

S. 2 – Georgia Coffee Star

That night might have rocked them a lullaby, had they been more secure. Tucked into twin beds even though they'd booked a double, but they'd been travelling long enough not to take any beds for granted. And these ones had such soft mattresses, made up with good linen. A room with a private bath, a nice hotel because they'd had it with hostels. Not realizing they were too old for such accommodation, that they were the problem and the hostels were exactly what they were supposed to be.

Thomas was sitting up against his pillows, laptop propped upon his knees. The last two days' photographs transferring from his camera one-by-one, appearing on the screen to cast his face in various hues. Mo watching him, curled up on her own bed, on her side of the room. The two of them not usually so territorial, but here it was a matter of symmetry. Thomas turning blue in the light, red, then blue again. He'd angled his screen so Mo couldn't see.

That he was looking at a picture of a girl: Transfer Completed. The photo was from the Peace Museum yesterday, the first one he'd taken that morning. A photo of a photo, the woman in sepia tones with her back to the camera, displaying the floral print of a kimono burned onto her skin. That incalculable horror could be represented so uncannily. As contrasted with the mushroom cloud, an iconicity as obscuring as the dust had been, but this woman's back obscured nothing. The imprint of truth here, a photo in a photo. Which was distance, but tangible-- Thomas was partial to truths he could hold in his hand.

But he wouldn't show Mo. Six weeks of travelling had made for well over four thousand photos-- of various sunsets, vistas, temples and pagodas-- but they seemed personal now. Though Mo had been with him the whole time, even appearing in half the shots, but here was the world

through his eyes. He didn't want to chance what she might reduce it to.

Thomas himself was rarely seen in the pictures, and he'd still been photographer in the ones where he was. With his arm outstretched to hold the camera, his head dipped into a double chin. But even at the best of times Thomas photographed badly, light glaring off his glasses, his jaw stiff and aching when he smiled. Thomas found his comfort behind the lens instead; of all the roles in his life, he liked this one the best. Something formidable had been achieved these last few weeks, and he reported, "Four thousand, three hundred and thirty seven," without even thinking. For he was of the type that thought sheer volume might constitute an oeuvre.

It was a sticking point. Thomas had viewed so much of their six weeks in Asia through his lenses, he might as well have watched it on television. He was utterly incapable of experience, preoccupied with documentation at a level that was disconcerting. Frustrating. Even when his seascapes all just blended into one, he'd argue memories did the same. Which memories didn't do, Mo was sure. Or at least when they did, they were supposed to, fading and blending all part of a memory's design.

She was sitting up in bed now. The light from the computer was distracting, the tap tap of the keyboard annoying. Illuminated letters spelling *Georgia Coffee Star* were secured to the roof next door, dousing their room in flossy pink, thin curtains shutting out none of the brilliance.

"Almost five thousand photos," said Thomas, who liked his numbers round.

"But not quite," said Mo. "There won't be time for that." Because there wouldn't be. Not for seven hundred and whatever other photos during the thirty six hours they had left. And now Thomas was exhaling through his nose, a rubber tire and she the rusty nail. "But you've got so many already," she said. Thomas was too sensitive. Lying back down, and there it was, almost.

Mo closed her eyes. Could it really be that easy?

But there it was, thought Thomas, his camera disconnecting from his laptop with a click. The noise would disturb her. And no matter what she said, it was a triumph, these four thousand, three hundred and twenty seven photos that proved not only Thomas Whittock Lives, but that There Are Places He Has Been. The whole wide world, if only so far, contained on a hard drive. Chaos, grit and ecstasy shrunk into bytes more mega than mere.

Outside the wind was blowing fierce, storm's stirring. A lagging warm front about to clash with its adversary, the first typhoon of the season descending, and Mo and Thomas hadn't realized. Neither one of them noticing the currents in the air, for they thought they'd seem storms before. Thomas was organizing his photos into albums, and Mo still had her eyes shut but then she opened them again.

"Are you going to be long?" she asked.

"Don't know."

Mo sat back up, turned on the lamp. "Anything good?"

Thomas shrugged. He created a brand new file, "Hiroshima Tuesday". There won't be time, she'd said, like the decision was hers, and now it felt like it was.

He continued sorting, and Mo got out of bed. Treading carefully, because the room was dark. In spite of the bedside lamp, the glow from the computer, and the pink light across the way. Too bright to sleep, too dark to walk, up here in this bizarre room eighteen stories into the empyrean and Mo was looking for something to read. There was only the travel guide, battered from weeks of use, from being stuffed into her backpack. Some pages dog-eared, whole sections

torn out from day-trips when they didn't want to haul the continent. But there were chapters they hadn't cracked yet, still places they hadn't been.

Then at the crash: they looked up together. A tile had come loose from a roof across the street, coasting up on the window and plunging down against their window. The view obscured as the rain started falling. Georgia Coffee Star had turned electric blur.

Thomas said, "What was that?"

Mo said, "How would I know?" She had resolved to be kinder, but Thomas made it hard. Behind his screen his head was bowed, shoulders slouched. And now, only now, did she want to push the computer away, the camera too, and crawl into that narrow bed beside him. Only when he wanted nothing to do with her at all.

Because he was reading his emails, using his access to the wireless world, but there was nothing urgent. Junior Associates with their massive quandaries, problems he could solve out of habit. These could wait a day or two. A note from his boss, but just an update, nothing had changed and Thomas clicked the email window shut.

Thunder rumbled far away, the rain falling louder, but neither of them remarked upon the weather. They were tired of weather. They were tired full stop, having had enough of such remarks, of observations lately. Of each other. Even the things they thought but never said seemed so dwelled upon.

Mo skimming a summary of Tibetan customs, and she was thinking about all they would be taking back with them. Bits and pieces picked up along the way-- sarongs, and thongs, and ethnic handicraft.

Thomas was looking at the photos again, beginning a slide show of the whole collection

nearly five-thousand strong. They'd both lost weight, he realized. Mo no longer smiled with her teeth.

And Mo was turning the page, enacting reading for the sake of comfort. What she would have given for a fat nineteenth century novel to pass the time, to take her far away from here. To just to be home, where the books were allowed to be heavy because there was no need to carry them around.

Oh home-- and she was thinking of bath towels. Her towels hanging on their hooks on the other side of the world and she could see them, memory capturing her senses: fluffy, blue, pleasure soft against her cheek, and they smelled like the dryer. The dryer-- she'd been rinsing her clothes in the sink for so long now, hanging them up to dry in the shower. Even her tank tops were stiff, nothing ever really got clean. A hotel as nice as this one, and still the towels were rough and worn with loose threads, too small for their purpose. One of the towels had to be the bath mat and it never mattered which.

But that there was a bath mat at all, which meant a bath. Even a shower hadn't been easy to come by. Once in Mongolia they'd travelled by bus for thirty hours to a destination without running water, so what a relief it was-- the bathtub, the end of this journey. Every second's passage bringing them closer to home, to end up finished where they'd started from.

There was a bolt of lightning then, the room ablaze for an instant, and then more thunder. Thomas considering turning off the computer, but he didn't want to give her the satisfaction. She was tired, but she was intolerable. Why should he always have to make it easy?

One pagoda slipping into another, and he was looking at Vietnam. Which Mo had also just arrived at, barely noticing the end of Tibet. Still thinking about the towels, how a soft touch

from one could rub her whole body dry, and she was thinking. She was staring at the ceiling when the lights went out.

The whole world disappearing, evaporating into a pinpoint of light where a stucco swirl had been, and then obliterated altogether-- pop. The last of the power when old TVs get turned off, but Mo's eyes adjusted and she found the world not gone at all. Its shapes instead draped in darkness, just the light from Thomas's screen.

But the *Georgia Coffee Star* had been extinguished. Thomas set down the computer and got up to see. Pushing the curtain aside, he looked out the window to see no lights shining, no street below. The 7-Eleven on the corner was gone; there was no sign at all of civilization. They were eighteen stories above an abyss and now they felt the wind. The gentle sway incongruous with the violent noise outside.

"It must have been the storm," he said.

Mo tossed the book aside.

Thomas turned away from the window, that blind opening. He sat on the bed, "You'd think they'd have a generator," he said. "For emergencies."

"It won't last long," said Mo. That sway, that uneasy awful peace. Because earthquake-proof buildings were designed to give way, to not collapse at a tremor, she knew. That the movement meant safety, but it was hard to be convinced. "What's out there?"

Thomas said, "Just dark, and the rain."

And neither of them had ever imagined a typhoon, supposing such weather for people prone to hyperbole. Their time in Asia had been so sticky, the heat endless, unbroken. So

accustomed to their own perpetual discomfort, they'd hadn't imagined something different or worse.

When a piece of the Georgia Coffee Star snapped, part of its scaffolding, and flew towards them. Arriving with a crash like shattering glass, but still the pane held.

"It's just the storm," said Thomas.

"But it's not." Thomas would try to make everything manageable. "Debris flying through the sky-- what storm is that?"

"Just the wind."

Wind, Mo thought, being the least of their problems. Looking out the window, straining her eyes to find a world she just couldn't see, and she imagined a blackened cow flying over a dark slice of moon. The wind getting louder now, like a highway was outside. Rain battering the glass, and they'd never sleep through this racket.

"Should we call downstairs?" Thomas asked.

"But what can they do? If they could turn on the lights, I'm sure they would."

"It might be an emergency."

"Then we shouldn't be tying up the phone," she said. "You wouldn't understand them anyway."

Thomas turned off the computer because the battery was low. The room was dark, finally.

"You're going to sleep then?" Mo asked him.

Thomas said, "I guess so." He'd never be able to sleep with the storm, but if the

alternative was Mo, he'd try. So he put the laptop away, came back to bed. Pulling down the covers to crawl underneath, though Mo was still on top of hers. His eyes adjusting, and he could see the shape of her-- there must be light from somewhere.

The pillow under his head was hard and heavy. He could still feel them swaying still; almost peaceful, were it not so imperiling his connection to earth.

It made Mo nervous too. She was freezing, her bed below the air duct, but she didn't want to move, to pull up her blankets, just in case she sent them toppling. This wasn't safety, she was sure of it, though of course Thomas would tell her otherwise. He'd find another way to render her anxiety all wrong, and with the cold and wind, she shivered again. The lightning flashing, illuminating the room just like day.

So they were staring at one another, lying both on their sides.

But when the lightning was gone, the darkness again. That one glimpse had changed nothing, and still the thunder rolled.

Thomas gripping the edge of his mattress, ashamed to suppose his stillness might just keep them stable. And yet he couldn't chance it otherwise.

With Mo holding her breath, as though the breeze of respiration even mattered. The flip side of the view was how far they had to fall, and she wondered how long it would take. So it occurred to Mo that she was about to die then. Almost resigned, she realized, with Thomas still thousands of miles away on the other side of the room. She couldn't reach him, even if she stretched out her arm. When she couldn't hold her breath anymore, she exhaled slowly.

Back and forth they blew, just like a bough. It was all give and take.

Thomas clutching the mattress, thinking here was grave danger. Something he'd never

experienced, though he'd heard about adrenaline rushes, but here was none of that. His fingers so fixed, he couldn't let go. A dream he couldn't cry out from, and what could he say if he did?

And then the room was flooded with light, as shocking as a sound. Both of them starting, so sure this was it, that the plummet would begin, but the sway kept on, everything pink as a postcard sunset. They even dared to sit up in their beds, to look out towards the electric beacon. For a glimpse to finally change something between them, to see it was the storm after all.

S. 5 – Remorse and the Post-Op Denver Convention

Perhaps it was the wine and the pill on the plane that sped the signal from his brain to his tongue and caused him to speak aloud that afternoon in the Denver hotel lounge.

“It’s not your goddam life,” he said.

The two men seated at the bar turned toward him. The bartender at the till stopped and turned as well. They stared at him like alley dogs who had found an injured cat. He looked down at the tuna melt on the plate in front of him. What had he done? This wasn’t a crisis, really. Most crises weren’t crises, really.

Even after the surgery, what he remembered most was how his wife and daughters treated him like a wounded king, giving up their favourite television shows so he could lie on the sofa and watch as much as he wanted, day and night. Even the dread had only lasted a month or so after the diagnosis, though his imagination kept spasmodically producing scenarios that he would brush away. Perhaps if he died, Elaine would never be happy again or the girls might be scarred for life, but he was being vain and morbid. Besides, the statistics were in his favour. Thank you, statistics.

A voice in his mind, sounding like his late father, insistent as a chainsaw whine, was speaking: “What are you? A baby? You get this thing, the quacks cut it out and if they kill you or cure you, that’s it. We die like animals in the field. Why should you or I be any different?” His father believed that if you hadn’t seen war, you didn’t know toughness, or disappointment or fear. When his body looked like a bag of sticks and he was trembling on the gurney, he had whispered, “Get me a gun.”

“Sorry,” he said, patting his father’s hand. So useless.

His father never reached the recovery room but he did and when he came to, they gave him a morphine pump. Every two hours when the lights were turned on he felt as though he were being dragged up from the bottom of a well. Each time, the night nurse asked: “Can you rate your pain out of ten?”

“One” or “two,” he said to keep her happy. It was like making up sins to say Confession to the priest when he was a kid.

Later, there were the prescription pain-killers he took every four hours that gave him dreams like cheap horror movies, vivid and violent and crudely symbolic. The second night, he dreamed of a destroyed city and rows of railroad tracks like surgical stitches while he sat on a distant hill in a red convertible. Honestly, you would laugh if you saw it on late night cable.

Once, he awoke feeling a sting near the incision site and he remembered the beginning of a poem: “Wynkin', Blynkin', and Nod, one night sailed off in a wooden shoe/ Sailed off on a river of crystal light into a sea of dew.” He had read the poem to his daughters when they were little, turning it into a game. “You’re Wynkin’ and you’re Blynkin’ and I’m NOD...” and he would drop his head and pretend to snore loudly. They would laugh and yell, “No Daddy! Wake up!” and pummel him with their tiny fists.

He started taking slow daily walks while he healed that progressed to long slow jogs around the neighbourhood. One afternoon, when he was coming back to the house, the postman asked him, “So how are you doing, boss? Has your brush with mortality changed you?”

“I’m afraid I’m not that deep,” he said, and took the mail into the house.

In June, he returned to his job writing promotional copy for a sports marketing company. One night during his second week, the department head, Ted Pendrith, came over to his desk. “Feeling nice and rested?” he asked. Pendrith seemed to be under the impression he had been on vacation. He wanted to know if he could fly to Denver that weekend for a marketing convention. Stevens, their research man, had come down with shingles. Could he read Stevens’ speech and pass around some cards and brochures?

He decided to go down a day early and the following Friday he waited in the terminal for the Air Canada flight from Toronto to Denver. He had a carry-on bag and a briefcase, with Stevens’ paper and the pill bottle with the remaining painkillers in case he had trouble sleeping.

He had time to look at Stevens' paper called “Rethinking Buyer’s Remorse in Emerging Demographics.” He was drawn to a passage cited from an article about buyer’s remorse and perceptions of virility but Stevens had a weakness for demographic jargon like “no-frills affluents” and “suburban “boomer-rangers” and he had the meaning of “bleisure” wrong. It didn’t mean “black leisure”; it meant “business leisure.” He

scratched it out and pencilled in “black leisure consumers.” Everybody was in some category.

When his flight was finally called, he got the aisle seat next to a woman in her mid-thirties with bright blonde hair and Western clothing. She winked at him.

“You visiting Denver?” she asked.

She was returning from seeing her younger sister’s new baby in Deep River, Ontario. She and her husband ran a guest ranch near the town of Cathedral, Colorado and last year she got kicked in the head by one of the horses. The MRI scan didn’t show anything but she was left with this eye twitch. Hadn’t he noticed it?

When the flight attendant came along to take lunch orders, he ordered a glass of wine. He explained it was his first drink since his own medical scan. She stared at him open-mouthed.

“You mean you’re a survivor?”

The word sounded like something she’d heard on daytime television: “Well, I don’t think like that but I guess I don’t find myself saying, ‘I hate my life’ anymore.”

“You hated your life?” she said.

Perhaps “hate” was too strong. What he had meant to say was that he didn’t feel so angry. Nowadays, he was making things up as he went along.

“You know what I think?” said the woman. “I think our mistake is thinking our lives ever belong to us. They don’t. They belong to everyone we meet, because we all come from the Cr’ator. Time is a gift and that’s why we call it the present. May I say a little prayer for you?”

After the prayer, he decided he was tired of her craziness, so he popped a pain-killer and washed it down with the last of his wine. He closed his eyes and drifted into swirling thoughts and then sleep.

Shortly after 4 p.m., he was sitting in the lounge at the Lowes Denver Hotel. He had imagined manly wood and stone and mountain views but the hotel had an exuberantly gaudy Italian Renaissance theme, including marble floors, arches and columns and red velveteen couches.

He was on Stevens’ expense account, eating a late lunch and listening to two men who were sitting at the bar. The younger man had a dark suit with a blue-shadow of a

beard like a priest or a thug. The older man, slimmer and closer to his own age, had receding grey hair and a moustache like Mr. Moody from “The Beverly Hillbillies.” A cell phone played the theme from “The Entertainer” and the older man reached into his pocket and held it to his ear.

“What’s up? Well, that’s a shame. We’ll work around it then. Goodbye.” The man slipped the phone back into his pocket and shook his head. “Pullman’s not coming until tomorrow. Story of my goddam life.”

That’s when he said: “It’s not your goddam life”

Some moments were ice-breakers, some were ice-makers; this one felt as though it had been immersed into liquid nitrogen that might shatter at any moment. Were concealed weapons legal in Colorado? “I beg your pardon,” he said. “I was thinking aloud.”

The dark younger man seemed to glower. The older man had hard little blue eyes and a wet lip under his moustache. “I believe you were commenting on my conversation.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I just finished a long flight and I’m on medication because of a recent surgery and, you know, I thought aloud that your life isn’t yours or dammed. Like my dad used to say, ‘Life’s a present.’”

The man raised his eyebrows and shrugged theatrically. “Listen, friend. I’m a Baptist deacon, myself,” he said. “What I said was an expression of my momentary exasperation, but not really your concern. Please enjoy your stay in Denver and keep a handle on that medication.” He gave him a formal nod to indicate the discussion was over, before turning back to his drink and his friend.

Back in Stevens’ room, he decided he needed to clear his head. He splashed his face and changed into his t-shirt, shorts and running shoes and headed west on wide flat streets, lined with trees and bungalows. He made a running rhythm out of the names of the sports teams – Broncos, Rockies, Avalanche, and Nuggets – but he was gasping after a few minutes. The mile-high city took your breath away. Denver – home of John Denver’s spiritual awakening, but then, this wasn’t exactly Saul to St Paul: Who wouldn’t change his name from Henry John Deuschendorf Jr.? This was also the city of Warren Zevon’s “Things to Do in Denver When You’re Dead.”

He saw a park ahead of him and it was splendid with massive flower gardens and tennis courts and running tracks. After a few gasping minutes more jogging, he came upon a tour group gathered around a white cottage next to a pond. He took a brochure from a young woman in a green parks' t-shirt. As he read the words on the brown paper, he felt a current of joy run through him. The cottage belonged to Eugene Field, a 19th century Denver journalist who had written the poem about Wynkin', Blinkin' and Nod, who "sailed off on a river of crystal light." In the pond there was a fountain statue of the three children in a shoe, adrift but frozen in stone, with streams of water playing over them.

Before he died at 45, Field had once impersonated Oscar Wilde, dressing up in a wig to gloves, waving to the crowd as he drove through the town in a carriage. When the real Wilde showed up at Union Station hours later, only a handful of stragglers were on hand to see him. As one Denver imposter to another, he felt a kind of love for Eugene Fields, and he dipped his fingers in the pool and touched them to his sweating forehead.

Back at his Stevens' room again, he wanted to call home but Elaine and the girls were downtown at a concert. He emailed them a picture of the statue on the internet with a note about the poet. "And now," he wrote, "I think it's time for daddy to nod."

He lay on the bed listening to the hum of the air conditioner before he slipped away. He was in a dark auditorium with rows of men sitting at metal tables writing exams. Soldiers in leather boots and rifles leaned on walls around the room, watching. He looked at the page in front of him. The question was: "What do you know and how do you know it?" He remembered from school that introductions were important. He would outline categories of thought and lists of things known. He would include illustrations with captions and refer to all the old debates. He would . . .

"Put down your pencils," said a man from the stage.

He had written nothing. Unless he could put down a sentence or two, he would surely fail, but the guards were attentive now, watching the tables closely, their guns in their hands. A telephone rang. One of the guards marched over to the corner of the room and picked it up. He placed it on top of the telephone box and marched until he stood behind his chair and whispered.

"For you," he said.

No one looked at him as he went to the phone. He picked up the receiver. "Yes?"

The voice sounded like his father: "Tell me what this means: "Remorse is absolute failure."

Was it a famous quotation? "If you give me a couple of minutes I can find it," he said. He put the phone back on the box and walked out the exit door. There must be a computer terminal around here somewhere. He was in an arched hallway that surrounded the auditorium. A door was partially ajar. He saw sunlight and outside a field strewn with rocks and bomb crater shells. "What am I doing?" he thought, "I'm going to get killed" but he walked quickly toward the exit.

The phone rang again. This time it was Elaine. She liked to give him wake-up calls when he travelled. Her voice was muffled, as though she were speaking through folds of dark, velvet.

"Are you awake?" she asked.

"Not yet," he said. "But I will be soon."

S. 9 – What I Know About the Production of Bubblegum

Everyday my father comes home from work smelling like bubblegum. It wafts from his jacket, Trident flavour and sugar and red food colour number 40, coming to puddle on the floor and sink into our balding carpet.

His socks are pink at the toes, sometimes at the heels from where synthetic food flavours have spilled. I never get to see his work shoes—he leaves them in his locker at the plant.

There are permanent red undertones to my father's fingernails, even though at the plant all the workers wear gloves. He'll sit in his chair and pick at them, diligently, as if anything he did could actually remove all that dye.

People don't understand why I don't like gum. They offer me sticks of the stuff, and all I can think is, my father made that. My father made that for eight-fifty an hour. My father's hands mixed that dye and that sugar, and now his work is in your mouth, squelching away into nothing.

Sometimes my father comes home with his hands burned; with big, soft welts cushioning his knuckles. This is where the hot sugar has stuck and peeled. He runs his hands under cold water in the kitchen sink and I watch, ready to bring him the band-aids he always asks for.

My mother, weathered and clinging to the stove, brings him dinner—potatoes and meatloaf, sometimes fried fish. Her hands are thin and knobby, her skin stretching over her knuckles like wet tissue paper even though she's barely forty years old. She smiles, and the effort of it distorts her face.

While he eats dinner my father has a beer. Sometimes he has two. On a really bad

day, or if he's feeling sentimental, my father has three. He eats in silence, stopping only to lift his glass. I sit in the living room and hunch over my books, making notes on the Quebec Act of 1774 and trying to ignore the thunk of heavy glass on the wooden table. I am studying hard. I am studying hard because I have to get a scholarship and move out of this house.

When my father is finished dinner he comes to sit with me in the living room, sometimes placing his beer stein on my history homework where it leaves sloppy wet rings which smudge my blue ink. He turns on the television, and when I complain he helps himself to another beer. This is when I usually leave, taking my books and papers and half-baked ideas with me.

While I lie on my bed and think about the significance of the War of 1812 for Quebec, I'll tap my pen loudly. This way I can't hear my mother in the other room.

I can hear my father's silence, though. That and his aura of pink sugar, which somehow manages to creep into my clothes.

My father was a history professor once, I think. In Poland, where his fingernails were still clean and he kept his alcohol intake to two tallboys a night. He talks about it some nights while he stands on the balcony, leaning into the rusty railing with a glass mug in one hand.

"I wrote the best thesis in my year," he'll say. "The professor thought I had copied it from somewhere, except that the grammar was so bad."

And of his students: "They loved me. I would have to extend class because they wouldn't stop asking questions." All in Polish, of course. My father's English is broken,

crooked. He uses it when scheduling his shifts at the plant, or when arguing with bank card companies over the spelling of his name.

“*A-n-d*—no no, *r-z*. The *r* come before the *z*. Yes. No, no space.” The credit statements come wrongly addressed anyway, usually to someone called Andrea. As if the prefix of Mr. couldn’t tip them off.

I looked it up once. I spent an hour trying to find the site of the university he had worked for, tripping over my computer’s inability to properly display Polish characters. Fourteen major papers—I don’t know why I was so surprised. My father’s name typed in under grand titles, under dissertations about the most obscure events the little country sidling up to Germany had ever seen. Recent political movements, Polish participation in the USSR army, names of historical figures I didn’t even know.

Like his scarred hands and his leaning into the humid night and that mug, that persistent glass mug. It was all there.

The saddest, saddest story I know: my father, taking my mother out to dinner for the first time in Canada, both of them dressed up with something like four words of English between them. My mother’s floral dress, those pearls she still keeps in her dresser. Probably that musty perfume I remember from early, early days.

The two of them sitting down at a table, ordering their meal in stunted syllables, injured words. Smiling at each other, maybe, feeling capable. And when the waiter asked what they’d like to drink, my father scanned the menu and found that one crucial word, the one he had bothered to learn. “Root beer,” he said, pointing at the text. Probably smiling, probably satisfied.

And when it was brought to him, all foam and sugar and sticky glass, he realized his mistake.

I think my father cried. I think that as he sat there, lifting the glass to his lips until it was empty, thinking about how unlike beer the brown fizz he'd asked for was, he wept. Because the price on the menu said three-fifty, and that winter when I was born everything I wore came from the Salvation Army. Because that winter my parents slept on a mattress on the living room floor.

Three-fifty for brown sugar in a glass, but my father drank it all.

And one time my mother walked into a Subway restaurant asking where she could buy bus tickets.

I stare down at my textbook, which is blurry now. As far as tragedy goes, the Seven Years' War is nothing.

General Wolfe died on the field.

And General Montcalm.

So they died.

So we all die.

Sometimes it's hard to focus on Canadian history, because the apartment gets loud. My father will drink, and my mother will scream over him as he hunches in silence, his broad back absorbing her energy. The volume of it exhausts her until she becomes a scarecrow of a human being, thin and stretched and gaunt, leaning on the kitchen counter and grinding her teeth.

Why do you have to drink, why can't you talk to me, why are we living like this,

why and why and tell me—he takes it all in without ever turning around. And then she goes to her room and cries.

My mother told me once, as she was mashing potatoes over the stove, that my father had come to their wedding drunk. Besides them and the priest, only his friend had come to stand in as the best man. They honeymooned in Greece and spent most of their money on wine.

I think that people shouldn't marry at all. That is what I think.

Today I'm sitting curled up on the living room couch, my notes on my lap and my pen in my mouth, bobbing up and down as I chew. I am learning about something that happened in Quebec at some time or other before it was called that, at some point when the country was still so wide and empty that the distance swallowed people whole. I have only one lamp on, and the room is dark. When I close my eyes I can see the text pasted to the underside of my eyelids in bright red font.

When my father walks in I jump, because sometimes at three in the morning the silence takes on an oppressive, dulling quality. I expect him to be drunk, but he doesn't sway, just sits down on the floor in front of the television. He gives me a look that could be hostile but falls short.

“Father,” I say, because my study session is over.

He doesn't answer, proceeding to plug in the Playstation and unwrap one of the controllers.

“Father, what are you doing?”

He turns his head, stares at my notes. “History is a good discipline,” he says. And flicks on the TV.

“Father, I have to study. I have a test tomorrow.”

“It’s late. For tests you should sleep.”

“Father.” But it doesn’t really matter, because the video game is already on, and tonight is going to be one of those evenings my father avoids sleeping with his wife by undertaking six hours of Resident Evil until the morning light stings his eyes and sends him to bed.

I close my book to watch him play, watch his shoulders tense and his fingers move in response to the graphics.

On the screen is a man in a black jumpsuit wearing a gasmask, running back and forth with what could be an assault rifle. I’m not much on guns, even seventeenth-century ones, but I can see that he’s using it to attack dead people. Walking dead people, really. I do not understand the game. It has something to do with shooting zombies, and often there is a lot of blood. My father cringes and swears if he can’t push buttons quickly enough, but always quietly—it is late.

“What is this?” I ask him.

“It’s Hunk,” he says, his eyes not leaving the screen.

“Hunk?”

“The guy’s name,” he gestures with the controller, “is Hunk.”

“And?”

My father sits, quietly focussed. “He has to kill more than ninety of them. Before time runs out.”

“The zombies?”

“The zombies, yes.”

I place my books on the floor and cap my pen. This is what my father does in the early hours of the morning, I should say at school when they ask on career day. He kills zombies for points. Getting up, I raise my arms to pop out the concentrated pockets of stiffness in my spine. I smooth my wrinkled shorts with my palms from where they stick to my legs. The room is too hot.

Picking up my books, I get ready to leave.

“Wait.”

“Father?”

He puts down his controller, pauses the game. I have never seen him pause the game before. “I have a poem,” he says. “About Hunk.”

I sit back down.

“Do you want to see it?”

But he’s already up, all but running to the closet, coming back with his worn leather jacket that reeks of pink bubblegum. From one of the pockets he pulls a small black notebook, something that might be from Dollarama.

“You write poems, Daddy?” I ask.

He looks up from the book, though his fingers continue to flip ink-stained pages. “All the time. This one was inspired by the game.” My father hands me his little black notebook, his lips moving into what could be a smile.

On the page, written carefully between blue lines in my father’s looping scrawl, is this:

When I Play as a Hunk:

When I play as a Hunk,

I am so free.

When I play as a Hunk,

The world belongs to me.

When I play as a Hunk,

I am never scared.

When I play as a Hunk,

I can go anywhere.

Life is better to me when I play as a Hunk.

I read it again, just because I can't raise my head. I think I might be able to look up after I've read it a third time, but everything is still heavy and hot, so I study the way the words curve into each other, the way blots of black ink have come together between the rigid Dollarama lines.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes," and it's stammering. "Yes, yes."

"I have more," he says, jumping up to sit beside me on the couch. My father reaches over my lap and flips the lined sheets for me, opening up pages upon pages of stilted rhyming poetry. All of them so carefully printed, staked out in my father's broken English.

So, so many words.

“I used to write, you know, when I was your age. Mostly history-based things, but sometimes poems. I’m thinking of having them published.” He looks at me, meets my eyes and smiles. “What do you think? Just a few more and I’ll have them published somewhere.”

“They’re really good, Daddy,” I say. “They’re really good.”

“*When I Play as a Hunk*, is my favourite. The best one. Do you think so?”

I stare down at the page and concentrate on making my throat less tight. “Yes, I think so. It’s good.”

And I can’t tell my father that it’s wrong to put an article in front of a proper noun. Tomorrow he’ll put on his sugary leather coat and his red-stained socks and work ten hours for eight-fifty making pink chewing gum for people, and I just can’t.

“Show me another one, Daddy,” I say.