out a ten mile detour around Talmadge for the return trip. We pick I-95’s flat, piece-of-cake bridge. Along the way home, when the interstate is about to split near Washington, D.C., Kitty robotically addresses us, “Turn right onto Route 301 North.”

Route 301. Which has a bridge almost the size of Talmadge. She repeats her instructions: “Turn right onto Route 301 North.”

I look at Cliff, then veer left to stay on I-95, and hit Kitty's "off" button. We'll trust our human instincts. This time.

Alice Hunter

Mind the Gaps

“I’m in bed thirteen, can you believe it? That nurse can never get the canula in and when she does it really hurts. She had my arm in a bucket of hot water and she still couldn’t find a vein. They’re only allowed three tries. I was ready to ask for someone else...”

My mother is on a roll. We sit in nasty leather chairs outside the hospital gift shop, staring at the shelves stacked with Lucozade and crossword puzzles. Neither of us can find the words to say what is really on our minds. At times like these humour is our best defence.

Canulas are thin rubber tubes like pieces of plumbing, which are used for the delivery of intravenous fluids such as chemotherapy. They are normally inserted in the back of the hand, in the sinewy veins near the knuckles. After a time, the veins harden and inserting them becomes more difficult. My mother’s canula is fragile and hangs limply from under her wrist. She eyes it with suspicion. An expert by now, she knows it will have to be redone.

Finally, we are shown to her bed on Wilson ward. The space is dingy, illuminated by overhead neon strip lighting. Red London buses growl past the windows, which shudder in their frames from the heavy vibrations.

The chapel is just outside the ward. Candles flicker in the low light. On the front bench a cleaner in white overalls sprawls out asleep. His open mouth releases the occasional snore, punctuating the silence. At the rear, a pin-board is plastered with post-it notes. Each note bears a message of hope. My mother scribbles, ‘Please pray for Kathy Hunter,’ and pins it to the board. She is Roman Catholic but different denominations do not matter here. Here, where so many people are housed under the same roof with the same wish: to live. So many people under one roof with the same disease: cancer.

Kathy is jaundiced again. It has been developing in her skin like a sepia photograph. When we were children, she would poke out her tongue and we would laugh and say she had the tongue of a snake. Now, the whites of her eyes are yellow like a snake, but nobody finds it funny anymore.

We have been here before. Five years earlier, Kathy had a mastectomy after multiple Grade Three lesions—the more aggressive kind—were found in her left breast. If cancer cells break away from a tumour, they often become stuck in the nearest lymph nodes and are flushed around the body. My mother was lucky. Her lymph nodes were clear. Four cancer-free years passed. It became a distant memory.

A year ago, to our surprise, the cancer returned. It blocked a bile duct in her liver and so a metal stent was inserted to help clear the duct. When bile cannot drain, the waste product, bilirubin, builds up in the blood and this causes jaundice and eventually sepsis.

Again, my mother recovered, endured six months of chemotherapy and was once again cancer-free. However, remission proved merciless and lasted only a short time. So it was back to the chemotherapy, and this time Capecitabine tablets, because it was far too soon for another intravenous cycle. We knew we were running out of options, but the tablets seemed to be working. Then my mother became jaundiced for the second time.

“Stents can become blocked as a matter of course,” the consultant says. They will position another stent over, or next to, the existing one to clear any obstruction. The procedure is presented as simple and routine. She will be out of hospital in a week.

That night, it rains harder than it has rained all year. While my mother sits in the chapel steel pins bounce off the pavements outside. Relatives crowd inside the hospital entrance, not daring to go off into the night. Perhaps it will ease soon, they mutter to one another. When thunder rolls through the sky just afterwards, they realise it is set for the night.

In the end they run for it, one at a time, like darts. They run as close to the buildings as possible for there is no cover between the hospital and the tube station. Finally, at South Kensington station, with hearts beating and flushed faces, they stop running. They wring out wet hair; wipe faces dry; clean off steamed up glasses. They ran in the rain on a warm summer's evening. What fun. They are alive.

It is good to be alive.

§

Two weeks later, I visit my mother's silent home. In the kitchen, I find a pile of freshly ironed clothes that will never be worn. On the door step, a note for the milkman, 'no milk today, thank you.'

The consent form Kathy signed upon admittance to the hospital states, 'please call next of kin (daughter) only with permission of Kathleen.' The 'only' is underscored several times in heavy, black pen. My mother was reticent to confide in me about her prognosis. Even in her bleakest moments, she did not want to burden me with any pain. It was the first time in our lives there was a secret that could not be shared. Yet, I also knew she was wrong to try and save me from that pain, because we never discussed her treatment or what would happen when she died.

"It is always easy to see things with hindsight in medicine," says the consultant in his letter of condolence, "and in this case, with hindsight, the procedure was clearly ineffective. Nevertheless at the time we went ahead, it seemed to us to give her a chance of improvement however slim, and I imagine this was the view she took also." This is his apology.

I think back to my mother lying in the hospital bed just after the operation. She was sleepy. Her lips were dry and blue. I asked if she was in pain. She thought about it for a long time. Finally, she replied that it only hurt if she moved.

Over several days, I kept a bedside vigil as her condition worsened. The doctors came and went, briskly swishing the curtains back and forth and examining my mother with worried expressions. First, the medical team, then critical care, followed by symptom control and the nutritional team. As the days passed they blurred into one. Then I noticed their language begin to change.

Ruth, a young nurse with soft eyes and grungy hair, gently suggested they "might not be able to make Kathleen better." Others said we should focus on "making her comfortable," or talked of what was "fair for Kathleen." When they began to suggest that it might be "appropriate to discontinue nursing interventions," the reality of the situation finally hit home: they were trying to tell me she was dying.

The gap between medicine and reality at that point was so wide that we might as well have been talking different languages. Medical culture was casting a defamiliarising spell. My mother reduced to a risk analysis. I also felt alienated at a time when I most wanted to be involved. How could I 'trust' the nurses to look after Kathleen in the way I would have done myself? I quickly learned that the doctors made treatment decisions and the nurses only carried out their orders. Time and again, the nurses were understaffed and overtired, and the staff rota changed every day.

There is also the issue of priorities. If a nurse has two patients who require help at the same time, which one does she go to first? Is it likely to be the dying one? And is a relative going to rationalise that and think it fair that the one who will recover will be attended to first?

I worry about Kathleen's syringe driver and whether it is functioning (when medication has been discontinued, opioids such as Diamorphine and sedatives such as Midazolam are delivered intravenously to avoid the disturbance of regular injections). I worry whether she is in pain since she often cries out and clutches the air. I worry why the nurses insist on washing and turning my mother when it seems to hurt her so much that she whimpers afterwards. I worry, most of all, about her dignity in this place.

One sleepless night, I wander into the hallway. Kathleen has stopped drinking water because she cannot hold it down, but her mouth is so dry that I am holding cubes of ice over her lips to wet them. I need more ice but I am not supposed to help myself. Notices in the kitchen warn of the risks of passing infections to patients. I cannot find a nurse. Instead, I find an A4 booklet lying open on the reception desk. My mother's name is typed on the front:

'Liverpool Care Pathway
Promoting best practice for care of the dying
Care of the Dying Patient Pathway
FILE IN MEDICAL NOTES'

The title's reference to Liverpool confuses me. I can only think of my family's roots in Manchester and the strong rivalry that exists between the two northern cities. For example:

Question: What is the difference between a battery and a Scouse (Liverpool) fan?

Answer: A battery has a positive side.

It would come as no surprise to many a Mancunian that the grim reaper would come calling in the opposition's football strip. But this document of death, bearing my mother's name, feels like just another terrible joke.

I read that the Liverpool Care Pathway (LCP) was developed by the Royal Liverpool and Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS Trust and the Marie Curie Hospice in the 1990s. It aimed to help clinicians plan a 'total care package' for people diagnosed as close to death. The problem is that diagnosing death is still an inexact science. There is a margin of error, which poses great difficulties for doctors. Even the concept of a 'total care package' is insidious to many practitioners, periodically inviting accusations of 'legalised, sanitised euthanasia.'

Claud Regnard, Consultant in Palliative Care Medicine at St. Oswald's Hospice in Newcastle, UK, tells me: "Medicine has searched for over 40 years looking for clear indicators of prognosis. So far, no one has found anything reliable. There are only two methods: firstly, to give someone the known statistics (e.g. a 50% chance of surviving five years). This tells the individual nothing of his or her own survival but a few find knowing the 'odds' helpful for future planning. Secondly, there is the 'horizon effect' or that the closer you get to death the more accurate you get. If someone is deteriorating month-by-month they probably have months left, while someone changing day by day may have only days."

§

I have been at the hospital for a week. My mother's condition is deteriorating. I stay at her bedside without a change of clothes and little to no contact with the outside world. It is reassuring in its own way, this hospital womb. Outside it is too cold and indifferent: business as usual. Day and night blur into one and my brain will not shut down for sleep. I keep wondering why this had to happen.

I decide to put my question to Kathleen's doctor, Tom Waddell. He is a pale, sensitive man with a grave expression and a soft Scottish accent. He takes great care when he examines my mother. He sits beside her when he talks to her. Moreover, he speaks in simple terms, not the complicated terminology other doctors use, as if it somehow slips their minds that their patients are human beings.

“Was my mother healthy enough to have the operation in the first place?” I ask him. (“Should she ever have had the operation at all?” I try to say.)

Waddell answers in a steady voice as if he is talking about the weather, but I can see in his eyes that the outcome has upset him. “Had Kathleen not had the operation she would probably have enjoyed many more months of active life,” he says, “but you have to balance that against the chances of improvement from the stenting.”

It is not much, but he is honest. It is still no consolation. At that moment, administering care seems like shooting a game of pool. Each drug sets a series of consequences and effects into action. Chemotherapy, for example, kills cancer cells, but it also destroys the body’s immune system. Medicine is a culture of risk and the complexity of balancing treatments is enormous. This is the principle of iatrogenics: disease or inadvertent effects resulting from medical treatment or advice. In the US, it is the leading cause of death and injury, far ahead of both heart disease and cancer. The doctors have been working so hard to save my mother. I find myself wishing they had just known when to stop.

Kathleen is moved several times from ward to ward and from bed to bed. Slowly the geography of these moves becomes clear. Palliative care sits on the top floor of the Royal Marsden Hospital. The corridor snakes around in an L shape away from the reception, offering the most magnificent views over South West London. When my mother is finally moved into the end room next to the service lift, I realise this is the shortest possible distance down to the mortuary. The room is number 14. Sequentially it should be 13. But, as usual, the hospital staff has thought of everything.

Naturally, I find myself referred for grief counselling. These recreant thoughts help no one, least of all me. I stare into space while the grief counsellor presses me to accept that my mother knew she was dying. I simply cannot. No, will not under any circumstances. When the time came to make the decision to stop the treatment. I asked the nurse not to remove the canula from my mother’s hand. I knew she would notice the absence of wires and drips. Although she was sleeping nearly all the time, rare moments of clarity still presented themselves. At one such moment, she opened her eyes to see my brother and myself staring at her, glum-faced. “Cheer up,” she briskly told us, “I don’t want to see long faces. I’m not going to die you know.” The determination in her voice told me everything. The spirit is always willing. It is the flesh that is so weak. And still, the grief counsellor won’t let the matter drop. I wonder how this is supposed to help.

Professor Smith, my mother's consultant, concludes his letter of condolence: "A further ultrasound showed there was extensive disease. At that point, it was clear that the deterioration was a combination of infection and progressive cancer, and there was little further we could do other than continuing the antibiotics."

If only my mother had not been admitted to hospital in the first place, I think. If only she had refused the treatment. If only... If only. Two little words that always arrive too late. Just a little more time, we ask. Just another day. Just another breath. We bargain and barter for our lives. "How well your mother looked when I last saw her," my friends say. They cannot believe she is gone.

Nor can I. Even when death is inevitable, when hope is yesterday's news, still I stroke her soft, blonde hair, and silently repeat over and again, "Please don't die Mum. Please don't die."

§

I was with my mother when she died. I held her hand. It was 7.45 am on Tuesday 28th July. The sky was blue and cloudless, and carried the promise of a summer's day. It reminded me of being a little girl and holding my Grandmother's hand for dear life, while she asked me how many sailor suits I might cut from above.

My mother died with grace. She simply stopped breathing as if trying to cause the least possible fuss. Above all, she died with the dignity that was all but denied her in ten days of panicked treatment in emergency mode. Dying well, as the Buddhists describe the process, should not be a matter of chance, funding or convenience. It is our basic human right. Let us not forget that simple truth.

I sit in that plastic chair beside my mother's bed. I see the purple bruises form on her young, olive skin as the blood stops flowing through her veins. I can't even comprehend that she is finally gone, let alone how much I will ache to have her back. And in that moment, shock claims me and I look up and I notice: it is such a perfect day outside. It is such a perfect day.

William Henderson

Mylar

On my lunch break, I bring over a dozen Mylar balloons that I have bought for your party, and some candy. Maybe if I bring over snacks, you and your two friends won't feel the need to go out when you're high.

We are unraveling. We are coming apart. Holly doesn't want you around Avery, and I no longer trust you completely around him. I no longer trust you completely around me.

Trust. Funny word for me to think, or say. Of course you trust me. You think you can trust me. And I trust you, or think I can trust you, but I can't trust you, can I? You've started cancelling plans with me so that you can get high with your best friend. You told me you and I didn't need to celebrate our sixth month anniversary together because we'd have many such anniversaries.

I minded, not celebrating the anniversary with you, if only because I had already arranged to be out of the house I share with Holly, my wife, who you don't know is my wife. Trust. Funny word for me to think, or say.

Somewhere between buying the balloons and getting to your apartment, I decide to leave my old iPhone under your bed with a recording application running and record you and your friends getting high. I think if I can show you how you get when you're high, you will begin to understand. I think that you getting high every day, and risking losing me and Avery, is as bad as you doing crystal meth again, which means I am fulfilling the promise I made you on our second date. I will do whatever I need to keep you safe. I love you. I'm doing this because I love you, I think.

People in love do desperate things. This thinking, my plan, I know it is all desperate. I don't know what else to do.

You laugh at the balloons. They're great, you say.

What's a party without balloons?, I say.

Holly does not know I am having an affair with you; you do not know Holly is my wife. The strain of keeping you from her and she from you is wearing on me. Maybe the strain is why I am recording you. If you find the phone, we are over. If I don't like what I hear on the phone, we are over.

I love you, but we are over. Should be over. Should never have started.

Around midnight, I text you. You do not respond. Around 3 a.m., I text: Are you done? Yes, you respond. Do you want company? I don't care, you say. Then I'll stay here, I say. Fine, you say.

I am angry and hurt. I know I won't be able to sleep, that I will run your words around in my head, trying to figure out if you wanted me to push harder or if you really didn't care.

I changed my mind, I text. I'm coming over.

Fine.

I call you when I'm on my way, and you answer, but you sound exhausted and high. I need to get up at five, you say. Let me rest until you get here.

At your apartment, I take off my clothes and crawl under the comforter. You are wearing underwear and a tank top. You say hi. I say hi. We do not touch. And then I reach for you, and you reach for me, and we are kissing and you are kissing me unlike how you've ever kissed me before. I pull away. How high are you?, I ask.

I don't feel very high at all, you say.

And then you kiss me again, and I kiss you, and the sex we have is frantic. It is nearly 4 a.m.

We sleep, though I feel like no time has passed when your alarm sounds. You get out of bed and walk into the bathroom. I hear the shower turn on. While you are gone, I get the phone from under your bed. There is less than five percent of the battery life remaining. I recorded us fucking, I think. That will be exciting to hear.

I take you to work, and when I get home, Holly is awake.

Where were you?, she asks.

I couldn't sleep, so I went to work.

OK, she says. Still, she believes me.

I did something horrible, I say. Holly is getting ready for work. Avery is asleep. We will have to wake him up soon. He has started crying when we wake him up. He burrows deeper under the blankets. He searches for Holly or for the warm spot she has left behind.

What did you do?, she asks me.

I left my phone in his room and recorded him and his friends getting high last night.

She just looks at me.

I need to play it for him. I need him to know who he is when he's high. I need him to see that he's heading down the path back toward crystal meth. He asked me to do this. He asked me to do whatever it would take to keep him safe.

That's not your job, Holly says.

I know, I say, but he's my friend, and I care about him, and I think I can help him. I think I'm the only person in his life who can help him.

If you need to record him getting high to show him what his drug use is doing to him, and to you, than you maybe should reconsider his place in your life. You have other options.

What?, I ask.

You could have talked to him about it.

He told me that if I make him choose between our friendship and the drugs, then he will pick the drugs.

She laughs. It is a hollow laugh, maybe even bitter. I know what she is thinking. This man, this drug addict, is who I've been spending time with while she is slowly growing our second child, and while our son asks most nights why daddy isn't home.

The fact that he has told you what he will pick if you make him pick is him picking, Will, she says. He isn't picking you.

I know, I say.

And still I listen.

I hear your roommate selling you an ounce of weed. Your best friend is already there. He tells you he will bring his half of the money later. Your roommate tells your friend that he is a good guy, and that he is better company for you than I am.

You and your best friend laugh.

Your best friend sees the candy I bought and asks about it.

Will brought it over, you say. I guess he thinks we're going to get high tonight or something. You both laugh.

I don't mean to be an asshole, your friend says, but that candy sucks.

Of course you mean to be an asshole, I think. You are an asshole. I've seen it from the first day I met you. I do not understand why D doesn't see it.

Then we won't eat it, you say.

I listen to the two of you smoke. Your other friend does not have a car and needs your best friend to get him. Your best friend doesn't want to get him. I just want tonight to be for us, he tells you.

No, you say, let's go get him.

I need to talk to you about something serious, your best friend says. Can you be my life coach?

What?, you ask.

I need help. I don't know what to do with my life. I think if I come over three or four nights a week and talk with you, and smoke – and here you both laugh – then I can start figuring out stuff. I trust your opinion more than I do anyone else's.

OK, you say.

You know that means Will can't come over on those nights. I don't want to have to split your attention.

OK, you say. I'll make sure he understands.

And how exactly are you going to do that?, I think.

You leave. The room is silent. I skip ahead to when I can hear voices. You have gone to the grocery store. You have picked up your other friend.

You know, your best friend says, I dreamed about the characters from Handy Manny last week.

You laugh. You know, you say, when I told Will that we had watched it, he freaked the fuck out.

Then you imitate me telling you how I felt about you watching Avery's cartoon. You change your voice. You repeat what I said to you. Your friends laugh.

I'm tired of how he reacts to me, you say.

He just doesn't get it, your best friend says. He doesn't understand that you're just trying to understand cartoons in a way that you weren't able to as a child. Who is he to tell you what you can and can't watch?

You know, you say, I saw my ex-boyfriend, Simon, at a bar with Will the other day.

I hear what sounds like you pulling up a video of Simon performing in something.

After the video ends, you tell your friends about seeing the man from your doctor's office. I knew he was gay, you say. He's cute. And I think he's a stoner. I'm thinking about running into him and asking him to get some tea. I'll bring up getting high, and if he's interested, see if he wants to come back here. Usually when you leave something good, you should have an upgrade in mind.

You had said that to me about four weeks ago. Is he the upgrade you have in mind?

Then what?, your best friend asks.

Then whatever happens next happens next, you say.

I can't hear any more of this, but I can't stop listening. I have to pee. I don't want to walk anymore. I don't want to throw you a birthday party. How can you be saying these things? I don't even think this is the first night you've said things like this. Have you been cheating on me?

It's about time you find someone better than Will, your best friend says.

I'm tired of dating someone who won't get high with me and who judges me when I do, you say.

You leave the room to make some brownies. While you're gone, your two friends talk about their separate credit scores. Your friend is trying to fix his credit. Your best friend tells him that his credit is too far gone. Don't even try, he tells him. When you return, your friend asks you what you think. You tell him that everything is salvageable. Just work at it, you say. Your best friend agrees. That's just what I was telling him, he says.

Asshole.

Want to do something else?, someone asks. Maybe it is your best friend. Maybe it is you. I cannot tell because I am crying and Avery is asking for me, and the birds, the goddamn birds on the side of the river, are loud and the sky itself seems loud, or at the very least seems like it is about to fall, or that it is already falling and I'm the only one who knows it.

I hear you bring out the pills that your doctor had prescribed for your head that hadn't worked. You offer them their choice. I hear you, or someone, crush the pills. I hear the three of you snort the pills.

Daddy sad?, Avery asks me. I am crying. I look at him. He is the only person in my life who knows you. He keeps secrets he doesn't know he's keeping.

I call Holly. I do not know what else to do.

He snorted pills last night, I tell her. He always said he would never snort anything again.

I don't want him around Avery anymore, and I don't know why you want him around Avery if he's high as often as you say he is. I don't know why you'd even want to be around him.

I can't even ask him about it, I say. How do I say I know?

Addicts are clever, she says. They are good liars. We form addictions to distract ourselves from ourselves. He doesn't really have room for you.

I shouldn't have recorded him.

But you did, and now you have to decide what you're going to do.

I'll have to ask him, I say. Holly doesn't say anything. I just wanted to help him, I say.

You know what we say at work, Holly asks. How can you tell when an addict is lying?

I don't know.

They open their mouths, Holly says.

I know you can't talk, I say to you later when I call you, but I'm at your apartment cleaning up and I found this powder on your desk. I think that your desk is the only place in your room where you would have crushed the pills. Did you guys do cocaine last night?

You laugh. No, you say. You know I don't put anything up my nose. If you taste the powder, and your lips tingle, then you'll know that it's cocaine. It isn't cocaine.

What about pills? Did you guys snort pills?

No, you say.

You can tell me, I say. I won't judge you.

No, rabbit, you say.

OK, I say. I'll just clean up here then.

I call Holly. He denied snorting pills. He lied to me.

Now you know, she says.

I bring everything to your home and finish setting up. I do not think I can act as if everything is OK and put our relationship on display in front of your friends. I write a note telling you that I am not

coming, that I know about the pills, and that I love you, but I cannot be with you anymore. Avery is playing with some cars in your room, and I look around and because I am having trouble separating what in the room is you from what in the room is us, and because I do not never want to be in this room again and in your arms, I rip up the note.

I'm on my way, I text you later when I am on my way. Holly didn't need to ask me what I had decided; I am coming to your party. My decision is fairly clear.

OK, you respond.

I'm excited for tonight, I text. I'm spending the evening with my pseudo-fiancé.

Your pseudo-fiancé better be me, or we have bigger problems, you reply.

I almost respond that we have bigger problems, perhaps even insurmountable problems, and that's not even including my wife that you do not know about, but instead I say of course you are my pseudo-fiancé. No one else, I text.

You respond, as you do when I say or text the words no one else: nowhere else.

You ask me to pick up some beer and wine. Already, this party has cost more than I had intended, but I agree, and when I get to your apartment, I bring up what is in my car, and begin cleaning your living room. You hear me, and you run into the room. You hug and kiss me. I love the flowers, you say. Thank you for being you and for everything you have done and everything you do.

You look so happy, I think. How can I think about leaving you and us? I can pretend, at least for tonight, to be happy and in love. But Holly is right; I know what to do.

We set up a tray of plastic silverware and a stack of paper napkins. We do this without talking. We do not need to talk. I have always liked this about our relationship. When we are done, you touch my face.

We're good at this, you say.

Yes.

Do you think we'll have parties like this often?, you ask.

I'd like that, I say.

You smile, and then you get the look you get when you have remembered something. I have to show you something, you say. I follow you into your room. You show me your bag. Look, rabbit, you say. I look at your bag and I don't see anything.

You pick up your bag and hold it open to me. Inside, I see a pile of what looks like sugar crystals.

One of the sugar packets I carry with me must have broken, you say. The bag was on my desk this morning. That's what you saw earlier. Sugar. From a broken sugar packet.

That must have been it, I say. There was never powder on your desk.

I should have bought fewer balloons. Too many float near the ceiling. I'll take some home tomorrow for Avery. He'll get a kick out of the balloons – trying to hold on, and letting them go, and trying again to reach them, despite them being out of his reach. People have to duck around strings in the kitchen in your apartment where the party I organized is happening. And you are happening, and I am happening, and there are strings you do not know I know about, and these strings you do not know I know about are unraveling, have unraveled, and no matter how high I reach, you will be out of reach, high, up there, without me.

Hayley Hughes

Montreal

A statement as bold as, “The best tomatoes in Québec,” deserves validation, even at breakfast. Market day at Marché Jean-Talon came especially early that July Tuesday, a chilly morning almost a month into the rhythm of the road trip, and a sharp nudge in my stomach reminded me that I had not yet eaten. My eyes caught those of the tomato vendor, who wore a charcoal beret, and he extended a slice of his famously sweet wares. It sat perilously on an emerald-plumed cocktail toothpick and I popped the piece of sunshine in my mouth, giving the man a smile full of seeds and saying an awkward, *Merci*. The anthropomorphized tomato from the sign above the stall grinned down, plump and serene-looking, and bade me, “Venez y goûter,” or “Come and taste,” watching as scarlet juice dripped down my chin.

It was only a short walk through the red, white, and green awnings of Montréal’s Little Italy to get to the market, but as usual, I’d managed to get lost. For a woman traveling on her own after a self-imposed exodus from love, I had an especially lousy sense of direction, and still do. In true Blanche DuBois style, during my trip, I often came to depend on the kindness of strangers, but on that particular day, I asked a less than helpful old woman for directions while she waited for the subway. She sneered when she heard me speak the pidgin French I’d self-consciously constructed, turning away with an exasperated sigh at my panicked hand gestures. It wasn’t until almost an hour of wandering later that I discovered I’d been only about a block away.

In the days leading up to my culinary tour of the Marché, when I wasn’t alone with a map and a foreign language dictionary, my newfound friend Denis took me to his favorite breakfast spot in the neighborhood, *Caffé Italia*, for toast and Nutella, and espresso. On the morning I went to the market, though, he went to the gym early, telling me that if I got to the Marché Jean-Talon before the crowds, I could dine like royalty on samples. I sat at his kitchen table drinking coffee and half-listening to Québec’s morning news, and watched as he left with a duffel bag in hand. “Don’t worry,” he told me as he closed the door, “you can’t go wrong at the market.” Hoping for the best, I put on my jacket,

one that had never seen July outside the confines of my coat closet. I remember that as I locked the deadbolt behind me, I couldn't help thinking that even the news sounded better in French.

I had Denis to thank for discovering the market, and the neighborhood, in the first place. I'd turned to Couchsurfing, an internet community of travelers, when I needed somewhere to stay. While searching for a place to crash in Montréal, I found a picture of a friendly-looking man helping to free a Galapagos sea turtle that was entangled in a fisherman's net somewhere near the Equator, far from blustery Québec. As it turned out, Denis was the website's official ambassador for Montréal, and I learned that he'd hosted people from as far as Italy, Australia, and Russia. Despite the overwhelmingly positive reviews I'd read that spoke of "the best host ever," there was a nervous tingling in my gut as I followed the concise directions Denis had given me to find his apartment. The anxiety I felt was not so much one related to the fact that I was a woman traveling solo—and perhaps it should have been—as it was a fear of the vast gaps between languages, a barrier so seemingly difficult to move beyond. When I finally arrived at the apartment I parked on the street, trying to shake the feeling that I was about to have a pop quiz in a French class I'd never taken. Propped against the stairs, though, I saw a pristine and unapologetically red Vespa and somehow I knew then that we'd get along just fine, playing with the strange idea that maybe some commonalities don't need words to be expressed.

I got to Denis' at that time of day when mothers begin calling their kids inside for dinner. When I knocked on the door, a man of about forty, slightly shorter than me, with blue eyes and designer glasses, smiled. "I'm Denis," he said, shaking my hand in a light, European way. I immediately felt at ease with his sincerity, his polite way of helping me with my bags. Looking to the modern lines of his monochromatic living room, we eventually sat, and in hesitant English, Denis told me about leaving his corporate job of over twenty years just a few months before despite obscene amounts of money, cars, and vacation time. Like me, he was obsessed with travel, the urge to move, and filled hopelessly with wanderlust. His dream was to teach in China, having just fallen hopelessly for a Chinese girl—ain't it always the way?—but he was having a hard time getting a work visa approved. I found out about his childhood in Québec City, and he told me I had to go there if for no other reason than to see Parliament. On the kitchen counter, he spread a Montréal map wide, and taught me the tangled history of his city; likewise, I discussed my tangled love affairs.

"What are you running from?" I recall him asking, "What is it that scares you?"

“Never falling in love again,” I think I said, or perhaps it was, “Never being whole.”

Looking back I realize that the two aren't at all the same thing.

§

As I walked down the crowded alleyways of the Marché on market day, past women in sun dresses and men in blazers, there were stores of every kind. A poissonnerie held glistening whole fish with clear, bright eyes, and sold fried smelt by the dozen. In the street, a man deftly worked a rotisserie that spun skewers smelling of slow-cooked meat and rosemary. Further down the way, a cheese shop caught my attention. It was called, interestingly, “Qui lait cru!?!” or “That raw milk!?!” My fondness for the Food Network allowed me to appreciate the statement being made by the shop's name: in France, there's a huge controversy about whether or not to continue using unpasteurized milk in the making of their beloved brie and camembert. It's an issue of such importance to the French people that the responsibility of making the decision of safety versus tradition has fallen to the government. In Montréal, that little cheese shop had cracked a joke at what they see as pretentiousness, and their window full of culinary contraband advertises rebellion.

On the narrow streets, in a mist of rain, people stood in a line that spilled out the door of a tiny boulangerie in hopes of buying fresh, artisanal bread. While they waited, they smoked elegantly or flirted with each other; some talked on cell phones. Occasionally, two friends would find each other through the crowd, hugging and kissing cheeks in that continental way—French Canadians are far friendlier than people give them credit for. Conspicuously absent was the rush and stress I was used to as a displaced American, where no one would ever deign to wait so long for something as simple as bread or cheese. Cooking and enjoying food was, in those days, and still is, a way for me to appreciate life, to live it through my senses, and beginning in Montréal, I began to use it as a bandage, a means of healing. I felt like I was in on some kind of secret there, one that I carry with me even now, but I wonder if the world might collapse if everyone knew that the simplest things are sometimes the most worthwhile, especially where food is concerned.

§

I began to pay particular attention, that morning, to the produce stalls and their free samples, which were my reason for coming to the market in the first place. The vegetables were random, flawless statues, with asparagus soldiers stacked in neat rows and shining, sensual-looking eggplants. Eggplants were not eggplants there, they were aubergines, and the vegetables in front of me were like a living, breathing representation of purple. Small flimsy, green, plastic baskets of strawberries and raspberries were each grouped with a single, pink orchid which seemed to serve no other purpose than to make the fruit look even more like an edible Impressionist painting. The air was heavy with the smell of summer fruits, and I was persuaded, wordlessly, to buy a plum, its juice sweet, acidic, earthy.

Much like subsequent visits I've made to the Marché, all around, the vendors shouted above the heads of customers to their neighbor. Every bushel of apples and bunch of grapes sold was a competition, and housewives tasted handpicked local blueberries that have no equivalent name in Parisian French, the Québécois instead adopting the word bluets, maybe considering a tart to come. One of them spoke to me, and as I remembered that I was and am useless in their language, I smiled politely and walked away. The women's delicate expressions and bargaining were strange to me, because although they're in Canada, they are still French; clearly, those berries were serious business. I, on the other hand, ate greedily for no reason besides my own pleasure, trying everything from mangoes to smoked salmon to dripping, amber honey. As the market was alive with conversation and the sound of passing traffic, my palate was alive with the spoils of the morning. Denis was right; I came, I saw, I ate.

As is the danger in any bustling, breathing place, my wandering through the market was interrupted, before I'd learned pardon or excusez-moi, by a near collision with an important-looking shopper carrying a baguette. I apologized under my breath in my most sincere attempt at French, which was, as the woman's condescending glare reminded me, woefully inadequate. It's times like those that make me feel out of place the most, but like Denis told me, Montréal itself is a somewhat precarious marriage between Francophones and Anglophones, as the city is divided in half by the boulevard Saint-Laurent. On one side of the street, everything is in English: street names, universities, churches. The homes there are large and utilitarian-looking, and even with their sprawling lawns and climbing roses, seem to be missing something. Once you cross Saint-Laurent, though, French is everywhere—familiar stop signs say arrêt, flags with the Québec fleur de lis fly, and, as Denis said, things are “interesting.” Nevertheless, I occasionally caught a whiff of English at the Marché Jean-Talon, hidden among the smell of baking croissants, and I'd smile to myself.

I'd like to, at this point, say a few words about my inexplicable love affair with French that began perhaps a decade ago, or maybe earlier. Sometime during the summer before middle school began, a humid July spent with my father in Newark, Ohio, a city that for some reason opted to have Kmart as an anchor store in the local mall, I decided that French was for me. I'll be the first to point out that I'd never met a French person, and had barely heard a word of the language at all except for the select phrases thrown around in cartoons like Madeleine or uttered by Pepe LePew.

Unlike schools these days, where kids count forwards and backwards and say, "The weather's cold today," in Spanish at age four, I wasn't allowed to take a foreign language — apparently a prospect that could only be entrusted to awkward, angsty twelve-year-olds — until I'd reached the seventh grade. I regret that, now, having only begun to learn the syntax, grammar, and soul of a second language long after the window of opportunity had all but closed. Nevertheless, I'd gotten more and more excited as September grew closer, if for no other reason than, in my young mind, I expected to be speaking impeccable, charming French no later than November, saying, "Joyeux Noel," instead of "Merry Christmas."

Like so many things, my expectations were dashed in a phone call. I used my dad's cordless, an enormous device, then, while he was at the office, to call my mother. After talking for a while about the unfortunate things my dog, Daisy, was doing while I was gone, she eventually said pragmatically, "Hayley, we have to sign you up for your foreign language. You're taking Spanish."

"What? No, Mom, sign me up for French. I want to take French."

My mother sighed. "Honey, think about it. You'll never use French, let's be practical—"

"—but it's so beautiful!" I argued, cutting her off, thinking of the songs in French my best friend got to sing in her music classes for the gifted, perhaps remembering snippets of lines I'd heard in movies: *bon voyage, c'est la vie, au revoir.*

"You'll love Spanish," my mother said. "And you'll probably actually have a reason to learn it." That's that, her tone implied, and the phone call ended with a reluctant, "I love you," on my end. In the fall,

I was enrolled in first period Spanish class at Verity Middle School with Señora Womack.

That period of time was when my love of French truly came alive—it was almost like a secret, a transgression, a need to be fulfilled in private. I enjoyed Spanish, and did quite well with the language throughout the years I spent with it, during a church mission trip to Mexico, into college, and while I fondly barked orders at my job to Hispanic cooks. Still, though, the twelve-year-old me asked every friend who took French with Mrs.—er, Madame—Clark to start saving all of their notes and spare handouts for me, which I poured over, learning to pronounce the words horrendously, and even developing a habit of reading aloud the French labels on toothpaste tubes and shampoo bottles. “Rinse! Repeat!” I imagine myself saying in the shower as a teenager, in badly butchered French. Soon after, as I pursued my dream of being an opera singer, I learned to sing in French, becoming more convincing with every hour in the practice room. When I auditioned into the chorus of a professional production of *Carmen* at fifteen, I listened to the French pronunciation tape until it broke—while I got dressed, while I studied, while I slept, the words filling my mouth like balloons.

I asked my first boyfriend—who took French at the Catholic high school, of course—to write to me in French, and when we broke up after our two-month-long relationship that felt to my young heart like two years, I repeated the words like a mantra, or the rosary: *Je m'appelle Troy. J'ai quinze ans et j'adore une fille. Elle s'appelle Hayley.* But once I found myself in Québec and began to fear that I'd be longing for it afterward, I couldn't help but seriously wonder—what was my real reason for loving French? Why did I care so much about a language I'd barely even heard? Perhaps it's out of a need to connect—to stare in wonderment at a life that isn't mine, but one that can be accessed through communication, whether it be by way of conversation, food, or giving a smile to a stranger. Some things, after all, are universally understood, aren't they?

§

I walked back to Dénis' house that summer day on weary feet, thinking over the new words I'd learned in the market: *boulangerie*, *poisonnerie*, *aubergine*. Saying the phrases aloud made me feel like a young Brigitte Bardot, albeit less convincing. Children played ball in the street and yelled things to each other that I didn't understand. Their laughter echoed off the buildings while the sun warmed the laundry that hung to dry above. In front of me, a man who was older and good-looking paused at the wrought-iron railing at his steps. He spoke and I could hardly manage my, “*Je ne parle*

pas Français,” before he asked me in a thickly accented, “Are you lost?”

I looked around. There was the Caffé Italia, surrounded by animated, mustached Italians, talking about something in grand gestures. The Jean-Talon subway stop was across the street, where the woman from that morning dismissed my French. I remembered the note Denis left me the morning after I arrived—in thoughtful cursive, it wished me a good day and thanked me for what he described as, “a conversation that changes someone.”

“No,” I shook my head, “I’m not lost. Merci beaucoup.” He smiled and went inside, closing the heavy wooden door behind him. I reached down to feel the outline of the folded map inside my jeans pocket, but around the next corner, I saw that red Vespa, waiting.

Please note that this was reformatted from the original online version for archival purposes. Formatting may not perfectly represent original publication on cobaltreview.com.