Kit

Nelson was a town of undercover Kraft Dinnereaters. Kit just knew it.

At a push, locals might publicly admit to buying the occasional box of Annie’s Shells and White Cheddar, the organic version of macaroni that tasted like cheesecloth, not cheese. But every week, Kit made a point of checking the Safeway shelves for signs of Kraft Dinner restocking. The fewer boxes she saw, the more she fist-pumped the air.

Kit stretched, then lay still in the sunlight that mottled in through the bedroom window. The problem, as she saw it, was that she couldn’t be bothered to pretend she was a perfect mother—a particular recklessness that broke all the rules and separated her from most of the women she’d met since moving to Nelson. She tried her best to do a good job, and had read every leaflet she’d been handed on the ill-effects of television for the under fours, for instance, but knew that anybody who claimed their children never watched TV was either lying or living in a cave. Meanwhile, the few mothers she knew flounced around their living rooms, carelessly drawing attention to the feng shui flow and the fact that theirs was a television-free household. Instead they had a piano, and felting. Kit knew it was all just a hoax and that the women watched as much TV as Kit did—they just downloaded the shows and watched them on their laptops in bed. It was a cunning way to appear superior and progressive while secretly being as invested in *The X Factor* as everyone else.

All over Nelson, mothers were scurrying to the safety of locked washrooms to change their babies’ diapers, terrified of exposing any disposable, crinkly waistbands. When their children went berserk in the mall, parents used only soft, cajoling voices. Soothers, when seen publicly, were the fault of the mother-in-law, as were Cheese Nips. Xbox 360s were an unwelcome Christmas present and not to be spoken about at school. Activist moms bought SUVs ready for action, making sure the inbuilt DVD screens only lowered from the velvety ceilings on journeys beyond city limits. Oh, parenting was a furtive business here.

The dog clip-clopped into the bedroom and began licking its private parts gummily next to Kit’s side of the bed. She sat up, groaning, and ruffled her hair, glancing sleepily at the iPhone charging on the bedside table. It took her a second or two to notice the date. Her mouth clamped shut and her eyes widened: it was the first Saturday of the month.

Pushing the blankets off, she hurried out of the bedroom into the wide open plan of the living room, where she found her husband, Clyde, at the kitchen table reading the *Weekly Radiance*, Nelson’s free Saturday paper. He glanced up and leaned back against the exposed brick wall, his steel-toed boots clumped under the table.

“It’s World Labyrinth Day.” He wiped coffee from his handlebar moustache onto the thigh of his coveralls. “Put it on the calendar.” His head tilted as he watched her sit down across from him and slouch forward until her head was flat on the table. “Are you wearing my boxers? What’s up? Bad dream?”

“I was fine till I woke up. It’s the first Saturday in August, Clyde. It’s book club tonight.”

Clyde shook out his paper and chuckled.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. It’s supposed to be fun, isn’t it? Here, listen to this. For sale: 4,000-watt light plant generator.” His mouth raked sideways. “*4,000*-watt? They forgot to write: Also for sale, twenty-five pounds of weed.”

She’d met Clyde backpacking in Australia—spotted him in a pack of Canadian hockey players. The two of them were married on a beach there and might never have left, had it not been for the wide-set panic that swept over them upon bringing their newborn son home from the hospital. Sprawling on the sofa at 3 a.m. one morning, their baby a wriggling bag of snakes between them, Clyde had turned to his glassy-eyed wife and yawned.

“What do you think, mama? Maybe move to a country with a grandma in it?”

They had both laughed then, brayingly and slightly unhinged. In those days, any laugh teetered dangerously on the brink of a sob.

They chose Nelson because Clyde’s parents had been living there; a month after their arrival, however, his dad had been laid off and his folks had moved up north to find a better job market, leaving Clyde and Kit almost as far from in-laws as they’d been in Australia. Still, Nelson sat tucked in a valley that cut through burly mountains, edged by the coolness of a clear lake. In the beginning, Kit liked the poems on the walls of the buildings downtown, the quirky bookshops, the freedom of living near a lake. She loved the mountains, their peaks smoothed through centuries into a calm omniscience more understated than the jagged European Alps of her childhood. But, landscape aside, it wasn’t long before Kit felt under siege from the look-at-me insurgents strolling the streets in their eclectic capes and alternative sideburns.

Nelson was populated by dissidents and rebels, a hub of counter-culture ever since the draft-dodgers from the States found it in the ’70s. Consequently, the exhilaration of taking a political stand had forged the town’s character, galvanizing it with a social conscience. Nowadays, however, protests outside city hall on a Wednesday night might consist of three men in knitted hats banging saucepans with wooden spoons, shouting, “Down with the government!” In springtime, the town turned out en masse to defend the rights of frogs to cross the highway. The legitimate uprising of the anti-war years had meandered into what seemed to be a modern pantomime of rebellion, to the extent that, at times, locals weren’t even clear which barricade they were storming.

At any given event, the cavalcade of banners bristled with wildly differing cries. *Share the Wealth* shouldered *Pro Life*, which bumped into *Free Education for All*. *Protect Bears* and *Free the Bees* always showed up, one way or another. Once, perusing a photo in the paper, Kit spotted a banner lurking at the back that read *Dubstep Sucks*.

“Bloody August book club. Seriously, Clyde, how am I going to get through it? Another dreadful book.”

“Did you read it properly?” Clyde’s eyes stayed on his newspaper. His hair, shaved close to his head, glinted golden as he turned the page. They read the paper like this every week; for Kit and Clyde, it was a way to navigate the town’s eccentricities. “Oh, here’s one. Ready? Looking for a loud bell.” He looked up. “That’s it. And a phone number.”

“Clyde! What am I going to do?”

Sweat prickled at Kit’s hairline. The dog, sensing trauma, rose from his basket and came over to rest his heavy head in her lap.

Clyde placed a thumb on his page as a bookmark, his nail blackened with oil.

“Answer their questions with questions. Or just keep eating. You can’t talk if your mouth’s full.”

“I’ve tried all that already and they all just stared at me, waiting for me to swallow. None of it works.”

Kit’s mouth was squashed in the crook of her elbow as she lay across the table.

Clyde drained his coffee mug. “Or don’t go if it’s so horrible! You have that option. Hey, you know I’ve got hockey with the guys tomorrow?”

“Sundays as well, now? I thought it was just Thursdays.”

“We got more ice time.”

Clyde looked back down at his paper again as Kit sighed.

“Oh, don’t stress it, sister!” He patted her shoulder. “It’s World Labyrinth Day!”

His eyes twinkled as he stood up.

“I got to get going here. The kids are both still sleeping.”

Clyde kissed his wife on the top of the head and left for work.

Genevieve

Genevieve had not enjoyed yoga. She’d headed out at 6 a.m. for the Sunrise Salutations class, hoping to start the day off right. With book club blinking on her radar like a fast-approaching torpedo, she needed to get centred as fast as humanly possible. But all that omming hadn’t done a thing: she felt as tense now as she had when she walked in.

Even the sight of Pierre, her yoga instructor, sitting in the lotus position in his Lycra hadn’t been enough to lift her mood, and the class had been especially ineffective because the woman in front of her—the one in the ill-advised denim shorts—had insisted on keeping her cell phone switched on throughout the session. It beeped and buzzed along the polished floor beside Genevieve like a beetle, ruining any chance of her entering a calm state.

Instead she lay with her eyes open under her lavender-infused eye pillow and thought about book club, noting with interest how her heart rate increased immediately. Why the hell had she invited those women over for a third time? She might as well have invited the circus into her living room. Book club was hands down the most hideous night of the month. What had she been thinking?

She groaned audibly and wondered whether her husband would be of any use. Martin was at home right now, *not* preparing appies, no doubt—more likely he was scrolling through unrelated recipe ideas on Pinterest. He hardly glanced up if Genevieve walked by in the tightest of her yoga tops, even the hot pink *Escape Your Body, Escape Your Shape* one she’d bought two sizes too small on purpose.

“Gen? Genny?”

She felt a gentle tap on her shoulder and leaned up onto an elbow. The eye pillow slid onto the floor.

“Hey, Gen, not to disturb you or anything, but my next class is starting any second.”

Pierre was hunched down next to her, shirtless, his stomach a series of skin lines and no fat. He was lit from behind as the sun flooded through the studio’s floor-to-ceiling windows. Motes of dust haloed in sunbeams around his head.

Genevieve hurried to her feet, smoothing the front of her stretchy pants and shaking back several loose strands of hair.

“I was miles away,” she mumbled, trying to bat her eyelashes even as she squinted in the brightness.

“That’s great!” Pierre placed his hand on her forearm. “Look at you, travelling to the core of your tranquillity! You know, once you’ve gone there, you can always find your way back. And own your progress. It’s okay to be proud—as long as pride doesn’t become, you know, egocentric. We’ve talked about this.”

She smiled, wondering whether Pierre’s yoginess would kick in soon and he’d be able to tell she’d really been thinking about stress and tight Lycra. Were yogis like Yoda? Better not to test it.

“So, yeah, take your time, Genevieve. I don’t want to rush you. You’re doing awesome.”

She shook her hair back again and threaded it into a knot behind her head. The position made her breasts jut pertly, and also gave Pierre a clear view of her improving armpit hair.

She bent to roll her yoga mat. Even Pierre’s feet were sexy; if he rinsed them quickly, she’d seriously consider sucking those toes. *In fact, can we do that now? There must be a sink around here.* She stood, adjusting the back of her pants where the fabric pinched between her buttocks.

“Thanks, Pierre. Amazing as always.”

Genevieve paused, wondering if a kiss on each cheek was out of the question, but instead she walked stiffly out of the room, her thoughts returning with each step to the evening she had ahead of her. Fucking book club.

She didn’t stop in the lobby for the mingling or gentle hugging.

Hilary

Hilary’s favourite thing about Saturday mornings was that they always brought with them the promise of the hunt. She was a specialist in garage sales, a champion of the local scene; each Saturday’s sunrise would find her leaning on the railing of her deck, logging co-ordinates from her town map into the GPS.

In the house, her son and husband slept soundly in the cluttered master bedroom. She would wake them in exactly seven minutes.

She took her lipstick from the pocket of her robe and applied a fresh layer. This had always been the best day of the week: family time, everyone together in a team, bargain-hunting merrily around town while they all sang along to child-centred music on the MP3 player.

Lately, Saturdays had taken a bit of a nosedive because of book club membership, but Hilary wasn’t going to let it ruin everything. It was important to keep your chin up, after all, much like Maria von Trapp did when she got kicked out of the nunnery. *The Sound of Music* was such a great set of rules to live by: when adversity hits, the important thing in life is to press on and pretend it isn’t happening.

She’d already organized the morning’s route; by her estimation—all being well—they would arrive at the first house at exactly seven o’clock. The sales always began at eight, but anything later than seven suggested a lack of ambition, especially since the same eager faces always showed up week in, week out, jostling at the garden gates.

Hilary knew them all: among the hunter tribe, she was something of an elder. She had an admirable blend of focus and shamelessness to which other early birds aspired. If you were going to be taken seriously in this game, you had to show up to the sales at least half an hour before the stated start time.

That said, a woman in a pink velour tracksuit was always there before Hilary, no matter how early the alarm went off. *She must sleep the night in a tent by the first place, like a superfan campout*. *If only I could do that!*

Then there were the stragglers, fumbling in mid-morning to grab any remaining bargains, the value of which—if noteworthy—they wouldn’t even comprehend. Hilary rarely encountered the garage sale B Team, but when she did, she smiled sympathetically. Not everyone could be as good at this as she was. Not everyone had the gift.

She heaved the patio doors along their rails and trotted back inside, clanking her mug into the kitchen sink. As she smacked her crimson lips in the reflection of the window, she noticed that her petunias were drooping on the windowsill again, bowing their heads in a sulk. She pulled her bathrobe tight, smoothing down the bulge of baby weight around her midriff. *Why should I try harder to lose that? It’s a lovely souvenir!*

She headed for the bedroom.

“Sweetie?” she said gingerly, stroking her sleeping husband’s brow. “Time to get up, Michael. Let’s get the show on the road. It’s a beautiful day for it!”

She ducked down and spoke directly into his ear, like it was a microphone at a bank teller’s window. He stirred, reaching up from his dream and pulling her toward him, his hand at the collar of her robe, pulling it open.

“Michael!” she whisper-shrieked, wrapping herself back up. “What the Jiminy Cricket are you doing? Jeremy’s right here! It’s Saturday morning, sweetie. Come on, rise and shine! Jeremy, pumpkin, time to wake up.”

She scuttled off as Michael sighed, then sat up. Michael understood the drill. He knew how important it was that he shower, eat two fresh-baked muffins, and get himself into the driver’s seat of their Subaru Outback.

In the kitchen, Hilary passed Michael his coffee travel mug and pulled lint from the shoulder of his fleece. Jeremy sucked on his juice box, emptying it in three sardonic pulls.

“We’re late getting going this morning, my little soldiers. Let’s hop-to!”

“It’s August this weekend, hon. You sure you’re up to this?”

Hilary shooed her husband and son out the front door, flapping at their backsides.

“Why would I not be up for this, babe?”

“Don’t you have book club later?” Michael tied the laces of his sneaker, looking up at her plaintively. “Don’t you want to save your energy?”

Jeremy handed Hilary his empty juice box. She put it into her coat pocket.

“Why would you ask that? I love book club!”

“Really?”

Hilary yanked the front door open and waved everyone through.

“Jeremy, leave your iPad here. No, you don’t need it . . . no . . . just . . . there. Good boy. No, babe, the book they’ve chosen for tonight is really fun and whatnot. It’s kind of like Cinderella-meets-Prince Charming-meets-*Pretty Woman*. I actually got to the last page of this one so it’ll be fine. I’m super excited. Now, get a wriggle on, pirates. There’s treasure to be found!”

She jostled down the steps to the Subaru and waited for Michael to beep the automatic lock for her. At last they set off and as they turned the first corner, Hilary fired up “These Are a Few of My Favourite Things”on the MP3 player.

Sasha

Sasha stepped onto the bathroom scales, then off them again. On them. Off them. *That can’t be right*. She looked in the mirror, pulled back the skin around her eyes, cupped and jiggled her breasts under her kimono. Since when was she this old? Were those scales defective? She’d have to go to Walmart and buy a new one.

She knew she should make the bed, but instead padded downstairs, trying not to wake her son. She put the kettle on, lit a cigarette, and leaned against the french door while she waited for it to boil. There was so much junk on her deck: the run-bike, a monster truck, dirt, an old bow and arrow, the G.I. Joe Arctic Cat, and that broken, rusted toy train they’d found in a puddle on a walk back from her mother’s. She exhaled. It wasn’t quite the urban warehouse apartment she’d imagined she’d be living in by now. She hadn’t been able to decorate in minimalistic white yet.

The roil of boiling water turned her back around. Once she’d poured herself a mugful, she carried the tea back up the stairs and stood for a moment in the crack of Harrison’s doorway. He slept as if dropped from a height, his limbs sprawled in four different directions. She smiled at the sight of his skinny ribs rising and falling with those rapid little-boy breaths. Who was this five-year-old roommate who’d filled her house with Lego? He lay with his mouth wide open on the yellow pillow, the fabric a backdrop to the freckles across his cheeks and nose. Sasha considered lying down next to him, he looked so peaceful. Harrison not moving or shouting was a rare event; were she to sit down on his bed, he might stir and scamper away and the quiet of the house would vanish.

She took a sip of her tea and tiptoed silently to her bedroom, where she sat cross-legged on the bed. Jared’s clothes were a trail to the window. One of his socks hung from her jewellery tree on the dresser. Her eyes strained to read the title of a book on the floor. *I Am a Mother*. Self-help. Was that hers? Bending to pick it up, she put her mug on the bedside table beside an empty wine glass and a full ashtray and then stood, letting the book fall onto the floor again. Somewhere in the room was her copy of the book club novel for tonight. She’d chosen it because it was the only novel she’d read in the past decade. There were only two reasons to go to book club, and neither of them had anything to do with reading.

Into the bathroom she went, twisting her hair up, peering into the mirror. Seriously, were those lines around the edges of her eyes? She was only twenty-nine! When did those lines get there? Jared would be home soon from work—it was almost 8 a.m. She had time for a quick shower before Harrison woke.

The hot water relieved her body, and as she wiped the droplets from her eyes she glanced down at her long, white legs. There was a plum sticker on her thigh. It had sunbeams around its edge, and a plum-man giving a thumbs up. She had no idea how long it had been there for.

Back downstairs in her kimono, Sasha shook back her wet hair and tugged open the fridge, shedding a few of the chubby, cheerful alphabet letters that adorned the front of it. She didn’t pick them up.

Grabbing an apple from the top shelf, she washed it under the leaky tap and bit into it, leaning against the countertop. The only person she saw in this house was her son. Jared worked nights and was entirely nocturnal, stumbling in at daybreak to kiss her on the cheek and fall into bed. It was like being in a committed relationship with a bat.

A sudden clattering on the stairs behind her, and Harrison tumbled around the corner with a pillow’s flatness to one side of his hair.

“I dreamed a dragon was eating a pig!” he shouted, running over to the TV.

“A dragon and a pig? What about a monkey? Was the dream in Chinese?” Sasha watched him snicker at the word *monkey* and put on the air traffic controller headphones she made him wear while he watched his hockey DVDs. He sat down with his back to her across the room, criss-cross-apple-sauced in front of the screen in his Scooby-Doo pyjama pants, his frame wobbling slightly under the weight of the headphones. The hockey movie began. The cuts were so frantic Sasha felt they hinted at a serious crack addiction on the part of the editor. The relentless, flashing images she could just about withstand, but she needed them to be silent: to add sound would force her to open vodka at nine o’clock in the morning and drink it straight from the bottle.

Her cell phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Hey, beautiful. You want to take Harrison to the ballgame at the park this morning?” It was Jared, choosing fatherhood over fatigue. She opened the cupboard and pulled oatmeal down from the shelf.

“Why don’t you take him? You know he’d rather be with you.”

“That’s not . . . I thought we could all go together.” A pause. “Everything okay?”

She picked at a hardened lump of gravy on the countertop.

“I found a plum sticker on my thigh.” Her voice splintered when she said it. There was a beat of silence.

“I don’t know what that means, baby.”

“Last week it was an elbow of dried macaroni in my hair. In my hair, Jared. And it’s book club tonight.”

“Is that bad? I’m not sure what . . . listen, I’ll be home in fifteen and we can all hang out. Okay? You can tell me all about all the food stuck to your body. Or better yet, show me. Okay?”

He hung up and Sasha wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Harrison was watching her. Pale snowy owl. She smiled at him and gave him a thumbs up, just like the cheerful little man on the sticker. Once he’d turned back to his screen, she went upstairs to get dressed. The book club novel peeped out from underneath her black faux-leather skinny jeans. Grimacing, she put it on the dresser and went to find more cigarettes.

Two months earlier

Standing on the mat outside Genevieve’s front door, Kit swirled the ball of her foot over the terra cotta cement beneath her feet. Had it been polished? Along the edges of the front deck were crocuses in pots, their leaves separated by a gap of one inch each. A sign by the doorbell read *Be the Change You Want to See in the World*. Kit rolled her shoulders and danced from toe to toe a little, shaking her hands like a swimmer before a relay final. This was the first club she’d been invited to join since she and her family moved to Nelson nine months earlier. The door opened.

“Hi, beautiful woman!” Genevieve threw her arms around Kit, pressing the tang of her armpits onto the shoulders of the new arrival’s T-shirt. “I’m so blessed that you could make it. Come in! We’re all here.”

Kit took a few steps into the house.

“Excuse me,” Genevieve said a little too brightly, “shoes off please!”

Kit scuffed off her flip-flops, then crouched and shoved them into a name-labeled shoe cubby, puzzled for a moment by the presence of silver stilettos in the neighbouring compartment. As she stood, she found herself at eye level with a curly-edged Post-it note on the wall, with the word *breathe* written on it—in capitals and underlined. Strange that she’d need a reminder for that, thought Kit. *Buy dog food* maybe, or *Lights off in the bathroom*, but *Breathe*? If the Post-it note fell off the wall, would everyone in the house suffocate?

“You Brits, tracking mud all over the house! I’ll have to keep my eye on you!”

As Genevieve wagged her finger, Kit took in the burgundy walls, the leafy plants, the gilded mirror by the door. It felt like standing in the foyer of a Thai restaurant. By the coat rack, elephant-headed Ganesha still had a price tag hanging from his tail.

A gangly-limbed thirty-something man wandered through the hallway toward one of the bedrooms. Behind him trotted two young children—a boy of about five wearing socks and underpants, and a girl in a floor-length cape.

“Oh, here are my kids, and this is my husband, Martin,” Genevieve said. “Martin! Kids! Come and say hi.”

Martin did a prompt pivot and walked over to Kit, his hand outstretched. He was wearing a red apron, on which Snoopy banged a saucepan with a wooden spoon, the words *Grub’s Up* written below him. The top button of Martin’s polo shirt was done up, forming a shelf for his Adam’s apple, and his hair, cut short like a World War II soldier, seemed accidentally on-trend. Shaking his hand was like holding onto a damp rag.

The two children huddled behind him, staring.

“Mercedes? This is my daughter, Mercedes.” Genevieve tugged the girl out of her hiding place. “Mercedes is seven. She likes root vegetables and sharing. Don’t you, Mercedes?”

The little girl shrugged. She pulled up the hood of her cape, covering most of her face in shadow.

“And my son, Hunter, is four. He’s learning to meditate, aren’t you, Hunter?” Hunter pulled the elastic waistband of his underpants forward and let it snap back against his belly. He started skating on the spot in his socks. “We’re working hard on the sitting still, aren’t we? Okay, that’s enough. Off to bed now, both of you! And Martin? Martin, can you . . .” She tapped on the front of Martin’s Snoopy apron and he turned to face her. “Thank you. Martin’s in charge of catering for book club. He really enjoys it, don’t you, Martin?” Martin’s eyes bulged but he said nothing. “And just so you know, it’s all organic, sugar-free, wheat-free. And in our house, we like to eat everything with chopsticks, to avoid germ transference.”

“Everything?”

“Yes.”

“Popcorn?”

“Yes.”

“Grapes?”

“Yes.”

“Honey Nut Cheerios?”

“We don’t eat those.”

The two women locked eyes for an instant. They were both mid-thirties, equally tall. Kit glanced at Genevieve’s neck, level with her own, around which she wore a string of wooden beads, while, in turn, Genevieve scowled at the scruffiness of Kit’s hair.

They’d met in the Nelson library ten days earlier, at one of those happy-clappy we’re-joyous-mothers-in-unity playgroups, where shadowy-eyed parents waltzed in a circle with their babies clamped to their chests, singing “Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush.”

Kit’s five-year-old son, Sully, had spent the hour turning the lights on and off and practising sprints, narrowly missing stamping on the forehead of his sister, Pip, and other babies scattered about the floor. Having missed grabbing Sully on several passes, Kit eventually connected with the back of his T-shirt and, gathering up both him and his sister, she’d withdrawn from the room, flustered and near tears. Genevieve had followed her out into the hallway and comforted her stridently.

To this day, Kit wasn’t sure why Genevieve had insisted she join her book club, but she had given her number up just the same. Playgroups she found difficult; but a club for lively literary debate? Surely this was going to be her niche.

With only a week to catch up and read *The Time Traveler’s Wife*, Kit had started off doggedly, but by a third of the way through, she was skimming down pages with the interest level of a court stenographer reading back notes on a small-claims car insurance case. Her main concern now, as she stood in the archway of Genevieve’s living room, was how to get through her first book club meeting without being banished from the next one.

Genevieve turned slightly. She breathed out a smile and Kit matched it. “Come on, let me introduce you to the others!”

In the living room, two women sat on chairs far away from each other. In the farthest corner was a petite woman wearing a sequined and sparkly tank top. Suddenly the glamorous shoes in the hallway made sense: this was Sasha, and Kit already knew her a little. They’d said hi to each other at Mama Banana, a play area Kit chose for Sully because the kids were allowed to kick balls at one another’s heads there.

“Oh, hi again. I thought it was you from your accent. I haven’t seen you around in a while.” Sasha’s smile was dazzling; Kit kept her own lips pressed closed. “I hope you’ve read the book.”

“Oh, I have,” Kit said carefully, watching Sasha pour herself a fresh glass of chilled chardonnay. She had the bottle—already half-empty—on a table by her elbow, next to a cactus. “I didn’t know you were in book club.”

“Oh, you two know each other,” Genevieve sounded mildly deflated. “Sasha goes to my yoga class, that’s how we met. Sasha likes to be in the front row, don’t you Sasha?”

“Who wouldn’t? You should get a load of the instructor.”

Sasha winked while Genevieve’s lips formed a hard, straight line.

“Kit, this is Hilary over here. Do you know Hilary? No? Well, this is Hilary! Hilary, do you need a plate? Where are your chopsticks?”

Hilary had found Genevieve at prenatal class. She had singled her out as friend material based on the suitability of her pregnancy footwear. Hilary had done a lot of Googling on the subject and as the classes progressed, scanned the room for women in Crocs or, at a push, Birkenstocks. When she told people around town she’d been invited to join a book club, she didn’t call it book club; she called it An Evening with My Girls.

Kit saw that across the room, Hilary had been holding her copy of *The Time Traveler’s Wife* at nose height, like a geisha’s fan. The sudden spotlight had caught her off guard, causing her to fumble half a flaky pastry out from behind the book. Genevieve bent down to pick up crumbs off the floor, dabbing them with her index finger, while Hilary jumped up from her ottoman to greet the new arrival.

“I am just so excited to meet you! Genevieve tells me you’re a mom—isn’t it the most important job in the world? It so is. I always say, I wish I’d been a lion tamer before I had children. The skills would have been so transferable! Gen says that you have two sweet kidlets. Now, what are their names?” Hilary’s cheeks dimpled.

“Sully and Pip.”

“How wonderful. What wonderful, wonderful names. Pip? Well, isn’t that unusual. Is she very small?”

“She’s small, yes. But we didn’t name her after an actual pip.”

“No? Oh, but did you name her after *Great Expectations*?” The bobbles on Hilary’s tennis socks quivered with literary pride.

Kit nodded, her eyebrows raised. “We didn’t, but are you a Dickens fan? He’s brilliant, isn’t he? It’s great that you like him.”

Hilary sighed. “Oprah Winfrey told me about that book, but truthfully, I didn’t get past page four. All that wandering around in the fog with murderers? Who wants that? I’m more of a beach reader.” She popped the remainder of her pastry into her mouth and spoke through a shower of crumbs. “So how old are your little dolls?”

Kit rubbed her chin. “Pip turned one a few months ago and Sully’s five.”

“How precious. Still breastfeeding them both?”

“Pardon?”

“I’m just about to stop with Jeremy—he turned five last Christmas—it’s breaking my heart. Are you co-sleeping?”

“With my husband, yes.”

Hilary shouted with laughter, making Kit jump.

“No, but seriously, remind me to send you a link on Attachment Parenting. We swear by it in our house; it’s been such a bond to sleep with our son in the bed. It’s becoming a bit more of a problem now that he likes to play Angry Birds on his iPad, but it’s nothing a good earplug or whatnot won’t solve.” Hilary sighed and smiled. “I’m just so super pumped to meet you.” She hugged her own midriff. “Welcome to the circle. I like to call it the goddess circle; there is nothing more sacred in the world than strong, supportive women supporting each other. Don’t you think?”

“I do like to think.”

“Well, let’s get you a drink and some food, Kit,” interrupted Genevieve. “Hilary, could you take care of that?”

Genevieve led Kit to a Thai cushion and encouraged her to squat on it, while Hilary dashed into the kitchen.

“We’ll get started in a moment. I’m sure we all have lots of amazing things to say about this month’s book.”

Kit hunched obediently on her cushion, watching Sasha and Genevieve smile at her. Scattered across the coffee table to Kit’s left were drawings, writing and origami done by Hunter and Mercedes. They were all variations on a Save the Earth theme, with pictures of globes weeping tears into fishless rivers. The teardrops themselves were shaded with an artistry suspiciously beyond that of a child. The drawings also seemed deftly placed. After a slight pause, Hilary came thundering back into the room holding a bowl filled to the brim with coconut-encrusted tofu chunks and a glass of white wine, both of which she handed to Kit.

“Right. Thank you, Hilary.”

With a sweep of her arm, Genevieve picked up her copy of *The Time Traveler’s Wife* from the living room table. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes momentarily, and then opened them again with a serene smile as she clasped the book to her chest, cover side out.

“Shall I go first? I would like to say that I loved this book: I found it to be so healing and positive. It made me feel glad to be alive. It is a soaring celebration of the victory of love over time. Didn’t you find that, Kit?”

“What exactly did you like about it?” asked Kit, noticing firstly that Genevieve’s description of the novel was actually written on the front cover, word for word, and secondly that Clyde’s evade-and-survive technique was already coming in handy.

“Well, let’s see. Here we go. Listen.” Genevieve scrolled to a random page of the book and began reading in a loud voice that reminded Kit of childhood Sundays in church. “‘Love the world and yourself in it, move through it as though it offers no resistance, as though the world is your natural element.’See, that’s exactly how I feel about the world! And this bit here about stealing the joy of this perfect moment. I just love how they’re living there. We should all be living in the moment like that, because tomorrow’s a mystery and yesterday’s history. Today is a gift.”

“Right,” said Kit, clamping her teeth into a smile.

“I think what she writes is beautiful.” Genevieve glowed. “Don’t you?”

“Oh, I think she can write.” Kit took an enormous bite of tofu and chewed fast, balking at the clammy tepidity of it.

“I also just love the gentleness of the man. Harry.”

“Henry,” said Kit, covering her mouth.

“Gentleness is so underrated. I truly believe this is the greatest love story since *The Bridges of Madison County*. He was a gentle man, too. A beautiful man who took lovely photos. Hilary, what did you think? Chopsticks, please.”

“I think Clint Eastwood wears his pants too high to be really attractive.”

“Pardon me? No, but what did you think about *this* book?”

“Oh, I liked that the man kept flying back to visit the girl, to check on her. He was so caring. Like a fairy godmother, except a man.”

“A fairy godfather?” said Sasha, looking at her nails. “Marlon Brando would turn in his grave.”

“Didn’t you think it was a really interesting story about time travel?” asked Genevieve, whose line of questioning Kit was beginning to find suspiciously vague. “I thought so. The time travel was especially interesting. Sasha, what did you like about it?”

“I liked the guy’s hair. And his accent was pretty good, considering they cast an Australian.”

“Did you think the time travel was especially interesting?” Genevieve smiled benevolently as Sasha looked up from the study of her manicure.

“I met a time traveller in the Co-op once. I kid you not. He told me he was from 1944 and had come from occupied Poland.” Sasha grimaced at the memory.

“Do you speak Polish?” asked Kit.

“If I flew in from occupied Poland, I’d smash my time machine with a hammer and stay here!” shouted Hilary. “You’d have to be pretty happy with landing in the Co-op. All the fruits and vegetables! All the organic coconut milk! Vats of natural peanut butter! Jackpot! I saw a movie once about a man in Poland in the war who was so hungry that when he found a boiled egg at the back of a cupboard he nearly passed out with excitement. Or was it an onion he found? Wait. It was a potato.” Hilary popped a grape into her mouth. “And he was always playing the piano. Anyway, if I time-travelled to the Co-op, I’d start eating right off the shelves.”

“That’s illegal, Hilary,” said Genevieve.

“He had a dictionary with him. A really mouldy, old, smelly one.” Sasha paused to remember accurately. “He stank, too. He stood way too close when he asked me things. Seriously, it was believable he was from the ’40s because his hygiene was very under-evolved.”

“Do you know what I find works wonders for hygiene? Feminine hygiene, I’m talking now, obviously, girls . . .” Hilary sat forward on her ottoman, ready to impart world wisdom. “Natural yogurt. And do you know what? They have a lovely one at the Co-op. You should have taken him to the yogurt aisle.”

“Is it full fat?” Sasha asked, flatly.

“I couldn’t tell you offhand. I can check when I get back home; I have some in my fridge.”

“With feminine *problems*”—Sasha made quotation marks with her slim fingers—“do you eat the yogurt, or rub it on you? Seriously, I’ve always wondered that. Surely men can’t do that? Do they have masculine problems?”

“Or”—Hilary shuffled further forward on her seat—“if you’re really in a tight spot, you can put a garlic clove up your va-jay-jay, pardon my French, and that’ll do the trick. Or run an apple cider/baking soda bath and just sit in there. Vinegar works wonders on your vagina.”

“You say vinagra, I say vagina. Let’s call the whole thing off!” said Kit. Everyone stopped for a moment and stared at her. Hilary gave her an uncertain smile and then returned to the private parts advice bureau.

“Sometimes I like to drink red wine and sit in a baking soda bath. That way I can pH down *there*”—Hilary pointed at her crotch—“while I relax up here.”

She raised her glass, beaming.

On her Thai cushion near the Buddha statue, Kit was aware she was starting to chug her wine. She stopped drinking, took a breath, thought for a minute, and had a smaller, more considered sip.

“About the book, though. Just to get back to that for a minute. Do you think time travel is a realistic plot device?” Kit’s tone was as light and casual as she could manage. Everyone stared at her again. “Really, as plots go, isn’t it all a bit conveniently magical? It’s like writing ‘and it was all a dream’ at the end of the final chapter. You can get away with anything that way.”

“What’s wrong with magic?” asked Hilary, sounding like a child whose teddy was being taken away.

“There is nothing wrong with magic, Hilary. *Magic happens*.”

Genevieve’s earnestness created a momentary silence in the room. Kit broke it.

“Well, no, it’s just that . . . I think this writer’s intelligent, and the love story’s relatable, I suppose, but time travel? I just find it hard to take seriously.”

“That’s what I said in the Co-op! Time travel my ass. If that guy was hitting on me, he should have washed first. Standards! He totally stunk. And his eyes were too far apart—I think he had a chromosomal issue, just saying.”

“Yes, Sasha, but apart from that man who was clearly very lost—”

“Poland is miles away,” agreed Hilary.

“Mentally lost, thank you, Hilary, and apart from him, I think we should remember that magic does exist all around us all the time.” Genevieve sniffed.

“So you all agree it’s a bit silly, then? The whole time travel thing? I mean, for a book we’re supposed to be taking quite seriously . . .” Nobody spoke. Kit panicked and kept going. “And also, since we’re talking about a guy dropping in quite randomly on a girl . . .”

“A fairy godfather,” smirked Sasha.

“If you like . . . well, didn’t anyone think it was a bit unsettling that it’s a grown man, stark-bollock naked, hanging out with a ten-year-old?”

“In what way?” asked Genevieve.

“In what way unsettling, or in what way stark-bollock naked? I think there’s only one way for that.”

“Could I have a word with you in the kitchen, please, Kit?”

Genevieve rose and strode out with the air of someone who expected to be followed.

Kit, still crouching on her cushion, looked at Sasha and Hilary, her eyebrows raised.

“Somebody got sent to the principal’s office,” said Sasha, singing the last two words.

Frowning, Kit put down her bowl of cold tofu, stood, and padded cautiously after Genevieve. Her baggy jeans swished in the silence.

In the kitchen, Genevieve stood with her hands on her hips in the middle of the room, under the glare of the overhead strip light. It buzzed. Behind her back, Martin hovered over the stove in his apron, frying more tofu in coconut oil. He glanced around at Kit, big-eyed.

“Hi,” said Genevieve.

“Hi,” replied Kit, her eyes narrow.

“Are you having a good time? I just wanted to say how glad I am that you came tonight, and what a welcome, joyful addition you are to our club.” Kit waited. “That said, perhaps I wasn’t clear enough about the kinds of things we talk about here at book club.”

“Don’t we talk about books? Am I at the right house? Where am I?” Kit swung her head around wildly.

For a moment Genevieve stood with her eyes closed. She breathed in and out slowly.

“Yes, that’s very funny, Kit, but what I mean is, it’s great that you have such lively opinions, but could you please check with me first before you announce them to the group?”

“I should check with you first before I speak?”

Kit folded her arms across her chest.

“Well, if you could just give me a little heads-up beforehand, then I can be more prepared when you drop into conversation that you think the lead character in the story is a pedophile.”

“A pedophile?” Kit gaped her neck forward to check she had heard properly.

“That’s what I said, yes.”

“Did I say *pedophile*?”

“You did not, but I think you implied it.”

“I think I just said it was weird that a man would talk to a ten-year-old without his trousers on. It can’t be that hard to find trousers.”

“It’s not a welcome subject at book club. It’s just that we all look forward to these meetings and, as planetary citizens, I’d rather we kept the discussions positive and beautiful. I don’t want everyone spiraling off on uncontrolled tangents.”

“Well, you say that, Genevieve, but to be fair, you’re the one who brought it up.” She really wanted to laugh but knew she mustn’t.

“It’s not Gen-eh-veev. It’s Gen-vieve.” She said the last syllable with French flair, sliding it downward. “Are you listening to me at all?”

“I am, yes. I am definitely listening.” Kit considered walking back to her cushion, but took a breath instead. “Look, I’m sorry. I’m not having a go at you; I just wasn’t that keen on the book. But I am really chuffed to join your club.”

“Okay, and *chuffed* is a good thing, I’m guessing. So do you hear what I’m saying?”

“Yep. Planetary citizens. Beauty. Got it,” Kit said, thinking, *First night here, being told off in the kitchen. Clyde is going to love it.*

“Thank you. Shall we rejoin the others? I’m so glad we’ve had this little chat. And like I say, I think you’re a really insightful, centred addition to the group. Should we have a hug? I think so. We hug at book club!”

Kit found her face being pressed against Genevieve’s shoulder. It was rock hard and smelled of cloves.

“There we go. Martin, you’re burning the tofu.”

Martin’s shoulders rose an inch, moving the bow of his apron upward, but he didn’t turn around.

The two women walked past him in single file back to the living room, where all talk of the book had ended and Sasha was quaffing wine as she told a loosely related story about a man she had seen naked when she was seven. She’d been using binoculars at the time. Hilary was popping dried cranberries into her mouth, one after another, her eyes enormous as she listened.

For the rest of the evening, all copies of *The Time Traveler’s Wife* lay face-down in the room, while Kit listened to the other women talk about the surprises they had found in male nudity, Mel Gibson’s ass of 1989 being the best one ever seen without pants on, and Sasha’s belief that time travel was the answer to successful dating because romance was in the early days, when your makeup was at its best. Kit spoke little but worked her way steadily through a bottle of Martin’s home-brewed elderberry-gooseberry wine, feeling her gums sting and then go numb.

With every top-up, she listened with lessening concern to Genevieve’s theory that time machines would help marriage in general, if only because you could travel back together to ancient Rome and mix it up a little; or, failing that, husbands might solo time travel and actually go away for the odd decade here and there, meaning less mess in the kitchen. Kit didn’t even blink when Hilary admitted that the best thing about a sabbatical from marriage would be that she could finally catch up on episodes of *Downton Abbey*.

Kit might have made it to the end of the evening unseen, had the others’ wine not run out. As it was, Genevieve, Hilary and Sasha all turned to her and ventured a sip of what she’d been drinking; only then did they all stop and shudder. Sasha pointed out that the elderberries were off, Genevieve complained about what time she had to get up in the morning and Hilary fetched everyone’s jackets, heralding the end of another literary evening.

Kit bounced like a pinball through a line-up of hugs and left, unsure of why it was called book club at all, but blurry enough not to worry about it too much on the walk home.

Kit

The whole of Lakeside Park devoted itself to soccer on Saturday mornings. All four fields were taken up with the bustle of hundreds of tiny players in knee-high socks. A steady stream of bigger kids practised penalty kicks, lofting the ball beyond the crossbar to bounce off the hoods of parked cars, causing a jagged chorus of car alarms to go off. Kit and Sully dodged through the gleaming rows of SUVs, then along the sideline of a game in progress, past beach-chaired parents in white visors, yelling in between bites of tofu dog.

Nelson was a small town, but Kit always marvelled at the sheer number of sport-playing children under six: it was like they’d been shipped in from a larger city with extra children to spare, or cloned during the week.

As they reached the fields for Sully’s league, Kit scanned colours. Why were there so many shades of sky blue, navy blue and silver? She hadn’t scoured the Soccer Association website for maps detailing this week’s game—a slapdash approach that would have made Clyde uneasy, were he able to attend games more regularly. Luckily, Sully seemed to have a built-in sense of direction so she ended up following him.

There were ten players on Sully’s team, nine of them parented by eager, compassionate local parents whose main concern in the game was kindness. “Be gentle!” they mewed each week at the sight of a tackle, while they sat on their communal blanket clapping equally for both teams. They had all happily signed waivers on the first Saturday, vowing never to shout competitively or keep score. Kit had also signed the waiver and since that day spent every week trying to contain herself. It was all she could do to absorb an obvious hand ball in silence.

When Kit sat down on the blanket, there seemed to be a crescendo of whispering. She smiled weakly and strained her ears.

“It happened at the end of the game,” a woman in a corduroy skirt muttered. “My son’s talked of nothing but winning ever since. It’s against team policy. I don’t need him to know the phrase *in your face*. It’s hostile, isn’t it, Fauna?”

“Perhaps, but I’m trying not to have strong opinions ever since my retreat,” replied Fauna as she massaged her own shoulder muscles.

What were they complaining about? Was it about the high five Kit gave that boy Zebedee last week? That was ridiculous. As if he didn’t already know they’d won. All six-year-olds could count, couldn’t they?

Kit looked out over the field of players warming up before the game. One kid had pulled his shorts up to nipple-height and was spinning in circles. *Most* *six-year-olds can count*, she revised, but kept quiet, hugging her knees, hoping against hope that she wasn’t the focus of the whispering.

The whistle signalling the start of the game sounded and she glanced sideways at the other parents. Nobody had spoken to her yet.

“I’m thinking of buying a bat home,” Fauna announced to the group. “Bat season’s fast approaching.”

“Guys,” said Corduroy Skirt, “can I bring my dog with me to the potluck? I have to take him to the chiropractor that evening, and it makes sense, carbon-footprint-wise, to just bring him along, since I’m in town anyway. He’s mostly house-trained, although I haven’t pushed it on him. Ulysses, have you organized the break-for-summer award ceremony?”

“I have,” said Ulysses, a man in a *Planet of the Apes* T-shirt whose hair needed washing. “We’re doing MVP stickers this year. I’ve ordered ten.”

Kit bit her lip. What potluck? What award ceremony? She turned toward Fauna.

“Is there an end-of-season par—?”

Corduroy Skirt cut in. “Kit? Where are the half-time oranges?”

“Pardon?” replied Kit, playing for time.

“According to the roster”—she flapped the pages back and forth on her clipboard—“it’s your turn this week. I’m pretty much sure I called you about it.”

“Did you leave a message on the answering machine?”

“Do you have the fruit or not?”

“I do not. But don’t panic, don’t panic, my husband’s bringing it. It’s all totally under control.”

Kit stood and meandered down the sideline, scrambling for her cell phone.

“Clyde!” she hissed when he picked up. “We’re on fruit duty! Half-time oranges! It’s our turn!”

“Okay. What do you want me to do about it?”

“Get some and come here.”

“Pip’s still asleep. Are you okay? You sound sort of unhinged.”

“She’s had a good hour. That’ll do. You have to get down here with oranges or we’ll be kicked off the team. They’re planning a potluck.”

“Who is?”

“The team! And we’re not invited.”

She could hear him opening the door to Pip’s room.

“Well, would you want to go?”

Kit stood quietly, thinking no. But also yes. Even if she didn’t go to the potluck, it would be nice to be asked.

The lullaby-duck in Pip’s crib started playing; Clyde must have pulled its string.

A whistle blew and she jumped, looking up to see Sully running a glorious, wide-grinned victory sprint, his arms outstretched like an airplane. His teammates mobbed him, squealing.

“Oh, Sully just scored and I bloody missed it. Listen, how long do you think?”

“Give me ten minutes.”

On time and true to his word, Clyde strolled along the tree line of the soccer fields at a pace not reflective of the current state of emergency. In one arm, Clyde carried Pip while in his other hand he swung a large bag of oranges.

“Who wants these?” he said to everyone on the blanket when he arrived.

All the parents turned.

“Just in time,” said Corduroy Skirt. “I hope you brought a knife!”

Clyde sat down and put Pip on his lap just as the whistle blew for half-time. “How’s the game?”

“Have you seriously not got a knife?” hissed Kit.

Clyde ripped open the bag of fruit and as the players arrived from the field, he threw each child an orange.

“Dig in, kids!” he said. “Fingers and teeth! It’s good enough for monkeys, and let’s be honest . . .” The kids started biting and grappling with orange peel, spitting out chunks and making faces. “There you go, Janice. Who says we need evolution?” Clyde grinned at Corduroy Skirt. “Sul, I hear you scored a beauty!”

“Top corner, Dad.” Sully tried to pinch some stringy orange pith from his back teeth, oblivious to the mud casing his fingertips.

Clyde laughed. “Get it, buddy? That’s the way. Dirt’s good for you, isn’t that right, Janice? Soon they’ll be selling packets of it in the Co-op.”

A couple of parents laughed as well.

*Since when is Clyde Mr. Soccer Personality of the Year?* Kit fumed. *Has* he *been secretly invited to the potluck?*

The coach blew his whistle for the second half and pointed for Sully to head to the bench. He trotted over to the sideline and sat down.

“Why’s he coming off? He’s only been on five minutes,” said Kit.

“It’s a sub-on system.”

Ulysses waved a list at her between long-nailed fingers.

“But why’s he the only one coming off? The other two he went on with are still out there.”

As she spoke, Clyde nudged her with his shoulder. What did that mean? *Be quiet* or *well spotted*? On the pitch, the game had resumed and the kids ran about, absorbed in the action.

“Look, there’s no real problem here.” Ulysses handed the list to Fauna, and leaned forward on the blanket to get a clear view of Kit. “Kids that score sit out to give everyone a fair chance.”

He opened his palms like a book, indicating equality.

“But it’s all topsy-turvy. You score and you’re benched? Are we *trying* to make them mediocre?”

“It’s not about winning, it’s about taking part,” shrilled Fauna, then cursed under her breath for having an outburst.

“Honey,” Clyde interrupted, over-accentuating the word, “what do we do when our daughter fills her diaper?”

He lifted Pip from his lap and stood her up, got her balanced.

“We change her nappy.” Kit looked around. “Oh, what? You didn’t bring the nappy bag either?”

“I think I followed the instructions you gave me very well. If you needed extra items, you should have added them to my list.”

Did Clyde just wink at another dad on the blanket? Where was he getting all these friends from?

Clyde stood up.

“Okay, Miss Pip, we’re out of here. Right?” He looked down at his wife. “I guess I have to take her home and change her?”

“I can.”

“You stay. I’ll see you at home.” He bent and kissed Kit on the lips then pulled his face back from hers. “Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

Kit watched her husband and daughter mosey away, jealous of their indifference. Parents stood from the blanket and walked down the sideline, following the switch of ends. Only Kit and Fauna remained on the blanket.

“Gosh, look at Indigo.” Kit pointed to Fauna’s son who was elbow-deep in the back of his shorts, scratching away. “Have you checked him for worms?”

She was serious. Pinworms were all over Nelson pre-schools at the moment, a fact Kit had just learned from Hilary’s Facebook update, which had also supplied a photo attachment alarming enough to stun everyone into silence. In fact, the only comment on Hilary’s worm status had been Genevieve’s, which announced that people didn’t wash enough.

“Look, it’s hard to get hold of food-grade diatomaceous earth, okay? It’s not like I haven’t tried. So in the absence of a natural remedy, he’s seeing the doctor on Monday. We couldn’t get an earlier appointment.”

Fauna’s chin looked terse and she got up to join the others further down the field.

“Put your foot in it more times, why don’t you?” Kit said to herself under her breath.

She saw Corduroy Skirt walking over to clear up the orange peels and joined her, kneeling to help scrape them into a pile.

After a few seconds of silence, Kit said, “Listen, I’m sorry if I did something last week that upset you. I wasn’t trying to sabotage anything, honestly.”

“Perhaps you could work on your over-competitiveness.”

Janice picked up orange peels like a bird pecking at worms.

“Listen, I’m sorry. I just told Zeb well done, is all. I don’t come here each week trying to cause trouble. I think maybe we have a bit of a cultural block here. I grew up playing sports . . .”

“Over-competitively,” said Janice. “Yes, that’s obvious. What we’re trying to do is raise compassionate children. Winning is irrelevant. Zebedee will not be turned into a competitor: it’s ugly and graceless.”

Had she been listening properly, Kit would have responded. Instead, her attention was caught by the sight of an opposing player dawdling in front of the miniature goal, filling it entirely. She watched as Sully streaked down the field with the ball, only to have his shot blocked.

“Ref!” she shouted, standing up. “Coach! You can’t have goalies in U6 football! That kid can’t stand there the whole match! That’s cheating!”

Corduroy Skirt put her hand on Kit’s arm. “Excuse me,” she said. “You’re doing it again.”

“I’m not . . . I don’t . . . look! Look at that! You can’t have kids in goal. It’s impossible to score! Look, and again! Sully would’ve had a hat-trick by now. Ref, are you having a laugh?”

Ulysses and Fauna reappeared behind Janice; they nodded to each other.

“Kit,” Ulysses said, steering her up the sideline by her elbow, “I’m afraid you’ll have to move further away.”

He urged her toward the corner flag, making her stumble on the grass.

Janice stood alongside Ulysses. “Yes. Go away. You’re banned. You can pick up your son at the end of the game.”

“Red carded?” cried Kit. “You can’t ban us! What is this, Planet of the Fascists?”

Kit felt her voice beginning to crack. Through the gap between Janice and Ulysses’s shoulders she could see the lake, lapping and calm. How she longed to go for a swim. When she took a breath, it caught in her throat.

“Not *us*—you. This doesn’t concern Clyde or Sully. Under the terms of the waiver,” said Corduroy Skirt, raising her index finger with her eyes closed.

“I didn’t read the waiver,” shouted Kit.

“Under the terms of the waiver, you are violating basic team principles. We have every right to eject you from the field. It clearly states in the guidelines that we will not approach team sports competitively, but every week you come here and shout and carry on, and you’ve taught your son that egotistical goal celebration. *And* you keep score. It’s like you don’t *get* it. Drop your son off and pick him up after his game, and if you want to talk more about this, you can contact the team manager.”

“Who’s the team manager?” seethed Kit.

“I am.”

Corduroy Skirt brushed her hair aside.

“You’d like me to contact you? Is email okay? Or would you prefer to speak in person?”

Kit threw her arms out in front of her, but in the ensuing silence sensed defeat, so she trudged off the soccer field toward a clump of trees by the edge of the lake, turning only to yell, “I’ll also contact you about Fauna’s worm-infested son touching the half-time oranges!”

Kit saw Janice shake her head and say something to Ulysses.

She sat against a tree with her back to the field, pulling daisies out of the grass and throwing them into a pile by her shoe. As each fresh one hit the pile, Kit recanted her list of grievances*. Hate football club, hate playgroups, hate potluck dinners that nobody invites me to, hate the perfect mums in this town who won’t give me the time of day, hate tofu, hate chai, hate crafts, hate round-the-clock gentleness, hate non-stop bloody unbearably earnest people*.She grabbed a fistful of flowers and hurled them at her feet. Her mind raced through possible exit plans. If she and Clyde left Nelson now, Sully would quickly find new friends. Her husband could get work anywhere, surely—it couldn’t be a nation-wide work slump. There were always plenty of jobs in England.

A whistle sounded far off on the soccer field. Kit watched as her son lined up to shake hands with the opposing team.

She stood, dusting bits of grass off her clothes and walked to the far side of the field where Sully saw her and ran over.

“Where’d you go, Mom?” he said, his face red from running.

“Oh, I needed some shade, buddy. Good work out there! You played really well. Let’s get home and tell Dad all about it.”

They walked off together, leaving the other parents to deal with the bag of orange peels.

Clyde got out two bottles of pale ale and slid one across the counter to his wife.

“Get that in you. You look like you’ve been hit by a car.”

She clinked bottles with him and sipped. The kids were playing in their room with Hot Wheels trucks and a ramp made from shin pads.

“Is this one of your home-brews? You should buy things in shops, Clyde. I keep saying these things and nobody listens.”

Clyde took an apple from the fruit bowl and bit into it, watching her.

“What?”

“I’m just waiting for you to say it.”

“Say what? This is horrid, I can’t drink it.”

She slid the beer bottle back at him.

“Come on, out with it. I know you have an announcement because you have that thing going on with your eyebrows.”

Kit rubbed her forehead and groaned.

“I want to leave Nelson, right now. Tomorrow.”

“There it is.” Clyde sipped, smiling.

“I do, Clyde. Those soccer mums are mean.”

She grabbed her beer bottle back and drank from it, despite shuddering at the taste.

“What did you do to get kicked off the field? That’s awesome!”

“I told the ref he needed to sort out the cheats in the net blocking Sully’s hat-trick. Perfectly reasonable request. Excuse me, why are you laughing?”

He reached out and touched her cheek.

“Hey. Lighten up. Maybe those moms aren’t your kind of moms. They’re a tiny group in a town of ten thousand people! You know what happened to me this morning when I was coming home from the game? I found this on the parking meter when I stopped on Baker. It was really damaging.”

He threw a crumpled Post-it note with a red love-heart border onto the countertop. Kit took it and read in curly handwriting: *Baby echidnas are called puggles. Have a far-too-cute day xx.*

“What the hell is that?” she asked, horrified.

“It’s the Parking Meter Fairy. She’s putting these notes on all the parking meters in town under cover of night, to make everyone feel happy. It’s a total nightmare.”

“We have to move immediately.”

“Yeah, but what I’m saying is it doesn’t matter. There are crazy people and mean people and none of them need to be your people.”

“Well, I need *some* people . . .”

“You have your book club moms now—they’re not mean, are they?”

“They pick absolutely shit books.” She groaned and slouched forward.

“Give it another try. You can’t tell anything about anything if you only show up once.”

Kit shrugged.

Clyde reached over and took his wife’s hand. “Even if they pick a crappy book, you should still go. After all, since when was book club ever about the book?”

He ducked out of the way of Kit’s bottle cap as it flew past his head.

Hilary

Why Michael felt that climbing Pulpit Rock at 5 p.m. on a Friday afternoon would be fun was beyond Hilary, but she could hardly stand in the way of a Fun Family Activity. That the FFA chosen by the boys required serious physical fitness seemed hostile, though; she was always trudging up a hill to keep them happy. The best part of winter was being excused from hiking, but every June, out came the bug spray and off they went again. It seemed unlikely she’d even make it to the peak this time: in her hurry to keep up, she’d only had time to pull on her old high school badminton pumps. Not exactly hiking shoes.

“Sweetie, did you bring some crampons for me?”

Michael stood at the entrance to the trail in athletic socks pulled midway up his sinewy shins. He hugged one knee to his chest, limbering up, and stared at the sky.

“Are you sure we shouldn’t message your mother, tell her where we’re going and who with and what time we left?”

“It’s not Moab, honey. You’re not going to have to cut your arm off with a pocket knife if you get stuck.”

“Bear bangers? At least tell me you’ve packed the spray!”

“Sing your nursery rhymes. I’m sure they’ll stay away.”

Michael and Jeremy chuckled.

The chest strap on Hilary’s backpack was too short and after a few attempts to grapple it around her boobs, she abandoned clipping it together. She hurried to join them on the steps, the top of her head already dry-baking in the unexpectedly hot spring sun.

The sky was cobalt and cloudless—a first-beach-trip-of-the-season day, not a throw-yourself-up-a-mountain day. The trail began with a series of precarious wooden steps before the path wound steeply up through trees, old gnarled ones with roots to trip over and foot holds too dusty to trust. To the side, a box offered free ski poles for balance. That was a totally bad sign.

Of course once she’d had Jeremy, Hilary had set out with good intentions like all other Nelson locals to hike Pulpit twice a day at a sprint with a ten-pound baby strapped to her back, but the one time she’d come up here before, she’d freaked at the sight of a woman a quarter the size of her running up the trail in bare feet. Hilary had turned around at the one-kilometre marker and headed to the bakery to eat a cinnamon bun, then lied to Michael about it later.

“Dad?” Jeremy’s reedy voice echoed in the trees. “Did you know the last time the Chicago Cubs won a championship was 1908?”

Jeremy and Michael were already two hairpin bends up on her: all she could see of them were boots and socks. Fragments of sports talk drifted back to her as she strained to keep up, though she had no clue what they were discussing. Whenever she spent time with her son he was face-down in technology. Add Michael to the mix and the boy lit up.

“Biggest dry spell in baseball history, son. Are you reading your stats book? All you need to do is pick a decent team. Want me to pick for you?”

They both guffawed.

Hilary puffed along behind, trying not to inhale the acrid stench of animal shit. Every dog that ran up Pulpit seemed to defecate in the first fifty metres—was it excitement or nerves? Either way, the early section of the trail was the steepest and smelliest, which seemed a cruel combination. Up she staggered, trying to breathe through her mouth without letting in any of the relentless flies.

She’d met Michael in high school. He’d been on the basketball team and had five Michael Jordan T-shirts, one for each day of the week. Kids in their grade called him Swoosh, a nickname Hilary had thought referred to the noise his track pants made when he strolled down the hall. She hadn’t been big into sports. Despite that, she’d somehow made it to a popular jock’s New Year’s Eve party where Michael had sat across from her in a circle, his ears backlit by the Budweiser sign in the basement window. He’d spun a bottle that ended up pointing straight at her.

They were in a closet for the New Year chimes, kissing endlessly, hungrily, the way teenagers do when they’ve just discovered lips. Hilary was surprised by the boy’s eagerness: he never spoke to her at school, was always twelve-deep in a wash of athletes strutting around in matching haircuts and jackets. Of course she’d noticed him—in English class he pulled a taped sign off her back and scrunched it into a ball, firing it into the garbage before she ever got a chance to read it. But had he actually known who she was at that party, or had it been dark enough in the closet that it didn’t matter?

She wondered about that nowadays. It seemed likely that he would never have kissed her at all had the bottle spun another inch to the right. The other thing she pondered lately was whether or not Sasha had been at that party, since she’d been in a grade lower. Sasha got into every cool party back then; she was the kind of girl who flicked high school boys away like ants—some girls just had the knack of confidence.

To date, Sasha never acknowledged Hilary—not then, not now.

And what had Hilary and Michael talked about in the beginning? It couldn’t have been sports, though Michael took interest in little else these days. What was it they bonded over? Stomping up the pine-needled path, breathing like a vacuum cleaner, her mind drew a complete blank. Had she been she hot back then? Interesting? When had they run out of gas?

Michael nodded at her a lot, the way men nod when they just want the conversation to be over. He was polite—thanked her for cooking breakfast and dinner fourteen times a week, and he showed up to Saturday garage sales. He showed up. But all they ever bought each other for birthdays now were gift vouchers to Source for Sports and Cottonwood Kitchens. Their toothbrushes wore bristle-protective hoods, and when their toes touched in bed they both jumped and apologized.

As they crossed over a dirt road to a section of vertical rock steps, Hilary had to stop. Sweat dampened her hairline. Who’d built this trail? Nepalese Sherpas? Whoever it was, they had to have been kidding.

“Boys! Can you wait for me?”

Nobody replied and she couldn’t see their feet anymore. A family of four went by her, the youngest of them about three years old. They were light on their feet, nimbly brushing past Hilary’s thighs as she blocked the path.

The mother paused before passing.

“Do you need assistance?”

She didn’t make eye contact, but fussed with the strap of her wristwatch, pressing the Velcro against itself for renewed grip. On her back was a squashy bag in the shape of a lung, with a plastic tube that snaked around to mouth height. Hilary wanted to lean forward and sip.

“I’m just catching my breath,” Hilary wheezed. “My boys are up there somewhere. Who can keep up?”

They laughed at the same time, though Hilary suspected the woman’s was pity laughter.

The family floated on, barely leaving a footprint on the path.

Hilary wriggled out of her backpack and unzipped it, curious to see what Michael had put in there for her. A battered, entirely brown banana. A compass. Band-Aids. *The Big Book of Sports Lists*—*plus 240 cool pics!*

She thumbed the pages in disbelief. Was she really carrying a sports encyclopaedia up the mountainside so her husband and son could compare baseball stats at the peak?

Hilary zipped the bag up aggressively.

*Thanks for nothing, Michael! Not even a godforsaken granola bar.* He needed a word in his ear about what constituted fun in an FFA.

She leaned to rest on a boulder, the berries of a nearby bush dangling crimson along her shoulder. Were they edible? There had been a hike one previous spring where she’d endured a half hour talk from Michael on the flora and fauna of British Columbia, an instructional lecture that ought to have left her wilderness-aware enough to be air-dropped from a helicopter and live for months alone in any woodland. The truth was, however, that she had spent the thirty minutes wondering when it would be appropriate to interrupt and ask if there were any M&Ms left in the trail mix. Perhaps because of this, the only friendly berry that stood out in a bush was a raspberry, and even those she preferred to buy from Safeway, for fear of getting it wrong.

She plucked one of the plump, round berries that fringed her shoulder and turned it full circle between her thumb and forefinger. It looked pretty harmless. It was probably a huckleberry. Elderberry. Boysenberry. Cranberry. It was definitely a cranberry. Or was it?

Hilary was about to chew it and see, when above her in the shrubbery she heard rustling. She froze in terror.

Snuffling—it was definitely a large animal snuffling. Oh my lordy lordy, it had to be a bear. Weren’t they all starving in June? A spray of pebbles rolled down the hill, heralding the arrival of something heavy.

In the absence of bear bangers, Hilary considered brandishing *The Big Book of Sports Lists* as a weapon.

More snorting and slobbering. Where had everyone else gone? That family of four? Her husband? Her son? Had they already been eaten, or didn’t anyone care that she was being hunted by a coyote, a mountain lion, a black bear, or a grizzly? Or what if it was one of each and they’d all banded together to form an ultimate predator gang?

Jesus Holy Bloody Mary, here they all came.

She floundered backward into the undergrowth on hands and feet like a land crab; then the tree line cracked and a huge St. Bernard emerged from the bush.

It swayed down toward her, its eyelids droopy, bumping the side of her shoulder as it passed. Who’d let a hundred-pound St. Bernard wander down a hill unsupervised?

Hilary waited for the owner to appear, but the path remained still and silent.

*If only that dog had been on its way up*, she thought. *I could have ridden it*.

She sat trembling on the rock, her knees touching, the adrenaline in her system swinging her between tears and laughter.

“Honey?”

Suddenly, Michael stood above her, his baseball hat on backward and his thumbs hooked in the straps of his backpack. Jeremy lingered behind him, chewing a PowerBar.

“You coming or what?”

“I need help, Michael! You can’t just charge up this hill. Why didn’t you wait for me?”

He ambled down to her, his boots slithering on the loose gravel. When she grabbed his outstretched palm it felt safe, comforting. She didn’t want to let go of it.

“Did you see that dog? It was the size of a small horse.”

“We thought you were right behind us. Jeremy, go behind your mom to make sure she keeps up.”

*Good grief, I’ve joined the Marines*, thought Hilary as Michael dropped her hand and took a sturdy stride forward. Her badminton pumps were insufficiently grooved for mountain excursions and she slid on the path, shrieking as she surfed her way backward past her son and over the edge of the path with a crash into the brushwood.

She did one full cartwheel, the sky blurring with tree trunks, before grabbing onto a viny root and saving herself from careening all the way back to the road.

“Holy smokers!” she could hear Michael shouting. “You okay? Hilary, where are you?”

Covered in dust and scraped along the shoulder blade, Hilary pulled herself into a sitting position in the ivy and sat wide-eyed. She plucked twigs from her hair. Up on the trail, Jeremy’s voice was part-panicked, part-thrilled. Michael pushed his way through the tree branches, his face pale.

“I’m okay,” she said. “I’m okay.”

When he pulled her to her feet he also lifted her into a bear hug. “Jesus Christ,” he said, smooshing her face against his chest, “I thought you’d really hurt yourself.”

The wooded grove she’d discovered smelled deeply of pine cones, a scent that could have been wonderful had it not reminded Hilary so much of cleaning the bathroom.

“Anything broken?” he asked, a question that seemed broader than he’d intended.

His eyes were ash-grey, his face lined from days spent outside in every available snowstorm. She shook her head, not telling him that her throat hurt on the inside, like it had shrunk or been peeled, with that rawness that comes a second before you cry.

This was the closest they’d stood all year: their quietest, stillest moment. The realization wasn’t mutual, however, and her eyes stung as he shifted his shoulders under his pack, readjusted the neckline of his Under Armour base layer.

“Ready?” he said, turning, and they clambered back up to the path, him bouncing her up like a bucket on the end of a rope. He stood her to the side of the trail and inspected her, pulled a stick or two out of her tangle of hair, scraped mud off her cheek. “We have *got* to get you better shoes. What is it? Is that shoulder sore? Lucky I brought Band-Aids.” He spun her around and searched in her pack for them, push-pulling her around as he rummaged.

“Here, Mom.” Jeremy handed Hilary his PowerBar wrapper. “That back flip you did was awesome. You looked like Kung Fu Panda.”

“Thanks, honey. Although I’m not sure a giant fat panda is the look I’m going f—”

“Okay, here.” Michael slapped a Band-Aid on her upper arm and turned her back around to face him. “All set. Are we good to go? Let’s get moving. We’re not even halfway to the flagpole yet!”

Michael gripped his wife’s elbows, squeezing encouragement into her so that when he let go, she almost toppled sideways back into the undergrowth. Off he went, leaping up the path again, calf muscles coping with the incline.

“You go ahead.” She flapped Jeremy on past her. “I’ll only slow you down.”

He didn’t disagree.

Her boys had already climbed around the next bend before Hilary decided to give up and skid her way back down to the minivan. As far as she could tell, they weren’t shouting for her.

She emerged from the trees into the softening sun of the parking lot and staggered past the bike racks, past the fresh wave of Nelsonites locking up bikes they’d just ridden to get to the hike. Their thigh muscles astonished her. How did they find pants that fit? And where did they all keep coming from? There had never been this many fit people when she was in high school.

Once that crowd had sprung onto the trail, she was alone. She heaved herself up onto the hood of the minivan, pulled out her cell phone, and blew dust from the screen. The text message she sent Michael read: *At car. Can’t get in*. She lay back against the windshield and noticed the St. Bernard snoozing in the shade under the trail marker. Perhaps they had more in common than she’d thought. She exhaled noisily and closed her eyes, letting the windshield warm her aching shoulder. For the first time in weeks, Hilary enjoyed the quiet of nobody asking anything of her, nobody bypassing her, nobody exposing her general inadequacy.

Genevieve

Genevieve walked out of the yoga studio, her mat clenched under her arm, and began her march down Baker Street. The 6 a.m. Sun Salutations class had been busier than usual: Pierre was getting a following. He didn’t have time to comment on her warrior pose this morning, and at the end of the class he seemed devoted to Sasha, who’d strolled into class twenty-five minutes late. Still, the walk home through the town would be calming. It was usually deserted at seven, though at one corner she had to step over the legs of some young hipsters sprawling on the steps of ReMax Wrightway. They didn’t even move—just sat there in their I’m-such-a-character hats, strumming guitars, lazy with youth. What were they doing up so early? Or had they even gone to bed?

*Don’t mind me*, she thought as she half-heartedly avoided stepping on their ankles.

There was something troubling about teenagers. Perhaps it was their freedom and the apathy with which they lolled. Genevieve wanted to lie like that in the sun all day. She wanted to lounge. These days she didn’t even get to lie down if she had the flu. In fact, thinking about it, the last time she’d lain down all day, she’d been in labour.

She walked on down Baker, glancing in the windows of the new, thinly veiled money laundering businesses set up by the grow-op dynasties of town, their camouflages laughable. A shop that sold only hammocks would never stay afloat in any other town because really, who lies in a freaking hammock in Canada between October and June? Genevieve suspected that the tax man must be in on the scam: why else wouldn’t he audit them?

Baker Street’s restaurant decks were newly open, a sure sign that July would soon be here. As she walked past them, her mind flashed to the plates of partially hydrogenated foods that so regularly filled the tables. Genevieve shook her head: nobody else was doing their part! Back east in Ontario, a few years ago, she’d been one to eat at Wingdings—there was no point denying it. But she’d cleaned up her act. She’d cleaned up so well that thirty pounds had dropped off her—but why bother giving up sugar, and alcohol, and wheat, on top of the veganism, when there were people in town who carried on ordering cheeseburgers? Working on this gaia-mind thing was more than a one-woman job, people! Everyone else needed to stop cheating.

As she walked, sweat gathered at her temples. Her Chinese medicine doctor had told her to accept life as a storm and allow herself to move to the centre, where it was calm. Easy for him to say: he just sat in a room all day with a harp CD playing. Still, she persevered—pouring milk thistle into her tea and smudging herself regularly with sage, but the frustration never left her. The face acupuncture had helped, but only for half an hour.

As she walked past the coffee shops, she closed her eyes and, breathing in through her nostrils, fantasized about interrupting patio-dwellers’ meals. She would lean in so close that there would be no escape from her beefy veganism. Out would come the abattoir pamphlet she kept in her purse and, after learning the truth, they would apologize to her and then order something with soy protein, for crying out freaking loud. It had become her favourite fantasy.

She had just crossed the street when she noticed a man walking toward her. He held a leash, at the end of which a barrel-shaped dog lunged from side to side, its tongue flopping from its foamy mouth. Every so often, the man stooped to pat the dog on the top of its wide, bony head.

Genevieve walked toward them, thinking hard about the joyful variety of the earth’s creatures, but noticing that these two were unbearably pleased with themselves, considering they were breaking the law. As they passed her, the dog’s frothy tongue smeared along the hemline of her yoga pants, a sheen of spittle dangling over her bare calf.

“Excuse me,” she said. The man stopped walking. “Do you know about the by-law?”

“Pardon me?” he said, his head tilting. His long hair had a Bic pen in it, sticking straight up like an antenna. The dog sat down by his side, panting, all of its paws in a row.

“I know we’re all creatures under one beautiful sky, but your dog has just slimed its tongue on my leg. Plus . . . there’s a by-law.”

“Oh, sorry.” He laughed. “Let me get that for you.” He danced around her shins, trying to wipe her hem with his open palm.

“Stop it!” Genevieve shrieked, pivoting with the man and batting away his hands. “Look!” She pointed to the painted sign on the sidewalk, the picture of the dog with a big red line through its midriff. “No dogs!”

He stood up and stared at her, his mouth drooping in tandem with his dog. Genevieve sniffed a little and postured herself to full height. *The centre of the storm, the centre!* Since taking up meditation two months ago, she had thought a lot about the connectedness of all beings on earth, but by-laws took precedence.

“Not everybody likes dogs. The rule’s there for a reason.”

“My dog’s not a problem.”

“It’s a rule.”

“I’m just walking a dog down a street.”

“It’s a law. Made by the city. You don’t seem to be listening.”

“Wow,” the man said. He had a broad, weathered face, and his eyes smiled slightly. “You should really get yourself a badge.” He glanced down at his dog. “Come on, boy, let’s get outta town before the sheriff gets a posse together.”

She watched the two of them saunter off, the veins in her neck throbbing. She closed her eyes for a minute, took a deep breath, and patted down the braids of her hair. Restored for the moment, she strode on home.

Genevieve slammed the front door and kicked off her Birkenstocks.

“Everything alright, honey?” Martin popped his head around the kitchen door.

“No, not really.”

Genevieve glanced around the living room and groaned at the sight of all the debris. Co-operative, win-win board games were splayed across the floor, the lids to the boxes ripped at each corner where they had been stepped on. Martin never made the kids pick up their toys, so that night and day she was surrounded by chaos, like she was dragging a train of building blocks, harmonicas and loom bands behind her wherever she went. She walked into the living room and began throwing wooden cars and ukuleles into a huge coconut-bark basket.

“I’ll get those,” Martin said, scurrying over from the kitchen and bending to grab a foam ball. “The kids just went next door to Mrs. Campese’s. She invited them over to bake cookies for the party later. The woman gets up at the crack of dawn. I hope that’s okay?”

He spun the ball on his skinny finger for a second or two, then shot it across the room like a basketball player, but it bounced off the basket’s rim toward Genevieve. Instinctively, she flapped at the rebound and scored. They both threw their arms in the air, then lowered them hesitantly.

In Toronto, Martin and Genevieve had spent summer evenings shooting hoops at the park after work. On the way home they would stop at the gas station and buy a hot dog, sitting on the curb to eat it with their knees touching. A *hot dog*, of all things. It seemed unthinkable now. Being a mom required a serious seven-day meal plan, though she knew about the Doritos bought from the 7-11 that Martin kept smuggling into the cupboard. He ate them in the bathroom, over the sink. From time to time, she would find the crumbs. As if he could hide them—they all but glowed in the dark.

“How was yoga?” he asked, picking up the last of the toys.

“Full. And this one girl left her cell phone on. I hate that.”

“Oh, crappola.”

“I know, right? Plus, on the way home, I had to tell a guy off about his dog. You know how I feel about by-laws.”

“I do.”

“I’m sick of people.”

Genevieve sat heavily on the Thai cushion in the corner and stretched out a shoulder muscle.

“Did the dog bite you or something?”

“No, it didn’t bite me. But it was *there*, and it shouldn’t have been.”

“But class was good?” Martin scratched his head tentatively and began to head back to the kitchen.

“Did the kids eat breakfast?”

“They did.”

From the kitchen, Genevieve heard him fill the kettle.

“Cup of tea?” he called out around the corner.

“Why are their plates in front of the computer?”

Martin’s head appeared in the doorway again. He was holding two tea bags.

“Oh. Yes, they watched a ten-minute thing while I was cooking. Something about a naughty rabbit. Chamomile or mint?” he said, dangling the tea bags.

“While you were cooking?”

Why did he always allow cartoons during food preparation? Whenever she cooked, she had them pulling at her pant legs and had to multitask her way through the process each time. Cartoons were lazy parenting.

“Just while I made eggs, yes. It wasn’t for long, honest.” The tea bags hung in the air. “I forgot to pick up the plates.”

He retreated and began to clatter tea cups. Genevieve walked to the kitchen and leaned against the door frame.

“Honey or stevia?” he mumbled, not looking at her.

“Nothing. It’s all sugar, you know.”

Once the tea was ready, he handed her a cup and held his own at chest-height.

“I’ll drink mine in bed. The kids will be gone for at least an hour.”

“Can I join you?” she asked quickly, reaching out to touch him just beneath the ear lobe. He blushed and looked down.

“I’m midway through this documentary on maypole dancing. I was just going to finish that up.”

“Maypole dancing?” She withdrew her hand.

“It’s a really interesting tradition. You know, Morris dancers. You can watch it with me if you like.” He glanced at her. “I think it’s pagan. You know, in origin. It’s fascinating to think they’ve been doing these dance steps for centuries.” She stared at him. “Although that’s only if you like old things and . . . well, anyway. I’m glad you’re home safe.”

He turned and left the kitchen, closing the door quietly.

Genevieve walked back to the living room and, after a sip of tea, leaned her forehead on the glass of the french windows. Mist rose from the trees along the shoreline like a smoky exhale.

She rolled her forehead from side to side against the pane, enjoying the coolness against her skin. Her pelvis felt hot. *Sleep with me, someone, for God’s sake!* Was it really so much to ask? Her husband didn’t want to have sex anymore and Pierre had a horde of groupies. It was really messing with her flow. Everything was wrong—the kids, the move here, the town. She breathed in and out, watching the condensation pool on the glass. *Breathe in through the nose, Genevieve, out through the mouth. Out through the MOUTH, Genevieve.* There was frickin’ too much to remember. Pierre seemed keen that she concentrate on being connected to everyone, but why the hell would anyone want that*?* Most people were hideous and didn’t wash. She pressed her head harder against the window, then something outside on the street caught her eye.

Directly across from her on the curb sat a young couple. The boy wore a knitted toque, pulled back on his bronzed forehead. Right up against him leaned a girl, her shirt flapping over some kind of bikini top, exposing a perfectly-toned stomach. Was that a flower behind her ear? They were smiling into each other, pressing their shoulders together.

Genevieve watched them from above, both palms against the window. As she stood there, the boy pulled a cigarette of some sort from his jean pocket, lit it, and handed it to the girl, smiling at her as she took a long, sucking inhale. He said something and the girl threw her head back and hooted. Genevieve grabbed her phone and walked to the front door. She yanked the screen door back; it banged on its hinges as she jogged down the front steps and crossed the street. A dog barked in the neighbour’s yard. Once she reached the couple, she stood over top of them, her hands on her hips. They squinted up at her.

“Hey,” the boy said.

“Is that tobacco?” The last thing she needed were some idiot kids polluting themselves in front of her house. “Wait a minute, is that drugs? Oh, no, you don’t, young man. Not on my watch.”

“This?”

The boy raised the joint between his young fingers. He smiled at Genevieve, his jaw line pretty. The girl had her head on his chest, and watched with big, amber eyes.

“Yes, that! What are you thinking? I’m calling the police.” She held her phone up, waving it furiously like an offside flag.

“Whoa, slow it down, man. Breathe a minute.”

Genevieve said nothing; neither did she dial.

“Seriously, sit down here a minute.”

He shuffled himself and his girlfriend over on the curb and patted it, his eyebrows raised.

“No, thank you,” said Genevieve, putting her hand on her collarbones. They felt bonier than she remembered.  
 “Well, here, want some of this? Go ahead, take a hit. It might be a good thing.”

The boy reached his brown arm up toward her. She hesitated, looking down at his raised face. She couldn’t remember ever looking flawless like that, even in the lifetime ago of her own youth.

“It’s seven in the morning!”

The boy grinned. “Yeah, I guess it’s a little past our bedtime.”

His girlfriend smiled too, brushing long hair away from her cheek. Genevieve looked at the joint, the smoke of it wisping up toward her beautifully, a genie from a lamp. Sweetness and musk curled to her nostrils in a drift of casualness.

“Go ahead,” he said. “We won’t tell on you.”

Genevieve frowned at his smile, and tucked the phone in the back of her stretchy waistband.

“Give me that,” she said, snatching the joint. “I can tell you right now, *this* isn’t the answer.”

The boy shrugged a little, bobbling the girl’s head on his shoulder.

Genevieve took a big drag on the joint, breathing it deeply into her clenched lungs. She snorted a little, and a tiny dragon puff of smoke peeped into the morning air. Once she had breathed out properly in a flume, she took three more rattling pulls, feeling heady with familiarity. The skin on her hands looked dry and reptilian now; how had that happened? She didn’t pass the joint back to the boy; instead, she threw it on the sidewalk and trod on it.

“Whoa . . . Bogart,” said the girl, quietly. The boy nudged her.

“So off you go, eh? Take your little Zen outfit elsewhere. I don’t need your teenage enlightenment, thank you.”

She turned and walked unsteadily back to her front steps. She could hear the youngsters dusting themselves off, clacking their flip-flops on the asphalt and giggling.

The morning air suddenly smelled earthy and green; the screen door, when she pulled it, rasped on her fingertips.

“It’s a sieve,” she said loudly, and the discovery amused her.

She kicked her shoes off against the wall, but they bounced back in a ricochet, making her stumble and snigger as she pushed her hair away from her face.

Barefoot, she wandered through the quiet house, trailing her hands along the smooth edges of the piano keys; the leafy fern in the bamboo pot; the cat’s mottled back arched suspiciously under her fingers. Scattered on the dining room table were paintings caked onto recycled paper the children had done the previous day—pictures of children in Africa eating pizza, and her daughter’s one of green grass and honeypots with bees saying *Buzz off, Monsanto* in thick-edged speech bubbles. She picked the paintings up, blinking, and sighed. The children were learning well.

*Good Christ*, she thought suddenly, *the kids! How long does being stoned last for?*

Her heart thudded in a wash of panic. Glancing at her inner wrist, she saw it was 7:25 a.m. *Calm, calm*. Surely Mrs. Campese would keep them for an hour or so and give her a chance to sleep this off.

She put her fingers to her lips, feeling the perfection of her own skin, but her tongue felt dry. Letting the art waft down onto the tabletop, she spun on her heel toward the kitchen, confident that Martin was safely hidden away with his movie.

When she reached the cupboard, she batted aside the boxes of quinoa and the cans of garbanzo beans. There, at the back, was Martin’s crinkled stash—three-quarters full and waiting in dark disgrace. She pulled the Doritos clumsily forward and hugged them to her breast. Sliding down, she sat on the floor with her back against the drawers and opened the bag.

A waft of warm, cheesy air met her face. Being careful not to crinkle loudly and alert Martin, she grabbed a fistful of garish triangles and shoved them into her mouth.

Kit

While the kids played around the table legs with blocks and Hot Wheels, Kit sat and read Cuddles ’n’ Curses, the *Weekly Radiance*’s Saturday column dominated by pushy locals telling everybody else how to live. Clyde found it hilarious, but for Kit it held the horror of a car crash: she couldn’t not look.

*Curses to the parents who cycle in the park without helmets on! What kind of example are you setting for your child? Curses to people who smoke cigarettes. Get green, you’re an embarrassment! Big, calming cuddles to the man who leaned on his horn at the crosswalk. I was simply looking at the sky. Take the cuddle—you need it more than me. Bless you.”*

There was a thump under the table as Sully stood up.

“I’m hungry, mom. Can I get cereal?”

Kit got up and shuffled into the mud room to let the dog out and fetch the Cap’n Crunch. As she walked past the phone it rang, forcing her to pivot and leave the dog wagging his tail by the back door. She hovered, wondering if it was another mom calling. They were the only ones who made phone calls before 8 a.m.; it was perfectly acceptable now that sleep-ins were extinct, along with jeans that fit and alone time.

Kit picked up, waving Sully over to the cereal cupboard and passing him a bowl. His hair was a firework on top of his head.

“Did I wake you?” Genevieve asked, banging something metallic on a hard surface.

“Nope,” said Kit, warily. They hadn’t spoken since the last book club, a week ago. “How are you? Did you get up early for yoga?”

Genevieve took a while to answer but continued to bang her object. “Yes.”

“Okay. Was it nice?” Why so monosyllabic? Hadn’t Genevieve called *her*? “What is that banging?”

Genevieve laughed suddenly—a loud, gurgling, fluid sound that Kit had never heard Genevieve make before.

“Why don’t they make cans that open easily? Like cans of cat food with those pull things. That’d be sweet! How come cat food’s so easy to open and no other can is? It’s a fricking important question. No doubt. And also, why is yoga so crowded? I just got back from class and they should raise the price. I can’t concentrate in a crowd.”

There was a rustling on the line, like a crinkly packet of chips opening.

“You should go to India,” Kit said, rubbing her eye. “You’d love it. You could do all the yoga you want, and I’ve heard it’s really under-populated.”

“They have hot yoga here now. I’d switch to that, except . . .” Genevieve’s mouth was full of something. What was she crunching on? “Do you know about the hotness?”

“Again, you could get all the hot yoga you want in India. It’s fifty-degree heat, one hundred percent humidity round-the-clock. It’s a hot yoga marathon. What are you munching?”

“Nothing.” Genevieve paused to swallow audibly before yelling, “Get down with the hotness!”

Kit paused. “I think you mean sickness.”

“The yogis in hot yoga lose five litres of sweat a session. Holy crappola, I don’t know where it all goes; probably into the mats, which for me is a disgusting issue. I think about that a lot.”

Kit nodded her head at the cutlery drawer, watching Sully eat Cap’n Crunch with a cupped hand. “They should make them impervious. They should lie on plastic sheeting.”

“Yes! Tarpaulin and sloped, so all sweat and gross bodily fluids pour sideways into a drainage system. Wouldn’t that be so cool? I’m going to go tell them.”

“What? Right now? Blimey, you’re a bit lively.”

“They also need to fill the cracks in the wood flooring because they do not hose those out between classes. They do not. They need to fill them in.”

“Grouting?”

“Home Hardware! I have to go tell them. On second thought, I might write them a note—it’s too hot to set foot in there.”

“Are you alright, Genevieve? You sound . . . weird.”

Kit heard Genevieve exhale.

“I need to breathe. I think there’s something wrong with the moon—I’ve been in a horrible mood for two days. I might try Energy Medicine, but I don’t know where to get it. Oh for God’s sake, this is ridiculous. Where’s Martin? His show must be done by now . . . Listen, okay, I know I’ll see you before July, but I’m calling to tell you the next book.”

Kit said nothing, but her toes curled in her slippers.

“It’s *Eat, Pray, Love*—have you read it? You goddamn should. It might help you. So it’s the first Saturday in July at my place like before. Martin’s making quiche and doing maypole dancing.” She snorted with laughter again while Kit shook her head, bewildered. “And also, can you watch Mercedes and Hunter for me this morning? I have to take a nap. And then I have to run out to Home Hardware.”

“For grouting?”

“What? Why . . . what? No, the hardware store and get something . . . I forget.”

Kit frowned. “I thought I was banned from watching your kids after the Wonder Bread incident.”

“Wonder?”

“Wonder Bread. Me feeding your children a sandwich with it. Have you forgotten about that?”

“Have I forgotten about wonder? That’s hurtful, Kit. How can you ask me that?”

“Genevieve, what’s going on? Did you have a rough night with the kids or something?”

Genevieve laughed again, snorting as she inhaled.

“Musical beds.” She sighed the words. “I met a couple of kids half an hour ago who were up all night. Do you remember when not sleeping used to be fun? Good Christ, give them fifteen years. Hey, please don’t show hockey DVDs while Hunter’s there. They’re too violent.”

“Violent?”

“Hockey hits are brutal. I’ve been trying to teach him to meditate, but he just will not sit still.”

“I can’t watch your kids this morning. I’m meeting a friend for coffee.”

“Who?”

“You don’t know her.”

It was a lie. Kit had no one to meet, but the inference that she was inciting her own son to violence irritated her. If they didn’t like how she parented, they shouldn’t leave their kids at her house. Did these mothers also sit down at restaurants and say, “I’m eating here but I’m not that keen on what you’re doing with the menu, or the decor. Could you change them please?”

“Oh, for God’s sake. Well, fine. I’ll get Martin to do it. We should get the kids together for a play date soon. A date of playing. A game date.” She paused. “Do you think we’re the only animals who play organized games?”

*Strange question*, thought Kit. “No. Otters do, I saw them in the zoo. They were having a right laugh.”

“But was it a game with rules?”

“I don’t know. I’m sure they’re still there. You could go and ask them.”

There was a rustling while Kit waited for Genevieve to hang up first. “I’m mouth-hungry. Do you ever get that?”

“Did you just say *mouth-hungry*?” Kit smiled.

“My body isn’t hungry but my mouth is. It’s an actual phenomenon. Wow, who made that word? Ph-en-ommmm-en-on. What’s good to eat when you’re mouth-hungry?”

“What’s in the tin you’re banging?”

“I have no idea. I have to go make Kool-Aid.”

The phone line clicked and went dead, leaving Kit to wonder who on earth she’d just been speaking with. She put the phone back in its stand, wondering if she could manage to borrow *Eat, Pray, Love* from the library, to avoid ever having to buy a copy.

Genevieve

She woke with a jump to find herself sprawled on the sofa, her head resting on a whoopee cushion that the kids must have snuck past her. Her limbs felt heavy and soft, as if she’d poured tar into all of them. She lay still, her right hand cupping her left breast as she listened to the clicks and snaps of the fridge in the kitchen as her mind swung carelessly from one thought to the next, like a child on the monkey bars at a playground. Then, careful not to press into the whoopee cushion any further, she sat up and stretched, realizing from the clock above the piano that she’d been asleep for almost two hours.

Martin had covered her with a blanket. She rubbed her eyes and frowned, aware suddenly that she’d had that dream again—the panic one of her running through cobbled streets being chased by snorting bulls. Genevieve had no idea why the dream kept repeating, or where in the world the cobbled streets were. She pulled her tongue up from where it lay pasted to the bottom of her mouth and put one hand to her temple. Now that the cannabis fog had dissipated, only a dull thump remained. She needed coffee.

By the kettle was a note in Martin’s pubescent scrawl: *Gone to fetch kids.* He’d marked it 9.45 a.m.—more than half an hour ago. No doubt he was at Mrs. Campese’s kitchen table eating chocolate peanut butter cookies. Genevieve picked up the ballpoint pen and wrote below his sentence: *Gone to Home Hardware for your shelving. 10.20 a.m. No TV for kids!* She underlined the last part, then poured coffee into her travel mug and found her eco-chic bag, bought from the Third World Boutique on Ward Street. Lifting the bag over her head, she swathed it across her chest as she stepped into her shoes and left the house. The front door banged closed behind her.

She parked at Home Hardware and headed for the entrance, but was halted by the sight of an enormous black truck, the kind that could drive through ravines and over fallen trees, should the apocalypse ever hit Nelson. Inside it, the driver rummaged through receipts, oblivious to the fact that his engine was still running. She walked over and rapped on his window.

A man of about thirty looked down at her. He had oil-stained fingertips and wore coveralls, pulled half-down to reveal a greasy tank top and biceps like boulders. She began to reconsider, but it was too late now; he’d already lowered his window. They were face-to-face.

“Oh, hi there, good morning,” she blustered, having to talk over the noise of heavy metal music that blared from his stereo.

He stared.

“Could you please turn off your engine?”

“What?” the man said and revved his gas pedal.

Genevieve shifted the strap of her beaded bag and regrouped.

“BC is idle-free! We all need to do our part.”

“Who are you?” he asked. “What do you drive?”

He switched his engine off, nudging Genevieve backward with his door as he got out. The guy was as tall as a tree in his work boots. Genevieve found herself staring too hard at the contour of his pectoral muscles and swallowed, then pointed half-heartedly at her rusted ’79 Buick, a dream catcher hanging from her rearview mirror.

“That’s yours?” He tilted his head to read her bumper sticker: *That was Zen, This is Tao.* He cleared his throat. “Those old beaters emit carbon like you wouldn’t believe. How does the environment feel about you?”

“Grateful. Grateful for my commit—”

“Okay, thanks. Have a good day.”

He sauntered around the front of her Buick, heading for the store. As he passed the hood, he pulled her antenna all the way down, sliding his finger along it until it pinged free. She watched the metal wobble, her arms hanging by her sides. Winking over his shoulder at her, the man pulled open the door and with a jangle of the bell, disappeared inside.

Genevieve watched the door close, the veins in her neck still bobbling blue. She jerked for the cell phone in her bag, groping for it among hand sanitizers and Tiger Balm. As she raised the phone to her ear, it began to ring.

“Hello?” she snapped.

“Genevieve? It’s Kit.”

“Ugh, some asshole just twanged my antenna.”

“Pardon? Where are you?”

“A parking lot. What an asshole. Where are you? I thought you were so busy having coffee.”

“Yeah, I was. I am. But listen—you know next book club? I might be a bit late because Clyde’s got a hockey game that day.”

“In July?”

“Well, they play in a car park somewhere up near the college. In Rosemont. God knows. I just thought I should mention it.”

Genevieve sniffed. “Who’s Clyde?”

The phone line crackled between them.

“My husband.”

“Your husband plays hockey? Is he buff? Like, NHL locker room buff?”

Kit barked out a laugh. “He’s quite fit, yeah.”

“You failed to mention this before.”

Genevieve kicked the tires of her car, checking for air pressure. She wasn’t sure why kicking them helped, but she enjoyed doing it. Near the front tire, she passed the antenna again and rubbed her own fingertips where the man’s had passed. If she reported him for vandalism, the two of them might meet again in the privacy of a police depot interview room. Left alone while the officer went to fetch coffee, Genevieve would tell Home Hardware what a bad boy he’d been; she could take the coveralls from his waist and peel them slowly from his . . .

“Genevieve? Are you still there? Has the antenna pinger returned?”

Shaking her head to focus, a fresh wave of indignation swept her. “I can’t believe that guy! Asshole!”

“I’m an arsehole?”

“No, not . . . look, whatever, that sounds great. I have to go now.”

She hung up, grabbed a Sharpie from the bottom of her bag and wrote down the man’s licence plate on her hand, noting the smoothness of the pen lid as she held it in her mouth. Her body felt tingly. Good Christ, was she still stoned? She creaked the heavy door open and crawled into the boat-like space of her Buick.

With only a cursory glance up, the young police officer at the desk motioned Genevieve toward a chair and told her to wait. He tapped away at his laptop, fingertips like scuttling bugs in the hush of the polished room. The place felt as blank as a morgue. She sighed demonstratively. So this was where tax dollars came to die.

Around her and above, the mushroom-coloured walls and strip lighting bludgeoned any freshness from the day, and her padded vinyl seat released air in a baritone wheeze whenever she shifted her weight.

What paperwork could possibly be so important that the officer couldn’t tear his eyes away from it? Genevieve tried coughing, but still he didn’t look up. She stood, listening to her chair cushion re-inflate, and wandered over to the notice board on the left of the officer’s desk. As she passed, she trailed her finger along the top of his workspace, watching for a reaction. She made a wiggly line, ending it at the top of his keyboard. When he raised his head she wrote *hi* in the gathered dust. Though his eyes narrowed fractionally, the officer silently returned to his work.

The notice board was filled with grey, curly-edged posters of the nation’s lost youth. With her hand resting gently on her collarbone, she scanned the faces of the missing children—the vanished horde. Those poor, poor babies. The teenaged ones, however—the ones with the facial piercings and the excessive eye makeup—they must simply have run off, and who could blame them? They were probably hitchhiking across the country, skinny dipping in lakes, sleeping under the stars. Genevieve felt tempted to join them.

Her attention drifted to the side of the notice board where a picture, clumsily tacked to the drywall, showed a scattering of lurid pills in front of stacks of casino chips. *High Stakes Gamble,* the slogan read. *This is one bet not worth taking*. Genevieve frowned at the poster, taking in the final tagline, *Street Drugs Kill*. Were those pills supposed to be Ecstasy? They looked more like Skittles. Unless Willy Wonka had formed a drug cartel since she graduated college, that ad campaign was totally far-fetched.

“Pardon me?” she said to the officer. “It says here, ‘This is one bet not worth taking.’ Is that supposed to imply that all other forms of gambling are okay?”

The officer stared at her, rolling something from the inside of his nostril with his thumb and forefinger. Now she had his attention.

Seizing the opportunity, Genevieve glided over to his chest-high desk, only to find he’d looked down again. She stopped directly in front of him, stretching loudly before folding her arms. If she leaned forward slightly, her breasts would rest on the counter. Surely that would win the battle. However, there was no way in hell she was touching his desk: God only knew what had last rubbed up against it. Her tapping foot resonated in the hallway.

He glanced up. “I’ll be with you shortly, ma’am. Please take a seat.”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” She slouched into the puffy chairs. “Would you like me to take a number, get in line?”

She sat down, her sarcasm undermined by the deep, rich honk of air escaping the cushion. A half-finished cup of coffee rested on the table by her side; gum floated on its surface. More criminal germs?

“Don’t you employ cleaners?” she grumbled loudly enough that it would reach him. Still no response.

She decided to shift on her cushion on purpose, sending low, resonant parumps of chair air in his direction. Each time she waited until the cushion was full, before squashing another honk his way. The urge to snigger flooded her—why wasn’t he laughing? *Would this be as funny if I hadn’t smoked pot three hours ago?* He barely even registered the noise, though perhaps the corner of his mouth twitched. *Wait, though! Is it obvious I’m still stoned? Christ, what if the policeman notices?* If she was going to get city laws enforced, better not to go breaking federal ones. *Calm, calm. The centre of the storm, Genevieve. Keep it together.* She squashed the chair cushion flat again and the air felt good against the inside of her thighs—naughty, even. She was just wondering where they’d bought the chairs when a home invasion leaflet on the coffee table to her left distracted her. She didn’t read it; instead she scrunched it into a ball and threw it full-pace at the wall behind the officer’s head. Her arm wasn’t what it used to be, but the ball scuffed the rim of the clock and dropped behind the man’s chair. He had to have noticed that.

Genevieve reached for her bag, lifting it across from the neighbouring chair. She wriggled her bum into the seat some more, mustering new air, and with the bag on her knees, dove in for the sanitizing hand gel. From the depths of the bag, her cell phone chimed. A tinkling sound, soothingly Balinese.

“Hello? Yes, hello, Martin.”

“Are you home?” He sounded confused.

“No, I’m at the police station.”

“What did you do?”

“I’m *reporting* a crime—or I would be if the man at the desk would notice me.” The officer shook his head but did not look up.

“Are you alright? You took a serious nap there on the couch. I thought you’d slipped into a coma.”

“I wish, Martin. No, I just needed a little sleep. Yoga’s taking it out of me.”

“The kids are hungry. What? Oh, and thirsty.”

“Well, make them a sandwich and a drink.” *For the love of God. Do all men turn back into children when they have children? It’s a conspiracy.* “There’re tofurky slices in the fridge, but you see the cashew nut butter in the side door? Don’t eat that, that’s mine.”

At the desk, the officer hesitated before he spoke, scratching the top of his ear. “Unless it’s an emergency,” he said, his shrug sheepish, “we like to limit the use of cell phones in the station, ma’am. Do you mind shutting that off?”

Genevieve pulled the phone away from her ear. “What? Martin! He’s saying I can’t take calls. There’s some kind of full-scale ban on speaking in this place, from what I can tell.”

“Are you coming home soon?” asked Martin.

“Yes, yes, after this. Why, do you miss me?”

“I can’t find the toenail clippers.”

She made a sound like the seat cushion. “In the cupboard under the bathroom sink. I’ll come straight home after this. Maybe we could let the kids watch the computer, you and I could—”

“Ma’am?”

“Okay, okay!” She stabbed her phone off, then sat staring at the policeman.

After a few more seconds he spoke.

“Right. You can approach the desk now. My apologies for the wait.”

Genevieve threw her phone back into her bag, stood and dusted off her pants, then swept forward until they were eye-to-eye.

“I am here, as I said when I came in, to report a crime. I have been violated.”

“Would you prefer to speak to a female officer?” The man looked hopeful.

“What? No.”

“Could you describe the nature of the violation, then, ma’am?” He threaded his fingers together in front of him and sat waiting with the patience of a Labrador retriever.

“An antenna violation. General rudeness. Disturbance of the peace? I don’t know. You’re the policeman!”

The man’s blue eyes widened. He was just a kid, barely twenty, with that tell-tale fluffiness at the crown of his blond head.

“Perhaps it’s best if you just tell me what happened. I’ll type as you go.” He smiled and nodded. “From the start, then? Ready.”

“Fine. A very rude man refused to turn off his engine while it was idling unnecessarily. In Massachusetts, that’s a crime, you know. Here—I looked it up.” She produced her phone and scrolled to her search history. “‘Chapter 90, Section 16A. No person shall cause, suffer, allow, or permit the unnecessary operation of the engine of a motor vehicle while said vehicle is stopped for a foreseeable period of time in excess of five minutes.’”

“This incident occurred today?”

Genevieve clicked her phone off, nodding. “Just now. Outside Home Hardware.”

“Right. Idling vehicle. You are aware that Massachusetts law doesn’t apply here? It’s not a crime in BC, ma’am.”

“Tell that to the environment.” She paused. A new light sparkled in her eyes. “Is it a by-law?”

“I couldn’t tell you. But I’m sure a by-law officer would be happy to help you.”

He said the sentence rather quickly for her liking. Still, he had a fresh, open face: the quintessential boy-next-door. If she tried hard she might be able to imagine him off-duty, cooking barbeque food with his shirt off, drinking beer with sunglasses pushed up on his head. *Perhaps he rides bicycles in Lycra. Perhaps he does yoga! His legs seem long enough. What are his toes like?*

She shook her head quickly.

“I’m here now and I’m sure *you’d* be happy to help me. What we have here is a crime that needs legislating.”

The officer exhaled and rubbed his eye with his knuckle. “Okay, let’s . . . Okay. When did the actual violation occur?”

“Just now! I told the man his engine was running needlessly, and he was totally unapologetic. Then he walked to the front of my vehicle and twanged my antenna. *That* is a violation of my property.” Genevieve glared at him. Was that the tremor of a smile she saw on his face? “I find this very offensive,” she said, smacking the desk between them with her flat palm.

“He twanged it?”

“He twanged it so it went like this.” She lifted her forearm straight and then shuddered it for him. “Who does that?”

The officer paused in his typing and covered his mouth with his hand. He seemed to be coughing. “Sorry. Could you describe the gentleman?”

“Tall, shaved head, hairy moustache, arms like a gorilla. Quite manly and attractive to some women, I’m sure.” She licked her lips and ran a finger along the wetness. Had her skin always been that smooth? Her lips felt awesome. “Some women.”

The man coughed again. “Did you get his licence plate number? That might be step one. Although I’m not certain we can press charges.”

He tilted his head at her, his young, smooth brow furrowing mildly.

“Of course I intend to press charges! Because really, let’s all run around vandalizing each other’s cars!”

The man cleared his throat. “Well, we can give him a call, ma’am, let him know you’re upset. Licence plate?”

She looked at her palm, where she had scribbled in Sharpie pen. “DF 1508. BC plates.”

“I’ll run it. We can take it from here.”

Genevieve sniffed. “Good. Okay, then. So, what, that’s all you need?”

“Yep. We have your number. We’ll be in touch if we need anything else.”

He seemed suddenly masterful. She broke her rule and leaned in against the desk, shaking her hair behind her to tickle the skin of her shoulders.

“Can I ask you something?” She smiled and rubbed her index finger in the dust again, swirling it in smooth circles. “Where is everybody? It’s deserted in here!”

He shrugged, his blue eyes blank. “Slow morning.”

“You could get up to all kinds of things with nobody around, eh?”

He smiled, but his eyes seemed startled.

“Are there cameras in here?”

He nodded, looking hard at his computer screen.

“Really?” Her voice was throaty. “Where, exactly?”

“All over.” His right arm waved vaguely. “It’s high security. Right, I think we’re do—”

“So who’s watching us right now? Like, how many men?”

Genevieve lifted her finger from the dust swirling and rested both hands on the top of her head so that her nipples crested the countertop.

“Okay.” The officer stood up, suddenly gangly over the desk. “It’s been a pleasure, ma’am. You have yourself a great day, now.”

He thudded the lid of his laptop closed.

Genevieve scowled. “If this place is so goddamn empty, I’d like to know why we really need two police stations in this town. I mean, seriously? There’s nobody in here.”

“They’re all at the other station.”

Genevieve lifted her bag over her head, pulling her hair out from under the strap.

“Well, it’s a waste of taxpayers’ money, and that joke you just made’s not funny. Plus, it’s filthy in here. Your cleaning staff’s ripping you off. You should nip that in the bud, or they’ll think they can get away with anything. I think next time I’ll be taking my concerns directly to the RCMP.”

“Okay.” He hovered by his laptop, one hand still on the lid.

“What’s your name?” She squinted at his badge. “Officer *Van der Beek*? Where are *you* from? Listen, I think you could have tried a bit harder. We can’t all just walk around ignoring each other, can we? And men should notice women. It’s a rule.”

The officer smiled wanly. Genevieve felt her breath catch as she sighed in, and wondered with horror whether she was about to cry.

Eyes watering, she turned quickly and strode to the entrance. She pushed her body against the glass of the door and stepped out into the sour heat of the summer day.

Sasha

Sasha walked down Baker Street toward playgroup, pushing Harrison in a big-wheeled stroller. As she passed the decks of guys drinking beer at the Tahoe Tavern, she took slightly longer steps so that her hips got the chance to extend fully.

Sure, men stared at her—they had since she was fifteen—but she couldn’t seem to hook the gaze of the cool ones anymore. All she got were the family guys in chinos and Dockers, who probably had three kids and drove minivans, for fuck’s sakes. Motherhood meant cool men don’t look at you in the same way, and it was a problem. She had joined some kind of amorphous, self-effacing, identically assed sub-race to which the winners paid not the least attention.

Her other main problem with motherhood was that it was so competitive. There were literally swarms of moms in this town elbowing to get to the front of the line on everything kid-related. They fought over organic suckers in the Co-op and they wrestled over woollen booties in Snow Flower, the high-end store with the train set in it that was impossible to get out of without a four-year-old losing his shit. Sasha wasn’t really into competition—had no real need for it. But when it came time to register Harrison for a daycare centre in town, she found they all had insanely long waiting lists, filled by children registered twenty minutes after conception by unexpectedly organized parents in hemp pants. Clearly they all had their third eye on the ball.

As for Sasha, she hadn’t banked on this much full-on parenting, especially when Harrison didn’t seem to dig her all that much. All the kid ever talked about was *Star Wars*, and Sasha had zero of anything to input on that front. How was she supposed to know that Darth Maul had a double-bladed lightsaber? Or that the Millennium Falcon made the Kessel Run in less than twelve parsecs? What was a *parsec*, anyway?

She went to places like Mama Banana and other family-filled soft-play areas purely to scope out moms with an eye on urban fashion, or some remnant of a life before mommyhood. She wasn’t the only one. Every woman who’d wanted babies was now desperate to get back to who they really were. Of course, they’d deny it fiercely, but she knew better. She filled her metal water bottle with rum and Coke and worked the room, sidling up to the mothers whose jeans she liked, and whose diaper bags showed some faint hint of fashion. Mama Banana was like a new kind of clubbing, only with really bad music; everyone wanted to score . . . playdates. Sasha never went home without a number.

She’d met Kit at Mama Banana, of course, before book club had even gotten started. Sasha knew she wanted Kit’s number when she saw her snort openly at the sight of a young mother feeding mung beans to a one-year-old. At the time, Sasha had headed straight to where Kit and her kids sat on the blue snack mat, an area guarded ferociously by the Mama Banana manager, a woman with an unforgivable mom-haircut. Sasha had said,

“It makes me think twice about getting out my kid’s processed granola bar.” She sat down next to Kit as she spoke, nodding sideways at the bean-mother, and feeling very confident she had found a way in.

“I think an alarm might go off.” Kit’s smile was cheeky: Sasha would cast Jennifer Lawrence with a pixie cut to play her in a movie. “In this town,” Kit grinned, “I only ever feed my children at home. I can get away with all sorts there.”

Even though Kit had been friendly enough, she hadn’t given Sasha her number—not at Mama Bananaand not at book club. Of all the moms Sasha knew in this town, Kit was clearly playing the hardest to get.

When Sasha made it up the steps, having left her stroller in the fleet moored outside the playgroup building, she grabbed Harrison’s shoes from his jogging feet and glanced around the huge room. It was a dance studio when not in use on Wednesdays as Mama Banana and the walls of mirrors were useful, in that they gave Sasha a chance to double-check her mascara while also keeping an eye on new targets entering the front door. She couldn’t believe her luck when she saw Kit stumble in and immediately glided over to her.

“Kit!” Sasha said, stopping alongside her book club co-member. Kit took off her kids’ shoes, both pairs of which were cool. Probably she’d bought them in the UK or somewhere fashion-forward. “I didn’t know you still came here. How’s it going?”

“Yeah, alright.”

She seemed slightly distant, slightly keen. She was hard to gauge.

“Recovered from book club?” Sasha laughed and shook back her long bangs. “What did you think of the other ladies? Yeah, they’re a bit Kootenays, aren’t they? I had to get used to that, too.” She twirled a long strand of hair, waiting for Kit to nod. She didn’t; she just looked like her brain was working fast. “So, listen, I—”

Sasha felt an assertive tap on her shoulder and turned to see a woman in a purple turtleneck beaming at her.

“Hi, Sasha. It’s me—Rita! We met here last week? Hi! I was wondering if you’d like to come over to my house later this afternoon and can peaches. There’ll be a whole crowd of us and then we just share out the cans after. What say you?”

Rita scratched at an itchy place on her collarbone.

“No, thank you,” Sasha replied. There was a pause before Rita’s daughter pulled her away to the bathroom. Sasha turned back to Kit, who was smiling. “Can peaches? Know your audience! Fuck, I’m not being horrible or anything but why would I do that all day when I can just buy them in a shop like normal people?”

Now Kit nodded. She was warming up.

“So listen, like I was saying, we should hang out sometime. Get the boys together.”

“Yeah . . . ,” said Kit.

“Or sometimes I go on these shopping trips when Jared, my boyfriend, takes Harrison—you should come on one of those. We have to go by car, obviously, to get to a decent mall. It’s like an eight-hour round trip.”

“You go all that way to go shopping?” Kit sat down on a plastic chair, scanning the room for signs of her children. Sasha sat too.

“Totally necessary. Have you seen what they sell in the shops here? Massive Bob Marley hats and nothing else. Who for the love of God wants those?” She took lip balm from her purse and applied a layer with her little finger. “I tried online shopping but none of the decent stores ship to Canada and the US border officials at Metaline Falls were starting to treat me like a drug mule, I crossed over to fetch packages that often. So what do you think? Coming with? I found this whole new wing of stores in the mall last time I went—it’s amazing in there—and, like, I got home super late from Kelowna that time but Hilary picked up Harrison from his karate class and put an extra car seat in her car so that was sweet.”

At that moment Harrison ran over and stood in front of the two women.

“Mom,” rasped Harrison, “Sully says the weather on the ice planet of Hoth is winter every day. No wonder those Tauntauns freeze.”

“No wonder, buddy.” Sasha smiled, her eyes wide. Harrison ran off again.

“Like I said,” Sasha breathed at Kit, “everyone needs a parenting break now and again.” She took a sip of her water bottle. “What the fuck is a ton-ton?”

“I think it’s a type of drum. Or a Chinese dumpling.”

“What?” moaned Sasha. “Now I’m *really* confused. Fucking *Star Wars.*” The two women sat next to each other, watching their sons crawl through a series of hooped tunnels. “They seem to be hitting it off, hey?”

“Seems that way.” Kit bit her thumb nail. “Are you going to July’s book club? Have you read *Eat, Pray, Love*?”

“Eat what?” Sasha rummaged in her purse and pulled out her iPhone.

“Didn’t Genevieve call you?”

“Oh, that. I’ll figure it out nearer the time. Hey, look at this winery I went to.” She leaned over and turned her phone sideways to make the picture bigger. “I hit up the coast with some girls from Van, it was the coolest weekend. Plus, bonus, Harrison ended up getting some kind of projectile vomit virus and Jared had to do all the cleaning up. He never puked again once all year. Dodged a bullet.” Sasha glanced at Kit quickly. “Harrison was fine. He slept it off.”

“We should let the boys play again soon,” murmured Kit, suddenly changing tack. “I’ll have to get your number.”

“No problem there, sista. I’ll send you a text right now if you—”

“Time to go!” shouted Rita, appearing again in her too-tight turtleneck to flash the lights on and off as some kind of signal. “Are you sure you don’t want to can?”

The annoying music shut down and the whole room erupted into a cleaning drill that reminded Sasha of a Christmas elf workshop. Little people ran in all directions carrying things that were far too big for them.

“Hang on, I have to grab Pip,” said Kit, jogging away, “she’ll get trodden on—I’ll see you at book club next week; I’ll just give you my phone number then.”

Kit disappeared into the mayhem. Sasha sighed. She’d made progress, for sure, but it wasn’t the home run she’d come to expect of herself. Maybe she was losing her touch.

Book Club II

July

At the library, Kit told the big-haired woman behind the front desk the title of the book for the month. The librarian exhaled and put her hand to her chest, her eyes dreamy.

“*Eat, Pray, Love*? Oh, it’s a story for the woman of our time. Are you only just hearing about it now? You are in for such a treat. Here, for this one, I’ll take you there myself.” Kit was escorted to the correct aisle and handed the book by the quivering-fingered librarian, like she was being handed a check for a million dollars. The woman put her hand on Kit’s forearm, sharing the ceremony of the moment. “You’re welcome,” she whispered, before Kit thanked her.

It wasn’t a hard read.

Kit lay in bed, rolling her eyes through most of it: she didn’t know how much more redemption, hope and self-discovery she could take. The protagonist’s journey into self-awareness had taken a serious detour into self-absorption, in Kit’s opinion, and the whole thing was engulfed in such triteness that it was hard not to yawn. A broken heart is a cloud with a silver lining, a learning curve, a chance to find yourself and start anew? *Well, I’ve never heard that before*. And if you were going for self-help, was it wise to seek counsel from someone who sits all night on a roof looking at cool blue souls? It wouldn’t be Kit’s top choice.

To her, the entire book was like asking a toddler for help crossing the road. For two whole weeks, Kit thought up a list of books to suggest to the three other women. How about some Ian McEwan, some John Fowles, some Toni Morrison? *Anna Karenina* was brilliant—couldn’t they read that? *Catch-22*? *On the Road*? *Cloud Atlas*? Hemingway? Dickens? Austen? Instead, they’d taken the trouble to set up a book club, only to discuss the worst-written drivel on the shelf. Nonetheless, Clyde made sense when he’d told her you couldn’t really know about a thing until you did it more than once. She promised him she’d make a bit of an effort.

Kit arrived at book club at exactly the same time as Sasha, even though they were both half an hour late.

“Read it?” asked Kit, as they walked up the steps to Genevieve’s porch together. Kit looked at the military-precision crocuses again, liking their familiarity. Sasha’s heels clipped on the terra cotta cement.

“Fuck, no. Plus, I thought it was spelled *Eat, P-R-E-Y, Love*; it threw me off for a while in the movie store.”

“That would’ve been a plot-changer.” Kit smiled. “Though technically, it would have to be *Prey, Eat, Love*, right?”

“You know Javier Bardem’s in the movie? Hello, daddy! *Prey, Prey, Prey*. Seriously, he’d have a chance with me.”

Sasha peered through the screen door of Genevieve’s house as Kit chuckled, but swiveled her head back to look Kit up and down.

“You look good. New jeans?”

“I do not look good, and no.” She gave Sasha a wary smile. “How are your legs that long?”

“I sleep on one of those medieval stretching machines.” Sasha rapped on the screen door surprisingly hard, given the flawlessness of her diamond-laden fingers. “You know your jeans are about four sizes too big for you, right? Did you wear them pregnant? Honey, you have to let me take you shopping. I think you’re a size 6. I’ll get you into some skinnies.”

Kit pulled her jeans up and shifted in her flip-flops. “I think I was a size 6 when I *was* six. Anyway, this is my indie band look. I’m rockin’ it.”

“Skinnies, honey. Trust me.”

Kit shrugged. “I can’t believe you get away with just watching the movie at these meetings. How does Genevieve not tell you off?” Kit walked up the last step and stood just behind Sasha on the porch. “Is she in tonight or what?”

“We better be getting good food,” Sasha said over her shoulder. “I fucking hate tofu. And I want the good wine from the basement.”

Sasha laughed, the way people do when they’re not joking.

Genevieve appeared on the other side of the screen door, wearing a vast pair of green Thai fisherman’s pants that were reefed tight around her middle. She brought with her a waft of incense as she opened the door.

“Welcome, welcome! Come one, come all!” Genevieve held the screen door open for the two women, who filed past her. “Sasha, I didn’t see you at yoga this morning.”

“They changed the instructor. I only like Pierre.”

“Oh. Well, he’s still teaching, he just switched to Fridays. He is amazing, isn’t he?”

“Parts of him are.”

“You shouldn’t quit. I’d be happy to take you through a few asanas.”

Sasha laughed loudly by way of response. She had taken her stilettos off and was wandering over to the best seat in the living room. She walked on tippy-toes, as if still in heels. Kit hung back in the arch of the hallway.

“What’s for dinner tonight, Genevieve?” said Sasha as she hopped into a leather armchair.

“Martin’s doing an Indian banquet as a fun tie-in to the book.”

“That *does* sound fun.”

Sasha slid herself to the back of the cool cushion, tucking her legs under her like a cat. The luxury of the haute-hippie decor swathed her. Once settled, Sasha blinked at Genevieve, her eyelashes heavy with mascara.

“And I thought we’d drink chai.” Genevieve rubbed her hands together. “I’ll go and get us some cups.”

“Fantastic,” Sasha purred.

Then, as Genevieve swept out of the room, Sasha looked at Kit, who was still standing by the doorway.

“Tea? Fuck off! It’s nighttime!” Sasha said. “And Indian banquet—*so* fun. If by fun you mean cooking all day. Why didn’t we just get takeout? I seriously don’t see the appeal of cooking your own food—it’s what poor people do!”

Kit sidled over to the couch and sat down, resting her arm on the silk-draped throw and drumming her fingers. As much as she agreed with what Sasha said, she was uncomfortable with her seamless two-facedness. What, she wondered, did Sasha say about Kit when Kit wasn’t in the room?

“Did you like this month’s book?” asked Sasha, blinking languidly.

“I’m not telling you.”

The two women smiled at each other from a distance.

Martin brought the tea. His apron was missing, but he had, in the month that had passed, grown a moustache. It had the fluff of a newborn fowl and reminded Kit of boys she’d known at fourteen. Martin stood in front of Sasha wearing a smart shirt tucked into jeans that ended above his ankles.

“I’m Martin. I don’t believe we’ve met.” He extended his hand to Sasha, who stared up at him from her seat. “I tend to stay in the kitchen for these things because my wife has set up an electric force field around the stove that shocks me if I move beyond it.” He winked. “Kidding, of course.”

“Are you?” said Sasha, shaking his hand with her fingertips, her eyes suspicious.

“No. Here’s your tea.” As he was slinking back out of the room, he passed Kit her cup and said to her, “See you in the kitchen later, no doubt. I bet you loved this month’s masterpiece.”

“What’s his deal?” Sasha mouthed to Kit once Martin’s back was turned.

Kit had no time to respond. Genevieve swept in.

“Are the samosas almost done?” she said to her husband without a glance, brushing hair from her brow as she swirled past in her wide-legged pants.

“Any fucking minute now, sweetie,” Martin muttered, his voice trailing away as he left the room so that nobody could be absolutely certain of the profanity.

“What did he just say?” Genevieve rubbed her temple with two fingers. “Oh, I can’t be bothered. Ciao, santé, Namaste.” She raised a cup of tea to her lips and sat down on the Thai cushion next to the couch. “Here’s to the serenity of womankind, and the power of our inner heart-dance.” Kit’s eyes widened and she looked at Sasha, who hadn’t been listening, but was instead heading to the kitchen to swap her tea for a glass of wine. “Everyone’s late tonight. Where’s Hilary? She’d drink to that. Kit, why aren’t you drinking?”

“I don’t really like—”

“Oh, here she is! Hilary! We were just talking about you.”

Hilary had let herself in at the screen door and was busily removing her Crocs. She scurried in and plumped herself onto the ottoman next to Genevieve.

“Girls! Girls! So sorry I’m tardy.” She smoothed her rowdy hair, flapped her hands at her red cheeks. “I got sidetracked Googling tips for how to wean your baby when he’s five. Well, six, I guess. There’s a whole world of information on it. I had a little cry as I was reading; it’s really such an emotional withdrawal for me. Gosh. There just doesn’t seem to be any set rule for when to wean.”

Sasha minced into the room holding her own personal vat of white wine. She smoothed herself back into the armchair. “I think if your baby can chew a steak,” she said, “it’s probably time to let it go.”

She sipped her wine.

“When did you wean, Sasha?” asked Genevieve.

“At five minutes old. I wasn’t going to let these puppies get all yanked out of shape.” She cupped a hand around each pert bosom. “No way, José. I’ve seen what happens to women who breastfeed. All they’ve got left at the end is a couple of empty tube socks hanging down to their waist that they could wrap around themselves twice. No way.”

Kit looked at Sasha, thinking how right she was about the tube socks. Genevieve and Hilary looked at Sasha like she had just turned into the antichrist.

“It is my strong opinion of late,” said Genevieve, breathing air into her chest cavity, “that breastfeeding is primarily what transforms a woman into a goddess.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” whispered Hilary.

“It is the ultimate nurturing force.” Genevieve and Hilary smiled at each other, their heads bent in mutual deference to being female.

“Oh,” said Sasha. “Well, I guess I missed my window.” She gulped her wine, darting glances at the others through the bottom of her glass.

“It’s super hot in here. What’s that smell?”

Hilary’s nose wrinkled as she patted at her face with small, white hands.

“That smell is India.” Sasha did a demure burp. “’Scuse that.”

“My friend Penny went to India last year,” offered Hilary. “She said she spent her whole holiday in the bathroom and there was no toilet paper. Apparently every time she sat on the potty it was like murky swamp water cascading out of her. She said it was astonishing. In retrospect, she thinks she might have had dysentery.”

“I’ve heard that diarrhea is great for weight loss,” said Sasha.

“Oh, it so is! Penny lost all her baby weight while she was there, every last pound. She said it literally dropped off her. Like, whoosh.” Hilary did a charade of water rushing forward from her body.

“It’s official. India beats Weight Watchers,” Kit said.

“Do you know”—Hilary leaned forward on her seat toward Kit—“the problem with Weight Watchers is you have to write everything down the whole time. I was forever scribbling in a notepad! I’d barely stopped chewing before I was rummaging for a pen.”

“Buy a ticket to India,” suggested Sasha. “Cleansenpurge.” She let loose another small burp.

“There’s your sequel to our novel. Eat, Cleanse, Purge.”

Everybody stared at Kit.

“I think if people go to India,” Genevieve snapped, “it might be for reasons a little more important than weight loss.”

“Oh, no, I totally agree,” Hilary replied, her face still flushed. “Penny went over there to visit all the temples and whatnot, but she told me she fainted at one of them because she was so dehydrated.”

“Did anyone help her?” Genevieve’s face was a picture of concern. She could have been a monk at the temple.

“Yes, but unfortunately when she hit the ground, the force of it caused an unexpected shit storm, pardon my French. You know, you can’t be banging into things when you have explosive diarrhea. It’s like hitting a bomb with a hammer.”

“Harrison had the shits last weekend.” Sasha put her glass down on the table momentarily. “It was so disgusting; I had to get Jared to deal with it. I’d just had my acrylics done and seriously, for real, the shit that came out of that child was orange. There’s just no way.”

“He must have had the Norwalk virus that’s going around. I’ve heard it lives on your door handles for at least two years,” Hilary nodded. “You should Lysol everything you own. I’m not kidding, Sasha, I’ve Googled this a lot. Door handles, light switches, remote controls. I like to carry a pack of Lysol in my purse at all times and, in restaurants, when the waitress isn’t looking, I wipe all the forks on the table before they bring out the food.”

“No dysentery for you,” Kit said.

“I do spend a lot of time wiping things,” mused Hilary. “I’ll come over and wipe for you if you like—it’s no problem.”

“Does Lysol have alcohol in it?” asked Sasha, glancing at her empty glass.

“Hilary,” said Genevieve, her mouth in a straight line, “as I like to say to my children, please, let’s keep the potty talk to a minimum. I don’t think anyone needs to know about the intricacies of diarrhea avoidance. Now can we get started?”

“Yes. Of course. Sorry. And just to get back to Penny in India for a moment, I just wanted to be clear that she’s totally fine now. She’s put all the weight back on. Plus a pound or two if I’m honest. She’s been on a leafy green diet for months but is actually gaining weight. I’ve been thinking about it and I called her this week to tell her to stop that diet, because all the leafy green eaters in the animal kingdom are the most enormous.”

“Sorry . . . you’re saying vegetarian animals are fat?” asked Kit, loving it.

“Well, look at elephants and hippos. Rhinos. Dinosaurs. All the biggest, fattest ones—they all eat leafy greens! Those brontosaurus ones were huge! I told her she should eat meat and nothing else. Lions have no body fat whatsoever.”

“I think lions run a lot more than hippos,” suggested Kit. “Or is it possible your friend Penny is on the leafy green and chocolaty donut diet?”

Hilary covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes wild.

“What, that never occurred to you?”

Hunched on the ottoman, Hilary banged her knees together, trying to contain her laughter. Snorts escaped from between the lattice of her fingers.

“Enough of that, thank you. You’re wasting time.” Genevieve picked up her copy of *Eat, Pray, Love* and smiled around the room. “Now, when talking about the beauty of Elizabeth Gilbert, it is hard to know where to . . . Where are you going?” She slapped her book back down onto the glass side table.

“Refill.” Sasha’s high-heeled tiptoe was becoming more pronounced and considered.

“Well, should we wait for you? Should we wait for her? Oh, let’s just get started. I think that . . .”

“Do you know something?” asked Hilary. “Did you see Sasha tiptoeing? Did you notice she *tiptoed* out of the room?” Everyone stared blankly at her. “No, but haven’t any of you guys done any research on autism? None? You should have, with all the inoculations and whatnot. Well, I can tell you—and you guys can thank me later—that recent research on autism states that walking on tippy-toes everywhere is a sign of . . . well, autism.”

“You think Sasha’s autistic?” Kit grinned. She mostly wanted to sit and listen to Hilary talk all night. The woman was amazing.

“Well, it might explain the aloofness whenever I see her in the grocery store,” Hilary said. “Perhaps she’s lost in her own world.”

“Hilary,” said Genevieve, snatching up her copy of the book again and clearing her throat sharply, “stop it and concentrate. We have begun the book review section of the evening. Okay, here we go.” When she spoke, she rattled out her sentences, her eyes dark, daring anyone to interrupt her. “I love this book because it shows us the beauty of the sacred awakening. It is life-affirming. It is a heart-warming story of hope and recovery. The woman is radiant with what I have come to learn is transformative goddess fire and I want to be best friends with her, right now. Hilary, what did you think?”

Hilary jumped visibly when she heard her name called. She smeared her palms against her thighs, and could only bear to look sideways at Genevieve when she spoke.

“I really liked the part in Italy, where she says it’s okay to just buy bigger jeans if your old ones are starting to pinch on your thighs and you have a muffin top.”

“Right,” Genevieve replied, rubbing her temples again. “But what did you think of the ashram part? You know, the blessed magnificence of India?”

Hilary paused. She was really struggling with something, as she chewed on her lip and wiped her hands together. Finally she closed her eyes and said in a tiny voice, “I only read *Eat*.”

“What?” exploded Genevieve.

“I haven’t had time! I only read the Italy part. I’ve always wanted to go there. The other places seemed a bit weird to me and the activities were less interesting.”

“The holy, healing power of meditation at an Indian ashram is weird to you?” When Genevieve said *power*, she spat the word at Hilary’s face. Hilary dared not flinch.

Sasha wandered back into the room carrying fresh wine, walking straight past Kit who looked at her mournfully, still holding her cold cup of chai.

“Whassweird to you?” Sasha asked Hilary. “Ashrams? They are seriously weird. Who wants to sit still and murmur all day? Hmmm? Thass weird behaviour.” Sasha wiped her lip with the top of her hand, smooshing it up to the level of her nose. Her blinks were getting longer and longer. “I like the last bit where she’s in Belize or wherever she goes because at least there’s hot sex.”

“Indonesia,” said Kit, putting her cup of tea on the floor by her feet. She figured it was safe to throw in a little hand grenade now, since Sasha was taking all the pressure off her. “She goes to *Indonesia*. It’s a journey of *I*.”

The sarcasm was detectable this time, especially since it was accompanied by Kit’s gesture of open palms in front of her, to mimic peaceful acceptance. Genevieve, who had been watching Sasha in horror, now swung her face around toward Kit, like a T. rex sensing new movement.

This didn’t slow Kit down.

“But I reckon Belize would have worked too, because this woman would have been right up for a journey of *B*. Just *be*.” Kit was chuckling. She had only planned to say one thing, but appeared to be on a roll. She put her hands together palm to palm in a yogic prayer. “And love yourself, and allow yourself to be loved, and let your heart be open, and let light in, and anything else you’ve heard a million times before, and feel balance, and travel, if only to think about nothing but yourself for a year, and pass your discoveries off as new and interesting, and sell it as self-discovery even though it’s blatantly self-obsession, and get paid loads for writing clichéd drivel, and don’t worry about writing as a craft of any kind, don’t worry about sounding fresh or polished, because who cares when you can go on Oprah and talk like you’re revolutionizing something, and be amazing, and read my amazing self-help, life-coach journal with sentences that the average thirteen-year-old girl could have written.”

Once Kit had stopped talking, she looked at the shocked faces staring at her. Even Sasha looked surprised.

“Oh,” Kit said. “Too much?” She turned to Genevieve. “Alright, alright, I’m going to the kitchen now. I’ll have a stern word with myself while I’m there, I promise.”

Kit stood up and wandered off in search of alcohol.

Martin was in the kitchen, eating a samosa.

“Ah!” he said, with his mouth full, as he saw Kit walk in. “Kit the Brit. I knew you’d end up in here. Are you in disgrace?”

“Yes. Where’s the wine?”

“Here.” He opened the fridge and poured Kit a glass. “Want a samosa? I’ve eaten most of them. Is she following you?”

“Nope.” They cheersed glasses. Martin’s had milk in it.

“She keeps on choosing the silliest books. I don’t know why she does that.”

“Want to start a book club? Why are you drinking milk?”

Kit took a samosa and started chewing.

“It’s a White Russian. As if I could survive in this place without hard liquor.” They clinked glasses again, leaning back on the kitchen counter together. “She’s clever, you know. She’s clever and funny and wild and free. She’s just forgotten.”

Martin stared at a point on the floor, lost in his thoughts.

Kit wondered what to say, scrolling through beginnings of sentences in her head. In the end she chose, “Well . . . haven’t we all? I blame being a grown-up.”

After a pause, Martin looked up and hugged his arms across his concave chest, his glass still in one hand.

“I blame Nelson. I swear to God. The minute anyone moves here, they get earnest and serious and think the only way forward is quinoa and soul-searching. I mean, my wife might claim she was spiritual before—but truthfully two years ago she had a Buddha T-shirt with *Rub My Belly for Luck* written on it, and that was as far as it went. No, when we lived in Toronto, Genevieve was a different person. She dabbled in being groovy: she lit an incense stick once a month when the apartment smelled of bacon, but it was never a full-blown addiction. This”—he waved his hand in the general direction of the living room—“is all new. It’s like she’s stumbled into a cult, and we’re all expected to sacrifice ourselves at the high altar of kale and flaxseed alongside her. She went to a rally last week to save that mountain up near Kaslo—”

“Jumbo Mountain?”

“Yes, but she doesn’t even know what Jumbo Mountain is! She thinks it’s an elephant sanctuary.”

Kit choked on her mouthful of wine.

“She’s trying to fit in with the locals, I guess, but they’re not her tribe. They’re an army of right-on cyborgs chanting about the evils of Ritz crackers. Beneath those kaftans they’re all made of clockwork: they wind themselves up and march on city hall. Don’t you think?”

Kit nodded happily.

“This isn’t her! You know what Genevieve’s favourite movie was when I met her? *Top Gun*. Ask her what it is now. I dare you.” Martin took a sip of his drink and winced. He turned to Kit. “You’re obviously not from around here. Are you eating a lot of quinoa?”

Kit laughed. “No, none. It gets stuck in the cracks of the floor when the kids throw it. Takes bloody ages to clean up.”

“It’s an ancient grain, Kit. How dare you?”

They smiled at each other, shy with unexpected connection.

After a pause, Kit asked him, “What are you doing here? Why’d you leave Toronto?”

He swirled his creamy drink around, staring down into it. “My mom and sister live in Castlegar. Mom’s been getting . . . confused lately, so I said I’d move closer. Genevieve didn’t want to leave the city at all, but she did it for me. Now I wish I’d never suggested it. Plus, I’m busy these days—I have my hobbies, see, dance and choreography and . . . stuff. And my sister’s kind of a bitch.” He sucked air in through a gap in his front teeth. “When I think about it, it’s no wonder Genevieve’s freaking out.”

Kit didn’t know what to say to that either, but had a sudden flash of solidarity with Genevieve’s homesickness. After another long pause she raised her glass.

“Here’s to soul-searching,” she said and they sipped quietly. Kit took a breath, breaking the reverie. “Okay, I’m going back now. I should go back. Round 2.”

“Good luck. Here, take the rest of these. You’ll get points for bringing food back. Make sure that leggy one gets some. She looks like she needs something solid in her stomach.”

Martin handed Kit the plate of samosas and turned back to the stove. Kit watched him pour new oil into the pan, the flash of fire lighting the row of sharp knives magnetized to a metal strip on the wall.

In the living room, Hilary was squealing and bouncing up and down on the ottoman. “I didn’t realize it was an Oprah’s Book Club book! Why didn’t you say so?”

Kit sat down quietly, hoping she could slot back in as Genevieve pointed to the sticker on *Eat, Pray, Love’*s front cover. “Wasn’t that a clue?”

“But there’s no . . . Why isn’t there a gold sticker on mine? How come I got the inferior edition?” Hilary’s face was crestfallen. “I’d have read it cover to cover if I’d known it was an OBC book.”

“I love Oprah,” Genevieve said, the beatific light back in her face now. “She’s done so much for the needy people. I think she’s changed the world. Whenever I see the Oprah’s Book Club sticker in the bookstore, I use it as a beacon. I let her guide what I read.”

“I’m hoping one day she runs for president of the United States of America,” said Hilary. “I’d vote for her.”

“You’re Canadian, Hilary.” Genevieve turned as Kit clattered the plate of samosas onto a table by her chair. “Welcome back, by the way. Did you find what you were looking for?”

“I did. I learned a lot. Your kitchen is a bit like an ashram.”

Kit crossed her arms, thinking how that had come out more sarcastic than she’d intended.

Hilary spotted the awkward pause.

“We were just saying, Kit,” she chirped, “that *Eat, Pray, Love* is on Oprah’s Book Club list. Aren’t you super pumped about that?”

“I am. Super pumped. Indeed.”

Kit took a samosa from the plate nearby and bit into it, looking around. She just wanted some confrontation-free time to acclimatize.

“Kit told me when I first met her in Mama Banana,” said Sasha, fumbling her forefinger around the rim of her empty wine glass, “that she thinks Oprah Wiffey’s a DUMBASS.” She punched out the last word.

“Did she?” asked Genevieve, still staring at Kit, who sat with her lips tightly pressed together, her eyes scrunched like she was running through hailstones.

Kit shook her head and exhaled noisily in Sasha’s direction. “I don’t remember saying that, actually. I may have said something about not being a massive fan of her book club. I can’t really recall.” Kit sipped her wine, waiting for the silence to go away. It didn’t. “To be fair, I never use the word *dumbass*. I really don’t. It’s a word that sounds rubbish in my accent. *Dumbass*, *jackass*, they’re all off limits. Did you just call her Oprah Whiffy, Sasha?”

“What is it that you find difficult about Oprah’s Book Club?” Genevieve’s iciness glinted on her teeth. Her face was an avalanche warning.

“Pardon?” Kit said.

“You heard me.”

“Oh. Just that, you know, Genevieve, I wouldn’t take her opinion to be a really . . . highbrow critique of anything. Is all.”

“Are you saying she’s stupid? And it’s John-vee-ev.” She staccatoed each syllable.

“Nope. No, not saying that.”

“You’re all about the highbrow, aren’t you, Kit?”

“What about *whose* eyebrows?” fretted Hilary.

Next to her, Sasha got up from the sofa and swayed out of the room, her arm out in front of her as if she were in complete darkness. Nobody noticed.

“I’m just saying that there are people’s opinions on literature I’d listen to before a daytime TV show host’s.” Kit’s face felt hot. She picked up Martin’s plate from the table again. “Samosa, anyone?”

“I’m sorry, are you for real saying you don’t like Oprah?” Hilary’s face crinkled in a blend of astonishment and pity. “I don’t understand. Is it because she’s . . . black?”

Hilary whispered the last word, and there followed a silence while Genevieve and Hilary shook their heads at each other. Kit had the urge to put her entire fist into her mouth, but then the somber mood was broken by the sound of things smashing in the vicinity of the bathroom.

“What the hell was that?” Genevieve jumped.

The women looked around. Where was Sasha?

At that moment, Martin wheeled into the living room, holding a tray filled with a colourful array of Indian finger foods. In separate side dishes, he had placed mango chutney, raita and chopped cucumbers and onions.

“Sag aloo, onion bhajis, some more samosas, and papadums,” he said. “Don’t say I never do anything for you, girls. Here, papadum preach, I’m in trouble deep . . . ,” he sang, lowering the tray so that Hilary could see its contents from the ottoman. “There you go, Hilary, take the biggest one. That one. Attagirl! That’s what I’m talking about.” He smiled, his moustache crinkling. “Papadum preach, I been losing sleep . . . Ah, that’s my favourite Indian joke—Gen told me that one when we were at a curry house down on . . . where were we, honey?”

“Dundas Street.”

“Right, right. And then you bet me I couldn’t eat that whole pot of lime pickle but I did it, even though it coated my tongue with molten lava, and then I couldn’t eat my main and had to go home immediately. We’d only just started dating. You still owe me five bucks.”

Genevieve smiled. A cautious smile, but it was there.

A series of retching coughs were coming from the back of the house.

“Babe,” Martin said, turning to Genevieve, “why is your friend throwing up in our bathroom?”

Genevieve snapped back into business mode, like a jack-in-the-box closing its lid.

“Well, if you wouldn’t serve her a litre of wine every time she stepped into the kitchen . . . ,” she growled, as she rushed past Martin and headed for the bathroom.

Martin frowned, took a papadum and dipped it in chutney, then raised his voice to be heard as he strolled after his wife to the back of the house. “It’s my fault your friend is throwing up in our bathroom?”

Kit and Hilary shrugged at each other, then got up and followed the others to where they stood in front of the bathroom door. Hilary brought the food tray with her.

It was dark in the corridor, and the children’s bedroom was right next door so everything was happening in frantic quietness.

“Sasha!” Genevieve whisper-shouted, “Sasha! Open the door! Listen to me, please! Open the door right now. You’re not in trouble.”

Inside the bathroom, it sounded like Sasha was removing the tank lid of the toilet.

“She’s not listening to me. Martin, do something.”

“Do you need help?” offered Martin, pressing his long nose to the door. “Do you want Genevieve to hold your hair back for you? Put my shower cap on! It’s on the peg behind the door. Go ahead.” Genevieve glared at him in the shadows and hit him on the chest with the back of her hand. “What? Ow! What is your *problem*?”

Hilary handed the tray to Kit and stepped forward, sandwiching herself between Martin and Genevieve. She tapped her fingertip on the door. Martin and Genevieve looked down at her but didn’t spread out. They were a snug little unit.

“Sasha? I want you to know that we all love you very much. You are among real pals here. So I don’t want you to feel ashamed. Honestly, this friend of mine Cathy was at a party once and she hurled in the people’s fridge. At the party. She opened the fridge and vomited in it, and she left without saying anything. So, you know. You think *this* is bad . . . And if you haven’t got it all in the potty, don’t worry, because I know how to get wine hurl stains out of bathmats. I’m a whiz at it. Especially if it’s white not red. The puke, I mean, not the bathmat. Genevieve, what colour is your bathmat?”

Kit stood behind the throng. They all had their backs to her, rattling the bathroom door handle, whispering and tapping and urging.

“Ask her if she wants a samosa,” she cried out. “Sag aloo? A loo! That would be funny in England.”

Nobody paid Kit any attention. Nobody listened. Nobody got her joke.

She looked at the others pressed in the doorway and in a blinding flash of recognition, knew how she had ended up here. Here in this dusky hallway, at this shitty book club, with these losers, holding this tray of cold food. *Oh my God*, she said to herself, *I’m a floater. I’m bloody one of them.*

Clyde had a theory about the people you make friends with quickly in a new town. He always said to be careful of the super-pally, super-keen ones, because there’s a reason why they’re available. He called them *floaters*, people with no discernible moorings, waiting for newcomers to arrive who had no prior knowledge of them. They were the ones nobody wanted in their group, the ones who just didn’t fit. The floaters worked fast, before the innocents could possibly know what they were getting themselves into. They preyed on new arrivals with the eagerness of vampires and, in a town like this, with networks that were iron-clad, it suddenly dawned on Kit how she had been able to break into this group so easily. It was because there was something wrong with all four of them. And now she was in the damaged goods section at the dollar store too. She was in *that* group. She was a member of the Floater Book Club.

As Kit deep-breathed over the onion bhajis, the bathroom door flew open. Genevieve, Hilary and Martin all stumbled forward a step, while Sasha pushed her way through them trying to emit dignity. The right sleeve of her shirt was wet and her eye makeup smudged and ghoulish. There were parts of her hair that looked suspiciously clumped together.

“Sorry ’bout that,” she said over her shoulder as she wobbled back into the living room. “And I used the blue toothbrush. I hope thassokay.”

Genevieve hurried into the bathroom to assess damage, while Hilary rushed after Sasha and took her by the hand, only to let go of it again as she felt moistness.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” Hilary asked, looking up at Sasha in wide-eyed condolence. She eased her down onto the ottoman.

“I didn’t eat enough. Fucking banquet, my ass.”

Sasha blinked around the room, blurrily. She had lost her pussycat purr.

“Well, you should have said! Have some curry. It’s on the congealed side.” Kit put the tray down unhelpfully close to Sasha on the coffee table. “Or would you rather have a lift home? It’s probably time I got going.”

Kit headed under the living room archway and rummaged through a pile of keys by the front door.

“Do you like me?” asked Sasha, staring after Kit who was still half-visible. Kit busied herself with finding her flip-flops in the shoe cubby.

“I like you!” shouted Hilary, sitting down next to Sasha on the ottoman and patting her on the knees. “Come on, chin up! What’s a little upchuck among friends?” She launched her arm around Sasha’s shoulder, making her frown. “What happens at book club, stays at book club!”

“You look like the woman out of *Bridesmaids.* Just sayin’,” mumbled Sasha. “The one with the dimples and the . . . big . . . Why doesn’t anybody like me? I’m fucking great. I’m *somebody* and I’m *hot* and I *could* be a good friend. I want to go home.”

“Perfect. Let’s get going, then. Come on, look alive!”

Kit stood at the front door in her coat, clapping her hands together like a basketball coach.

Genevieve emerged from the bathroom with her hands on her hips. Her nostrils were flared.

“Okay, crisis over,” she said, looking around the room. “Though, Martin, was it you who failed to fully extend the shower curtain? Or did you bunch it all up, Sasha? Whatever, never mind. I’ve fixed it now, so there’s no danger of mould. No real problem apart from the fact that I’ll have to leave the bathroom window open for a while.” Her eyes settled on Kit, who, from the living room, could just be seen with one hand on the front door. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Oh. I was thinking I was going home.” Kit paused. “You know, it seemed a good time to leave. Give you some space, a little peace and quiet. Some time to bleach your toothbrush with love and deliberateness.”

“Should we all leave?” Hilary looked perplexed, her arm still around Sasha’s bowed shoulder. “*Which* woman out of *Bridesmaids,* Sasha?”

Sasha gazed into the middle distance like she’d been lobotomized.

“Everyone can go, but only after we’ve had a cleansing prayer! Stand up, everyone. There we go, and let’s hold hands. Kit, come over here.” Kit hesitated, dragging her fingertips from the door handle. “Sasha, have you washed yours with soap?”

The women stood in a circle and Martin, who had been in the kitchen, wandered out and joined in. He stood opposite Kit, grinning.

“Let us bow our heads,” Genevieve intoned, “and remember that, even when things go wrong, and even when people behave badly, we must still practise mindfulness and loving-kindness. Let us be reminded that we are still so grateful for our deep connection and support. Let us link energies and be the soft and endless compassion of womankind. Not you, Martin, let go. Let. Go.” She flayed her fingers away from her husband’s, as if trying to get a crab off her at the beach. “And let our hearts feel joy, even when life is full of chaos and people make messes in other people’s houses with other people’s things. Let us say together, may I care for myself joyfully. And forgive, forgive, forgive. We call on the Goddess Mridaani, Rudraani, Shivaa, Bhavaani to infuse us with forgiveness.” Kit looked up to see Sasha swaying and frowning. Genevieve’s eyes were tightly closed. “And let us all breathe in and out like this—so hum. That’s it. So . . . Hum. So . . . Hum.” Genevieve dumped Hilary’s hand to elbow Martin in the ribs. “H-U-M, Martin,” she hissed, “not *hung*.”

Martin shrugged sheepishly and smiled at Kit.

“That was great, honey,” he said to Genevieve when she had finished humming. “Where’d you learn that? Very meditative. Oh, are we still holding hands?”

Genevieve frowned and let go of Sasha and Hilary, stepping back out of the circle and wiping her palms down the front of her fishing pants. Left adrift without the safety of a neighbour to lean on, Sasha fell straight backward onto the sofa. She stayed there, sprawled.

“Speaking of fun meditation, babe, tell Kit what your favourite movie is.”

Martin hopped from foot to foot. Genevieve’s eyes narrowed as she looked from her husband to Kit.

“Why? And please don’t call me babe.”

“No, just that we were talking about favourite movies in the kitchen, and I couldn’t remember yours. Mine’s *Mama Mia*.”

“Mine’s *Dear John*. Or *The Notebook*. I can never choose.”

Hilary’s dimples were eager. She kept formation in the circle.

“*Seven Years in Tibet*,” intoned Genevieve. “I’ve recently decided I would happily spend seven years in the holy city of Lhasa. It would be an honour.”

“Do they have fast food there? McDonald’s? I couldn’t go seven years without Maccy D’s,” said Kit, hauling Sasha up off the sofa and pulling her out the door. “Oh, wait, we hate McDonald’s in Nelson, don’t we? Evil, evil. But we’re totally fine with KFC and A&W because they’re so different.” Everyone stared at her. “Well, thanks very much, Genevieve, great night. Great. Lovely chant thing. I need a bit of infusing by Shivaa. You can’t have too much of that. Okay, bye, see you soon. See you, Martin. Wicked samosas, I actually mean that. Come on, get it together.”

Sasha walked like the room was tipping.

“So we’ll all meet back here same time next month?”

Hilary sat up straight on the ottoman. She looked like a meerkat.

“Of course, of course,” said Genevieve, her face tight. “Can somebody else choose the book? I’m done. Not you, Kit.”

“Not me? Why not me?”

“I’ll do it. I am all over it,” slurred Sasha. “Leave it with me, girlfriend.”

“So next month?” Hilary looked tiny on her seat. “Kit? Sasha? You’ll both be here, right?”

“Where else would we go?” muttered Kit, wondering whether pacts with the devil were really watertight. Anyway, she could say yes now and bow out later. “Where else is there?”

“Nowhere.” Sasha’s chin wobbled. “Do you like me, Kit?”

“Yes, yes. Hurry up. Hurry, hurry. Right we are, then. Thanks a lot! See you same time next month.”

Kit bundled Sasha out the front door, pulling her down the steps behind her like a sled.

Genevieve

In the days following book club, Genevieve meditated. Every evening between four and five o’clock she scheduled an hour in her personal planner while Martin took the kids to the park. She went down to the basement each time and snapped the light on, waiting with her foot tapping while the energy-saving light bulb gloomed into action.

Stacked up against the wall to her left were plastic tubs full of junk. Why Martin kept all this stuff was beyond her—was it really necessary to document every phase of their lives? She stepped over the life-size cardboard cutout of Wonder Woman that used to stand in the kitchen of their first city apartment, nudging a tower of old photograph albums with her knee as she passed.

She rolled out her yoga mat and flapped it onto the floor. The CD player was plugged into a wobbly socket—another chore on Martin’s list that he seemed determined to ignore. He’d asked her to buy shelves from Home Hardware and she’d gone to all the trouble earlier, knowing full frickin’ well they’d stay just where they were, leaning up against Martin’s old ping pong table for the next year at least.

Genevieve leafed through loose discs of spa music, choosing one and pressing it down into the open flap of the CD player. She lit each candle and with a Bic lighter she found that had the word *peace* scanned onto it. Where the hell had that come from? It must have been Martin’s. Hauling her legs into as close to a lotus position as she could get, given her unhelpful knees, Genevieve sat on her mat facing the lights and the music. Her hands rested on her thighs, palms flat, thumbs and forefingers touching. *Bellissimo!* she thought every time she meditated, since her fingers looks like a chef’s. She stretched her neck from side to side, trying to rid her head of the niggling aggravations of the day. It was hard to work on enlightenment when everyone around you seemed to be a savage. Book club, for instance, had all started to fall apart when she invited Kit. In fact, why did she let any of those people into her house? They were not what Pierre would call pilgrims of truth. Twice now, she had sat in a room filled with snobbery, shallowness and mindless chitchat, interspersed with thinly veiled binge drinking and—to top it all off—vomit. Whenever Genevieve thought about book club, she felt a stone in her core where her goddess fire should be and she was having trouble pushing out the bad energy and breathing in light. “Om Namah Shivaya,” she hummed, over and over. *Positivity, Genevieve, not negativity! Oneness, not division!* She really must try harder. Try. Harder. But Kit swanned into the living room each month laughing at everything that wasn’t stupid British and expecting everyone to bow to her. Who made her queen of book club? *Can I cancel the next meeting? There must be a way to get out of it.* Sasha was only interested in how good she looked in her clothes and clearly set no boundaries for herself. What grown woman drinks so much that she throws up in the host’s bathroom? Sasha had yet to call and apologize. Hilary was . . . well, limited. She didn’t have the vision. Hilary did try to behave, at least, but everything she said was boring and Genevieve still couldn’t forgive her for claiming that ashrams were weird. Hilary was also fat and doing nothing about it. Really, the universe wasn’t giving Genevieve much to work with. But she must love and absorb, love and absorb. “Om Namah Shivaya.” She closed one nostril with a long, lean finger and breathed in. Switching nostrils, she exhaled slowly, trying to ignore the nasal whistling. She should try to think about something positive. Something positive. Something maybe less goddamn totally annoying. Hunter’s birthday party was coming up soon—there, that was good—and she’d already sent out the invites, including one to Pierre, who was going to bring his son. This idea pleased her, and she readjusted her meditative fingers. The party would go great and she’d be able to show Pierre how much she’d advanced in the months since she first walked into his class. Hopefully he’d wear flip-flops. It would all go great, as long as she didn’t do anything wrong. *Don’t be a dumbass*, *don’t be a dumbass,* *ommmmmmmm*. Perhaps they’d have carrot cake at the birthday party. Yes, that’s calming to think about, a locally-sourced one with a low glycemic index. Carrot cake was surely vegan, mostly. Genevieve took another breath, ready to blow it from a nostril when from upstairs there came a great clattering. Were they home already? Martin had promised to be an hour. How was she supposed to freaking concentrate with a herd of hooves stamping around on the ceiling?

“Martin!” she yelled. “Martin! Keep the noise down!”

“What?” she heard, muffled through the ceiling.

“CALM! CALM, PLEASE!”

Genevieve took a deep breath and tried to centre her blue chakra. It hadn’t been an easy couple of months, especially because she would never have chosen to leave Toronto at all, given half a chance. They both had good jobs there, though Martin’s, as a paralegal, had transferred well. He worked for a lawyer in town now: new office, same documents to scratch at all day. Back east, Genevieve had been an events organizer, but hadn’t got started here. What was the point? She couldn’t even organize her own day, let alone anyone else’s. When they’d moved, Martin had pledged that their new life in a rural town would be less frantic and scattered. They’d both sworn it was time for a change. But in Toronto they’d had hobbies, and friends—Martin spent all his time outside of work in an amateur drama group and had been in the chorus of a musical adaptation of *The Great Gatsby*, dancing the Charleston with glitter on his eyebrows. In her free time, Genevieve had enjoyed paintballing. Sundays they’d always spent together. Genevieve sighed again. For all they’d given up leaving the city, they weren’t meant to have given up on each other.

She shook her head and clenched her eyes. *Stop being a downer. Unity. Niceness.* Martin’s avoidance of her lately was just his way of adapting to a new place. After all, Nelson was the perfect town to reinvent yourself; maybe if she got her half of the reinvention right, the locals would let her join in when they spoke of feeling *present* in their lives, and Martin’s sister would finally lay off about Genevieve’s need to evolve. She’d been trying! She’d learnt phrases such as *deliberate living*, *manifestation* and *intention*, storing them like keys in her pocket. Yoga was her way in, she was sure of it. Pierre had told her that with dedication, she would start to feel a flow, and be comfortable in her own skin. He had looked at her so lovingly, as if she had real potential. Genevieve took a deep breath in and out. In the years since motherhood, she had all but shed her skin and grown a new one. She drank alcohol sparingly now and hadn’t touched drugs in years. Well, not counting a few weeks ago. Truly, she was running out of things to convert.

Concentrating on her breathing, Genevieve let her chest rise and fall, finding a rhythm. That was better. Compassion, not discord. She let her thoughts flow freely, trying not to attach to them*. Goddamn Sasha. It took me ages to scrub the bathmat. She should buy me a new one, and she can stop flirting with Pierre in yoga class. Holy crap, I hope she doesn’t start showing up on Fridays now. Ommmmmmm. Actually, Pierre’s kind of a hardass. I held my downward dog for longer than anyone this week and in tight shorts, and all he could say about it was that my knees were too bent. Does he think about me between classes? Ommmmmmmm. What are those children doing up there? Is that a ball bouncing inside the house? Are they trying to be as loud as possible? Where’s Martin? Why isn’t he managing them? Omm . . .*

The CD in the player suddenly stuck on a particular harp chord, twanging it again and again and again. Genevieve opened her eyes with a snap, like a crocodile pretend-sleeping.

“Oh for GOD’S SAKE!” she grumbled, unwrapping her knees and wincing.

She stretched her legs out onto the cool basement floor. The house needed tidying, the kids needed feeding, and Martin had announced he was heading out this evening to a cat appreciation night at the Civic Theatre. *To a what, now?* Day in, day out, she never got to concentrate or do the things that mattered.

Genevieve stabbed the CD player open, grabbed the disc and flung it to the darkest corner of the basement.

A pink foam ball bounced off the side of her ear as she emerged into the chaos of the living room. “Really?” she said, picking it up off the floor and dropping it into the toy basket. Her husband and kids glanced at each other, suppressing sniggers.

“Are you done relaxing?”

“Meditating, Martin.”

“Want some help getting dinner ready? I’ll probably eat out. The SPCA is doing a pasta buffet called No Balls and Spay-ghetti. It’s a promotional thing.”

He ushered the kids into their bedroom, following his wife into the kitchen.

“Cooking food for our dinner would be helpful.” They stood in a stalemate, neither of them ready to budge.

“Why don’t you just get take-ou—” The phone rang on the wall. “I’ll get that.” He snatched at the receiver like it was a gun in a holster. “Oh, hey, Sasha, how’s things. Done anything naughty since we last met?” He pointed at the receiver and shook his head, rolling his eyes as if they were buddies. Genevieve’s lip curled. “No, nothing . . .” *She wants you*, he mouthed at Genevieve.

“Is she calling to apologise?” hissed Genevieve.

“Yes, she’s just here. I’ll pass you over.” He fumbled the phone toward his wife’s chest and wandered over to the fridge to start dinner.

“Yes?” said Genevieve.

“How’s it hanging?” Silence. “Dude, I’m calling to let you know I’ve chosen the book for August. I told you I’d take care of it.”

“Let me get a pen.”

“You won’t need one. Everyone knows this book, the whole world’s into it.”

“Oh,” said Genevieve, brightening. “Is it something uplifting?”

“*Fifty Shades of Grey*,” said Sasha, her voice flat. “Something for everyone.”

“*Fifty Shades of Grey?*” Genevieve felt the blood drain from her face as Martin snorted over his chopped carrots. “Are you serious?”

“Hands up who hasn’t read it. I’m telling you. Anyway, there you go. See you . . . whenever book club night is.”

“Wait!” shrieked Genevieve, her head spinning, “Hunter invited Harrison to his birthday party. Did you get the invite?”

“Oh, sure. He’ll be there. When is it?”

“In two weeks. It says on the invite.”

“Is it a drop off?”

“No. Read the invite.”

“Okay, already. Chill pill.” Sasha hung up.

Genevieve stood with the phone in her palm, staring at her husband’s back.

“She told me to take a chill pill.” Martin stopped chopping for a second, then carried on. “She’s chosen *Fifty Shades of* fricking *Grey*!” She had to steady herself against the fridge. “Are they doing this on purpose?”

“I liked that book.” Martin turned around. He had picked up a carrot stump and was gnawing on it.

“When did you read it?”

“I’ve read the whole trilogy. They’re kind of hard to put down, if you know what I mean.”

They stared at each other and Martin swallowed.

“Seriously?” Genevieve played her forefinger against her bottom lip. “Was it the sex parts that kept you int—”

The phone rang again. Genevieve looked at it in her left hand and then raised it slowly to her ear, blinking fast.

“Oh *hi*, Rebecca. Do you want to speak to your brother?”

“I’m in the shower,” he said.

She glared at her husband while trying to keep her voice light. “No, that’s fine, I have five minutes. Are you? Well, isn’t that a blast.” She covered the mouthpiece with her hand and said to Martin, “Rebecca’s going on holiday with her girlfriends. Six nights in Cabo.” Martin turned back to the carrots. “No, I’ve never been there. We could afford it, yes, but there are other places I’d rather go. I don’t know. Thailand. Bali. I’ve been thinking a lot about India. No, well, obviously we wouldn’t let the kids splash in the Ganges. Yes, thanks a lot for the gift—that was unexpected. I haven’t had a chance to read it yet. Yes, it’s right by my bed.” *The* *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* had arrived unrequested in the mail; as an inscription, Rebecca had written, *For you, a very necessary read*. Genevieve had considered sending it back to her sister-in-law on fire. “No, we already have a book this month for our club.” *Please don’t ask. Please don’t ask.* “Nothing you’d have heard of.” In the background, Martin snickered unhelpfully. “Yes, I’ll keep trying. No, I don’t eat that anymore. I swear! Ask Martin.” Genevieve heaved with impatience. “Okay, take care.” She put the phone down, adding, “But not really.”

Martin laughed out loud.

“Oh, I’m glad you find it all so amusing. Maybe one of these days you’ll support me by actually TALKING TO YOUR OWN SISTER WHEN SHE CALLS. OM NAMAH SHIVAYA!” Genevieve stormed to her bedroom, slammed the door, and lay flat on the bed with her eyes closed.

Hilary

“Pass them, Michael, pass them!”

Hilary had both of her palms flat on the passenger-side window but Michael didn’t accelerate. Sometimes Hilary wondered if he could hear her as they drove along: he seemed strangely vacant. There was also that time she had returned to the car to find he’d switched off “Edelweiss,” and was instead listening to the Nelson Leafs junior hockey updates on Mountain FM. Still, if Michael’s commitment to garage sales was questionable, Hilary’s made up for it, and that was the balance in their marriage.

“Okay, Jeremy, you can be explorer navigator today: that’s a very important job.”

“Can I use Google maps?” Jeremy raised his iPad listlessly.

“No! Why have you . . . look, here’s the map.” She passed it back to him in the Subaru, feeling the paper bat against the side of her face in transition. “Okay . . . who’d like which song?” She fanned CD covers in her hand like a magician’s card trick. “Now I’m up to date with downloads. We’ve got *Frozen*, *The von Trapp Family Singers Do Christmas* or *Mary Poppins*. Gosh, we haven’t heard that one in a while!”

“I think the MP3 player’s busted.” Michael stared straight ahead.

“No, look, I’ll just push this button . . . Now, carefully, Michael, we’re getting close, aren’t we, Jeremy Fisher? Jeremy? J-man? Where’s your map gone?” She turned to her son in the back seat but he stared out the window, munching his muffin. “Babe, we are, we’re getting close. Can you slow down as we pull up and I can just, you know, leap out?”

Michael patted her thigh. “Why don’t you tuck and roll, honey, like Jackie Chan? Like you did off Pulpit last month. I’ll just keep driving. What do you say, son—we can hit up the A&W drive-thru?”

“Michael! Gross! Jeremy that’s not funny, we all need to . . . We’re here! That’s it! Hit the brakes!” She clawed at the door handle and launched herself from her seat, not even bothering to close the passenger door properly before she set off at a sprint up the front path of the house.

In the past six years, Hilary had turned herself into a child-rearing expert. She had begun with playing classical music to her womb, then memorized all the ethical brand names, and read up on all the cognitive development stages. If little Jeremy liked a new yogurt flavour, she bought a case and hand-delivered samples to all the moms she knew, twenty of whom she had on speed-dial. Half-price rice crackers at Save-On Foods? She was on the phone. She entered contests to win child-related prizes even if she didn’t need the merchandise. To date she’d won four diaper bags, three of them with removable insulated bottle holders. Hilary knew more about children’s sleep patterns than she did her own—she hardly had time to sleep—and was available day and night for advice. After Jeremy was in bed, she scoured the latest information on the Internet regarding BPA leakage into sippy cups, and updated her Facebook status accordingly: *Nelson Peeps! SippySafes or Klean Kanteens all the way! See attached link and share it on! xoxo.* Other Facebook statuses offered ice cubes of mashed cottage pie: *Does anyone need a restock?* Or popcorn threading parties at her house: *Let me know if you’re coming this year! Last year I had to eat a TON of popcorn. Oh DARN lol lol xoxo.*

She checked her Facebook account twice hourly for likes, squeaking with triumph if she got one. Her Twitter account, @yummymommy81, had over twenty-five followers. In quiet moments while she was boiling her breast pump tubing, she liked to think up new hashtags. Her best ones so far were #burnyourpremompants, #whoopsiesatethekidsdinner, and #myseventhchipsahoyofthemorning. She had taught herself to speak the language of mothers: she was a resource of indispensable value.

Her mother once told her that you know you’re fluent in a language when you start dreaming in it, and Hilary had been dreaming about playpens and Jolly Jumpers for years. Sometimes she dreamt about princess tea parties, and called her friends in the morning to advise them on what colour party sashes looked best on their children. Hilary was known for her dreams; if she had nightmares, they were only ever about forgetting to do snack-day duty at pre-school, or babies chugging formula. Either way, she woke up sweating. By family standards, Hilary’s grasp of parenting vocabulary was complete. She was so fluent, she rarely spoke anything else.

The greatest moments of triumph for Hilary were those when garage sailing and motherhood combined, and every Saturday she said a little prayer as they drove to the first garage sale that they’d uncover a trove of second-hand maternity items. Of course, everyone wanted those, and everyone at garage sales read the local paper and had the same map, so it became tactical among serious contenders whether to linger at one house or scramble to the next. Hilary sized up her opponents early on—athletic footwear was always a good indication of commitment. But even on days when she outran the competition, the real work of garage sailing was in the giving, not the getting. She consistently found quality items—had a real knack for it—but she also needed to share the love. Hilary had to deliver her purchases to her best friends within the course of the same day.

She tore up the path to the day’s first house, panting as she rounded the corner to the back yard. *Thank heavens I wore my sports bra*. The lawn was immaculately groomed, a sure sign of promising merchandise.

“Hello jackpot,” she murmured to herself, scanning fast and heading straight for a rack of old maternity clothing. She’d discovered a haven of discarded new motherhood, with items perfect for her new favourite friend. She beamed as she got her breath back, bending forward with her hands on her hips. Then she stood and reapplied a fresh layer of lipstick.

Kit

When Kit’s phone rang, she peered at the call display and let out an audible groan. Hilary, mid-morning on a Saturday. Kit knew very well that were she to *not* pick up, Hilary would continue to call. Last weekend she had left nine messages about a used double breast pump, regardless of the fact that Kit had stopped breastfeeding Pip months ago. “Very little sediment, Kit, hardly any mould!” Hilary had yelled into the machine, every one of her subsequent messages increasing in urgency. By the time Kit played the ninth,it was really just a cockatoo screeching. Kit had no idea why she was suddenly top of Hilary’s garage sale call list but, weighing up the lesser of two annoyances, she decided to gamble and pick up.

“Kit! Kit! It’s Hilary! I’m standing here on the corner of 4th and Elwyn and I’ve found you a second-hand bra, a maternity one. It’s beige, which is a bit of a shame, but who’s going to see it anyway, right? I mean, really, right? It’s in pretty good shape, all things considered. What size are you?”

“What?”

“What size? And have you been brushing your nipples with a toothbrush, like I told you? Are they getting tougher? Oh, there’s a crib here, looks like good quality wood, maybe mahogany. Cherry, maybe? Do you need an extra crib? Just in case? Michael’s parking the car.”

“Hilary, I only have two children.”

“Hey, ma’am! Excuse me! What size is this bra?” Hilary had found the lady of the house. “Is it yours? Oh hi, yes, my friend is interested in it, but her breasts have been so engorged. Yes, tight as drums, enormous—oh, did you? Oh, I *know*. We should all get medals—breast milk is liquid gold! It literally makes our little munchkins smarter! Every time I see a bottle of formula I feel like crying. Those poor bottle babies—their IQs don’t stand a chance. It was always my personal plan to breastfeed till my youngest was five, but we’ve sailed past that now. So, what size are *your* breasts? Oh, that’s super. Kit? Kit? Are you there? What size are you, Kit? This lady here says she’s a D cup, but honestly I think she might be under-estimating. She seems sweet; I might get her number.”

“I don’t want it.”

“You don’t want her number?” Hilary frowned. “I got to tell you, she looks like our kind of person.”

“I don’t want the bra. I’ve got to go, Hilary. No more cribs either, okay? Two children, just the two. I’ll see you later.”

“Don’t hang up! What are you doing later this morning, say around noon?”

“Nothing. Wait, why?”

“There’s a new Kidz Krazy Club opening up on Stanley. Kidz and Krazy with a *z*. Isn’t that so fun? We should totally take the kidzz.” She buzzed the last letter and giggled.

“I don’t know if I’m a kidz club kind of woman.”

“Oh, sure you are. I’ll pick you up later; we’ll grab a coffee first. It’ll be a blast. Oh my God, I’ve just found cloth diapers. Should I get you some? They’re a steal!”

Kit hung up the phone, sat down, and pressed her forehead to the kitchen table.

Going to coffee shops with children was like giving birth: every time, Kit swore she’d never put herself through such an ordeal again, but before long, the need for frothy coffee took over and she found herself back in a room with everyone staring at her, sweaty and under-prepared.

Hilary came to pick her up at twelve o’clock sharp, thankfully not carrying garage sale items. It took ten minutes to get shoes onto Sully and Pip’s feet, and then she and Hilary hurried the kids out the gate and into the minivan, where Jeremy sat silently on a booster seat, sweeping at something high-tech. Kit strapped her kids into two empty car seats, wondering why on earth Hilary had three in her car. Had they been a bargain, too?

“They’re not video games,” Hilary assured Kit, motioning back at her son and yanking at her jammed seatbelt. “Educational apps.” Kit arched her eyebrows. “No, it’s just that Genevieve’s always saying video games breed violence.”

“Genevieve thinks hockey breeds violence, for God’s sake. I’m pretty sure that’s un-Canadian. Imagine what Wayne Gretzky would say about that one.”

“Are you okay?” Hilary panted, struggling with her strap. “Does somebody need a hug?”

“I’m fine. Let’s just get this over with.”

“Well, okay then, Negative Nelly.” Hilary finally clipped in her seatbelt, then turned to face the row of children’s faces behind her. “Is your mommy a Grumpy Pants today?” Sully and Pip giggled. “Is she not very pumped to go play?”

Kit shook her head and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms. “I know, I know, I’ll pull myself together. I’ll be Fun Mum.”

Walking into the Green Goddess café, Kit couldn’t believe the number of people who had time for an entire morning of chitchat. The coffee drinkers sat at tables jammed against walls of local art—much of it made out of cans pulled from the recycling, or flaps of rag and gossamer woven into what looked like curled potato peel. Every bench in the place was crammed with Winter People. They were locals who kept their mountain experience visible at all times by wearing North Face hats indoors—in the middle of August. Apparently the anti-corporate label thing didn’t apply when it came to snow sports. They told stories, in rugged outdoorsy voices, of snow-brotherhood days spent ski touring in a minus seventy chill factor.

*It was a total whiteout, man. It’s lucky I had my snow cave building permit and my Wenzel Tri-Fold shovel.*

The Winter People were a faction of a larger group in the town, the Rural High Achievers, as Clyde called them, who wore functional Gore-Tex to wick moisture away from themselves, even while grocery shopping. In massive backpacks stowed beneath the coffee tables, all Rural High Achievers kept with them a PowerBar, an efficiently rolled fleece, and a space blanket. They squeezed four jobs, three hobbies and five children into their lifestyles, and weekends existed solely as a contest to see who could be busiest, worthiest and closest to nature.

In the early days of his job, Clyde had carpooled to work with three Rural High Achiever engineers, but had opted out of the arrangement when, as he told his wife, the Monday morning conversations began to make him want to eat his own head.

“What did you do this weekend, Chip?”

“Oh, not much, Brad. Gathered signatures for Amnesty International, hiked to Condor Peak, taught my kid how to fly fish, ran forty k. How about you?”

“I taught a class on sustainable energy at the college; then we hosted a street party for the mayor and visitors from Japan. I drank a bunch of my home-brewed gooseberry wine—first prize this year in the West Kootenay Organic Wine Festival—no sulphates, no hangover. Got up early Sunday, biked the rail grade, home in time to can beets with Muffy. What did you do, Clyde?”

Kit’s kids were pressing their faces against the glass of the baked goods display shelves, staring doubtfully at the sesame-roasted zucchini balls and organic date bars, when a man walked in singing and playing his guitar. He began “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door,” causing three benches-worth of coffee drinkers to join in so that Kit felt as if she’d been cast in a dirgy Broadway musical without having auditioned.

She rolled her eyes. “I’ll grab us a table outside. Hilary, can you get us some juice and a tea? Milk and sugar.”

She handed Hilary a ten-dollar bill.

“Tea with the Brits!” squealed Hilary. “It’s like a Jane Austen novel!”

“Which one?”

“Any of them. Though I was thinking of the one with the guy in the long coat who comes walking over the hills to propose at 5 a.m. Which one’s that? They’re all called the same thing too. Whichever one it is, there’s no way I’d be taking offers of marriage at that hour in the morning. Give a girl a chance to primp, Mr. Darbyshire!”

“I think you mean *Pride and Prejudice*,” Kit muttered as she headed to the back of the coffee shop.

Outside the french doors, a path wound up to the top section under a scattering of umbrellas. Sitting down on one of the wooden benches, Kit glanced around the gently hushed group of people. A dad sat across from her with a son about the same age as Sully. The boy wore a T-shirt with the slogan *Kill Your TV*, which seemed ironically violent, as right-on slogans go. The dad was reading a flyer for *An Evening of Sacred Chanting* and didn’t look up. A tattooed sentence curled along his wrist that Kit tried to read, but she could only make out the word *blessed*; he kept turning the flyer over, forcing her to crane her head to unacceptably nosey angles.

Jeremy sat down next to Kit.

“What year are you in at school, then?” she said to him, realizing she’d never once spoken to Hilary’s son. He shrugged and switched on his iPad, lank hair covering his eyes.

Sully and Pip wandered off with the Kill Your TV boy to harass birds just as Hilary bustled up the path trying hard not to wobble the tray.

“Tea is served, m’lady.” She paused to laugh with her hand on her chest. “And juice boxes, rice milk latte and four cookies. Just for the kids, though I got one extra. A little bit of what you like can’t hurt you.” She took a mouthful immediately and sat down, chewing with a furrowed brow. “They’re called Joy Bars, though . . .” She looked around, then whispered, “I can’t see what’s so joyful about them. They’re not even real chocolate.” She swallowed. “Still. Better than a slap in the face with a wet fish, as my mother used to say. Now. What is it that you don’t like about playgroups?”

She took another large bite.

Kit was aware they were being watched by an older lady on the next bench over. Making eye contact, the woman nodded at Kit but didn’t smile. Her hair was shaved close up to her neck, a swan-neck, stretching up from impeccably postured shoulders. “Oh, playgroups? Can’t stand them. I gave it eight months on the Nelson parent trail—I worked really hard, I’m not joking. Did I make friends? Did I, bollocks. Can I say *bollocks*?”

Kit glanced down at Jeremy’s bent head.

“What does *bollocks* mean?” Hilary finished her Joy Bar and licked her fingers.

“Balls.” Kit sipped her tea. “Hairy man balls.”

Jeremy looked up from his iPad and Hilary quickly covered both of his ears with her palms.

“Anyway, I went from Kindermusik to toddler gymnastics to Mama Banana, to This Goose is Loose at the community centre . . .” As Kit spoke, Hilary counted off every playgroup name on her fingers, nodding at each one’s familiarity. “. . . to Aquamoms to Beansprouts to Whizzbang Wigglers, weather permitting. Same faces at every place. When all the playgroups shut down for spring break, I went to the swimming pool for fourteen days straight hoping to bump into mums I knew. Sad, really. Pathetic. It was like the quest for the Holy Grail, trying to get a play date.”

Hilary sat back with eyebrows raised. “Were they all . . .”—Hilary mouthed the next word—“meany-moms?”

“I suppose. I gave it a good go, though, despite not getting anywhere with any of them. I even took up skiing, though I’m totally useless at it—I’m a knock-kneed Brit. But those mums barricade themselves a little corner of the ski lodge and swap out in pairs to take runs on the hill. Sounded alright.”

“Was it fun?”

“No, it was rubbish. I always got paired with this woman Jude who was a right tit. She had a new ski jacket every week and a fur-lined headband and never learnt what my name was or waited for me at the top of the lift.”

Hilary looked so sympathetic, Kit feared she might sob.

“Oh, honey! Well, it’s not like that now, is it? Hey? Chin up, pumpkin!” She patted Kit’s bare knee. “You have us now. Problem solved.”

She jiggled her body over so that she could put her arm around Kit’s shoulder. When it didn’t reach, she adjusted it to Kit’s waist. The two women sat wedged together on the bench, Hilary patting Kit’s knee with her spare hand.

After a few seconds, Kit registered that Sacred Chanting dad had come off his bench and pulled his son in close to his side. Holding him across the chest with his arm, the father spoke into the boy’s ear—loudly enough for Kit to hear once she tuned in.

Sully and Pip continued to play by a far-off umbrella, twirling around its stand, tricking the pigeons into relaxing. Every minute or so the children charged at the birds with overexcited arms.

“We don’t do that to birds,” the man said. “We are not aggressive, Iago. We are kind people.”

Why, Kit wanted to ask, would someone name their child after a Shakespearian villain? It was like calling your dog Rebel and hoping he’d come when you whistled. Kit stayed quiet, however, to hear the remainder of the father’s speech.

“Chasing birds is unkind,” he pronounced to the patio, “and I want you to stop.” He glanced at Kit as he spoke. “I don’t care what that other boy is doing. His rules are very different.”

Kit blushed and called her children over. They looked at her with big, mocha eyes.

“You weren’t kicking it, were you Sully? Pip?”

Her voice sounded stringy. Around the patio, all the clusters of people had stopped talking and gawped at her. Hilary took her arm from around Kit’s waist.

“No, mom. But it’s funny when they fly up.” Kit stared at her son’s clear skin, his sandy, surfer hair. His front four teeth had fallen out, making his pink tongue visible at all times.

Kit turned to Hilary, whose face seemed alarmingly close. “Is that terrible behaviour?”

Hilary bit her lip. “I always like to think, *Would I do that*? But the problem is I’m not six or a boy, so I’m not sure why that’s helpful. Live and let live? That’s a good one. Are you letting the pigeon live? Maybe ask Sully that.”

She took another bite of Joy Bar.

“Excuse me.” Kit’s voice rang out in the stillness of the patio. “Excuse me, I appreciate there’s a gentleness mandate in Nelson, but does it actually have to apply to pigeons? I mean, I’m not being funny, but all boys run after things that fly. They also pull the legs off spiders. I’m sorry but they do.” Kit glanced at Hilary hoping for backup, but Hilary had lost all colour in her face. “I mean, honestly, if the pigeons are thick enough to land in exactly the same place again and again, they’re asking to get chased.”

“Oh dear,” Kit heard Hilary whisper.

Hilary stood up and brushed crumbs from her skirt.

“What my friend means, in a nice way, is that no harm’s been done to the pigeon. Isn’t that what you mean, Kit?”

“No, not really. They’re pigeons, for crying out loud! It’s not like my son’s chasing grannies.”

The man made a noise like he was blowing a fly off his top lip. “That you discriminate between living creatures is a problem for me, and I doubt I’m the only one who feels that way.”

Murmuring filled the patio.

“You think people are the same as birds?” asked Kit.

“My husband calls me bird-brain!” shouted Hilary. “But of course he’s joking!”

The dad sighed. “I think you should be mindful of all souls in all beings. Imagine the fear the birds are experiencing. Would you like to be chased by a predator?”

“A *predator*? I don’t think my son was planning to kill the pigeon and have it for dinner.”

“Iago, we’re leaving. There’s no point debating a closed mind.”

The dad stalked away down the path, dragging his son behind him. As he walked past two couples eating breakfast buns, one of the guys fist-bumped him, sprinkling his fingers into a firework.

“You sure know how to clear a room,” said Hilary to Kit, and sat down again.

People resumed chatting on the patio, snippets of their conversation overlapping for Kit to hear.

One woman in stripy knee-high socks was absolutely certain pigeons had souls. *Have you seen the square outside the Vatican? Tell me they’re not spiritual beings.* Her companion worried for Kit: *She must be very unhappy within herself. I wonder how she is with squirrels.* An older gentleman wearing an *I Love Jumbo Mountain* T-shirt told everyone that outer behaviour reflects inner ambience and that you have to build the temple*.* At least five people mumbled agreement.

“Mom, why is your face all red?” asked Sully.

Kit put both palms to her cheeks, only to see the lady with the African bangles lean forward and speak directly to Pip, who was jumping up and down near her.

“Does your mommy teach you to be kind to animals?”

Kit’s head swung around and she gaped at the woman. A childphoner! She was a childphoner!

Childphoners talked to small children they didn’t know, purely for the purpose of communicating with the parent. The child, in every instance, was only ever used as a telephone. Nelson was a town rife with childphoners, with a high season that seemed to Kit to link directly to hat-wearing. In summer and winter, childphoners hopped from foot to foot on Baker Street when they saw the jackpot of a parent approaching with a hatless child. Kit wasn’t sure where they all went in the off-season, but suspected it was a childphoner cruise, where they lay back and sipped piña coladas, swapping stories of the year’s laughably inadequate parenting.

This morning, African Bangles’s assault—when coupled with Sacred Chanting dad’s advanced maneuver of using his *own* child to childphone—threw Kit out of her depth.

“Stop it!” she shouted, her voice trembling now. African Bangles didn’t break posture. “Of course I’m teaching my kids kindness! But they weren’t . . . they’re not . . . I’m not doing anything wrong! What *is* it with this town . . . ?” All areas of the patio erupted into fierce whispering. The high-fiving man with the breakfast bun stood up and sat down again.

Pip waddled over and hugged her mother’s knees, sensing conflict. Hilary, sensing the need to leave, pulled Kit up by the elbow.

“Out we go.” Hilary began to execute as fast an exit as was possible with three kids and a friend on the brink of a donkey-bray sob. “Down the path, grab the latte and whatnot, there we go, all good. Yes, we’re leaving. Well, you can bring it with you, Jeremy. Kids, carry your juice boxes, but don’t squeeze the . . . no, that’s okay. Sully, we can give that a dab with a wet wipe when we get in the car. All good, just a bit of a mark on your shirt. Oh, you too, Pip? Look it, you two are twins! Matching grape stains! Isn’t that fun? Okay, now is that your stuffy? Grab it, get it, that’s awesome, off we go. Kit, we’re going this way, no, this way, no that woman doesn’t want to . . . let’s not . . . Shoes on, Pip, one foot, two foot, that’s a good girl. Jeremy, shut that off please, right now, right now, right . . . there we go. Okay, that was great listening. Off we go, then, let’s all follow Hilary please; here we go, almost there.”

She opened the french doors and steered Kit through them like a hospital outpatient. They made it to the Subaru and got in. Hilary organized kids into car seats while Kit sat in the passenger seat, breathing hard.

Once Hilary had clambered into the driver’s seat, she gripped Kit’s forearm. “Now, listen to me you lovely girl. Pigeons *are* weird. They don’t blink enough. I don’t like a creature with no eyelids. I just wouldn’t say that out loud in a Nelson coffee shop, is all. Not without riot gear.”

Kit groaned. “I just can’t get it right.”

“Well, no harm done! On we go!” She adjusted the rearview mirror. “Ready, kids? Who’s up for some Kidz Krazy Club craziness?”

Cheers sounded from the back seat. Ignoring Kit’s horrified face, Hilary started the engine, gave all the kids a “yay” in the rearview mirror and punched a button on the MP3 player. “It’s a Jolly Holiday with Mary” fired up as she pulled away from the curb.

They drove along Vernon Street, past the post office and the old arena. A nut-brown man sat on a wall in the sunshine rubbing his belly, his walking staff resting against the stone. Kit watched as he crushed a small container of yogurt, squelching the contents into his mouth.

“Mom, can we listen to ‘High on a Hill Was a Lonely Goat Turd’?” sniggered Jeremy from the back seat. Sully squealed.

“Jeremy! Mind your manners!” Hilary punched the MP3 player with her thumb. “Here we go. The Wiggles!” she shouted as blaring harmony fired up. “The Wiggles are Australian; didn’t you live there?”

“I’d go for the blue Wiggle. But so would everyone.”

Kit picked at her fingernails, hands limp in her lap.

“Check out the flyer for Kidz Krazy Club!” Hilary threw Kit a leaflet that featured a picture of a jaunty, well-rested mother wearing clogs, laughing uproariously at the sight of her child playing with blocks.

“What’s so funny about blocks?” Kit passed the leaflet back. “Do you own clogs?”

Sasha

Sasha leaned on the kitchen countertop, flicking through *Fifty Shades of Grey* with Harrison’s oversized headphones on her head. With book club only ten days away and no movie yet released, she had to give the book a five-minute read-through. It all seemed pretty straightforward: loser girl meets multimillionaire and has mildly deviant sex in an S&M chamber. What was so unusual about that? All those people who were scandalized by the book needed to get out more.

In front of her on the couch, Jared and Harrison sat watching a *Star Wars* movie. Father and son had their backs to her and Jared’s thick arm was hooked around Harrison: she could just see the fluff of his hair peeping out from the crook of Jared’s elbow. Sasha tossed the novel to one side and picked up a fashion magazine, scratching at a new perfume sample on the inside cover and sniffing it while she tried to grasp a strand of the movie’s plotline. From what she could tell, the whole *Star Wars* saga seemed to hinge on the bad guy in the black cloak taking his helmet off. You’d think they could have come up with something more dramatic, or at least cast a hot guy so that the revelation was worth the wait. With his hat off, the guy on the screen had skin like mashed potatoes. He needed to put that helmet back on pronto.

Sasha turned a page of her magazine, drinking in the cityscapes, the lights, the cafés just in shot behind every haute couture model’s pose. Sighing, she looked up at the view through her french doors. Elephant Mountain loomed beyond the smooth lake, stoically present as ever. Everyone always marvelled at the glorious mountain backdrop of Nelson, but Sasha found the mountains unnerving. She felt supervised at all times.

She’d grown up in this rinky-dink town, and spent the last few years of high school willing the time away on mushrooms and acid, barely hearing her name called at grad before thumbing a ride to the city. She got herself a job on a Vancouver film set, and quickly climbed the ladder: within ten years she made production co-ordinator and was hitting her stride. She oversaw travel arrangements of cast and crew, organized set equipment, distributed vital script revisions, and went home at sunset after a sixteen-hour shift, walking away in on-trend sunglasses as everything went to camera. Hollywood stars requested her to work on their projects—A-listers, too—not the sad ones you see on reality shows, eating spiders in the jungle for the sake of an audience. There was a painting in the living room given to her by George Clooney, for God’s sake! Daniel Craig had hung out with her, even when he had all manner of groupies to choose from. She’d really been going places.

Then she met Jared in a club: a dark, pumping one where skin brushed skin and the ceiling dripped like a cave. He was the lead singer in the band, all swagger and skate shoes, and he’d beckoned her to the VIP section with a curling forefinger. He wore checkered granddad pants bought from a thrift store. His eyelashes were longer than hers.

“Who are *you*?” he had said, the ice clinking in his Jack Daniel’s. “I’m Jared, and you need to sit next to me.”

She laughed and it felt like a beginning.

When she got pregnant on a one-night layover during one of his tours, it wasn’t funny anymore. Jared was away a lot, though he did call from the road. He moved them into a loft apartment where he left her alone with the chrome and the exposed brickwork, returning weeks later to be amazed at the increased size of her. Around week 35, he looked at her in her over-stretched white sweater and told her that she looked like the fridge. She left and moved back to the rinky-dink town and her mother.

He’d only been joking; that much was clear. He gave up his band for her and moved to Nelson. That was four years ago, and now he played the local bars for peanuts on weekends, and five nights a week, between midnight and eight, vacuumed the stale offices of town.

Right now, Jared was still in his pyjama pants. He got up around 4 p.m. each day and played guitar for an hour with Harrison or—like today—watched a movie with him before eating the Whitewater Cookbook pad thai he insisted on making from scratch and leaving for work again. None of Jared’s band T-shirts fit him anymore. He’d switched checkered pants for fleece and Jack Daniel’s for Faceplant ale. The Kootenays claimed him inch by inch and it made Sasha shudder. He was even growing a beard.

Something flashed to the left of her page and Sasha realized her cell phone was ringing. She pulled the headphones from her ears, hooking them around her neck, and tapped the face of the phone, waving an apology at the boys for the interruption.

“Hiya, is that Sasha?” said a woman’s voice. “I’m calling about the ad in the paper for a room?”

Sasha had advertised their basement suite in the Pennywise, but so far the applicants had been a woman with fourteen cats, a young girl who was “manifesting” a job, and a shoeless man who told her to stop “conditioning” him when she asked if he smoked. That one brought his suitcase with him and had to be gently encouraged not to unpack.

The woman on the phone took a breath. “I’m wondering if there’s room in the suite for my bear skull shrine. Because don’t you hear the voices of the ancients calling you from the forest? The feminine call of the wild—”

“The suite’s taken,” Sasha lied.

She hung up and covered her face with her hands. Lost souls. You’d think there’d be more crazies in the city than a tiny town in the Koots, but you’d be surprised. This town was a loony haven; they flocked here in droves.

“Who was that?” Jared had both elbows hooked over the edge of the sofa, his chin resting on the top.

“Nobody. Nothing.”

“We don’t need a renter. Baby, we talked about this. They’ll just complain about the music and shit. I seriously don’t want to live above anyone.”

He got up and walked around to her, stealing her headphones and walking them over to Harrison’s head, plugging the lead into the TV jack.

“But you’re never here!”

She pushed the magazine away from her, watching the edges of it droop into a puddle by the sink and begin to absorb the liquid.

“You know the last people who knocked on my door, Jared? Jehovah’s Witnesses!”

“Sweet.”

“It wasn’t. One of them was shiny and new and the other was one hundred and fifty years old. Tell me that’s not weird. They wanted to know what I’d ask God if I had his undivided attention.”

“Wicked!”

“‘When did He get my life mixed up with someone else’s?’That was my reply. ‘And where’s my fucking apology?’” Sasha flinched as she realized she’d dropped another f-bomb but the headphones seemed solid. “They left me a pamphlet.”

She nodded at the fridge, where she’d pinned the Jehovahs’ pamphlet with alphabet magnets. On the front cover beamed a man who had caterpillars for eyebrows, wearing a collared shirt and cardigan. He looked like Eugene Levy on meds. In his hand he held a fresh mug of coffee, the steam rising up to bathe his face in new-day bliss. Things were great in Jehovahland. Below his clean-cut joy, the leaflet read: *Wouldn’t YOU like to wake up each morning with happy, positive thoughts?* “I kept the leaflet because it’s cool but that’s beside the point.”

Jared hunched his shoulders over the counter, his arms crossed. “What is the point, baby? Why do you think this life isn’t yours?”

He tucked his hair behind his ear, like he did when he was worried.

“No, it’s not . . . it’s not you.” *It is a little bit you*. “It’s just I’m in a rut, Jared! This town—I left it behind! And here we are, back again! It’s like a vortex. People are batshit crazy here, or haven’t you noticed?”

“Spend more time with your high school buddies. The ones without kids.”

She raised an eyebrow.

The previous year she’d organized a dinner party, to which she had invited only child-free friends—people she’d associated with in high school—as an homage to her old self. She wanted to talk movies, celebrities and fashion, not diaper rash, nipple cream and croup. Unfortunately, she had fallen asleep while leaving the festivities to put Harrison to bed, and had woken up at 7 a.m. the next morning to the debris of a dinner party she had hosted but failed to attend.

“My friends are in another world, wearing slim-line sneakers and sipping martinis. They aren’t looking for me.”

He leaned against her with his shoulder. “Be a mom then. Hang out with mommies.”

“Gross. Though I thought of a new TV show. Want to hear my pitch?”

He nodded.

“It’s called *Mommies Moving In*. Ten new mothers line up in front of the one main character in the show. Main Mom has to choose one of them, right then and there, to be friends with. She doesn’t get to speak to them, but she gets to hear what they’ve called their kids, see how they’ve dressed them, what brand of stroller they’ve gone for, whether they breastfeed while walking down the street. Main Mom picks one out of the ten and spends a month living with them in a house, parenting communally. There’s a confessional room for both moms to talk to the camera as they go. At the end, the directors reveal to Main Mom who her actual match was in the line-up. They have one of those computer compatibility things, like with online dating.”

Jared smiled. “What do you know about online dating?”

“Jack shit.” She pointed her index finger at him. “But I do know that mommy-moms are for sure as judgmental as anyone else. They just try to hide it better.”

He shrugged. “It’s pretty good, Sash. You should call up your old boss, pitch it for real.”

“And then what? Go back to production and work thirteen-hour days on set?” The top of Harrison’s hair bobbed into view as he shifted position. “Like that wouldn’t be the parenting fail of the decade.”

“Is there nobody exciting here?”

“I like Kit. Book club Kit. She actually called me today and asked me to babysit her kid next week.”

“Seriously?”

“That must mean she kind of likes me. I have to go to this way uncool birthday party thing on Saturday and then I’m taking Sully for an hour after. Fuck knows how she got that one past me. I told her I’d do it but one hour max and I’m not kidding. Scheisse.”

“Work your magic, baby! You can win Kit over. Get her in your sights.” He laughed. “And also, just so you know, I can find you some fun. I got asked to play a gig down in LA; I didn’t want to mention it until it was set. You want to come? They’d put us up in a flash place . . . you know, wine us, dine us—the whole shebang.”

It was as if Sasha dropped one mask on the ground and picked up another, her face changed that fast.

“Oh my God, I think I love you!” she squealed, jumping up and down behind the kitchen counter, suddenly noticing again the fullness of Jared’s lips, the length of his eyelashes.

“You *think* you love me?” He grinned and stretched.

There was a rip in the armpit seam of his T-shirt.

“So I’ll tell them yes, I guess. Can you ask your mom if she’d babysit? It’s coming up pretty quick here, like in two months. Start of October. You think she’d watch him?”

“Watch who?”

“Harrison.”

“Oh, for sure. He loves going to Grandma’s and let’s not give her a choice.”

She jumped up and down and clapped her hands; the commotion made Harrison turn around on his cushion.

“Mom?” he shouted, unaware of his own voice’s volume. She nodded at him with her eyebrows high. “The Ewoks have the coolest villages! Can we go to Endor?”

“Uhuh. Sure thing we can.” She smiled and nodded vigorously until Harrison turned back around. “What the *hell* is an Ewok?” she hissed at Jared. “I’ve had it with this trilogy.”

“There are six.”

“Six Ewoks?”

“Movies. It’s not a trilogy, babe. I can’t believe you had a job in film.”

Sasha blinked in panic. “Have you told *him* there are six? Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

She reached across and grabbed her magazine back from the wet patch near the sink.

“Go on, then. Back to your weird little world of magical powers and hairy things. Fill your boots.”

She pushed at Jared’s shoulder and he ambled back to the couch. Behind them Sasha smiled at her magazine, blind to the page as she toyed with the peacock feather earring she’d bought from a city boutique, not the Nelson market. Here she was in a two-bit town, in a weirdo book club, surrounded by people who shopped from the Sears catalogue, but she had LA in her pocket now. LA!

Kit arrived at the park just past noon and helped Sully out of the car.

“Do you want to leave those here?”

She nodded at the packet of Pop Rocks in her son’s hand. If Genevieve read the ingredients list, her head would probably catch fire.

“Nope,” he said, jamming the candy into his pocket and scurrying off to find his buddies.

“No kicking or chasing things!” she yelled after him.

Kit unbuckled Pip from the other side of the car. The pigeon debacle still had her on edge and here she was at a party she’d been dreading for two weeks. As confused as she felt, though, she couldn’t very well deny Sully his friendships. All Kit could hope was that play dates beyond this event could be the kind where coffee was not included.

Kit waited while Pip dawdled her way up the path toward the little group standing by the picnic tables. Eventually she ran out of patience, picked her daughter up, and carried her under her arm.

Sasha stood in oversized sunglasses, drinking from an opaque water bottle. Next to her, Hilary dabbed at her son’s face with a wet Kleenex while telling a story to Sasha and Genevieve, whose faces were glazed with disinterest. At the far end of the picnic table a clear-skinned man lounged, his hair pulled back into a sleek ponytail. He was playing with his soul patch, pulling it out from the crest of his lip. His T-shirt, grooved tightly across his chest, showed a ninja mid-jump; the muscles along his arms were lean and smooth like molasses. He wore trodden-thin flip-flops and pyjama bottoms.

“Hello, everyone,” said Kit, setting her daughter down. Pip bobbled over to the group of kids playing by the slide. “Sorry I’m late. Dog walk.”

“Dogs and pigeons and kids,” sighed Hilary. “They’re all little animals. I was just saying Hunter’s got a sniffle and asking everyone if you can suck a six-year-old’s nose like you can a baby’s. Do you know? I’ll have to Google it.”

“What about pigeons?” Genevieve asked, separating paper plates.

“Doesn’t matter.” The last thing Kit needed was Genevieve siding with the childphoners. “Where shall I put this?”

She waved Hunter’s present which was covered in Spider-Man gift wrap.

“This is a no-present party. Didn’t you get my email?” Genevieve’s foot tapped. “Hunter and I decided that it’s much better if he takes gift donations rather than presents, and then we’ll forward the money to charity. He has enough toys already.”

“Oh. Well . . . Sully chose this himself.” Kit rubbed her forehead with a flat palm.

“What is it?” asked Genevieve.

Everyone along the picnic table stared at Kit’s present like she’d wrapped a dead fish.

“This is a monster truck. Are monster trucks wrong?”

“Plastic?”

“Well, I didn’t see him whittling it out of wood.” Kit set the present down on the table. How many more ways could she fail socially in this town?

“Shame. It’s such a lost art.” Mystery Ninja stroked his soul patch.

“Is it?” bristled Kit. “Were there many five-year-old woodcarvers in the ancient days?”

Hilary, who had sent Jeremy back over to the other kids after a hug and a kiss, turned and shrilled, “Kit, have you met Pierre? He’s Genevieve’s friend from yoga.”

“He’s more than my friend; he’s my teacher.” Genevieve put her hand on Pierre’s forearm. Normally she wore her hair up, but today it was silky and free. She was also wearing mascara. “He’s changed my life.”

Pierre covered her hand with his.

“Are you both French, then?” asked Kit, her arms crossed on her chest.

“French?”

“Do you have a kid here?”

“My son, Gaia, is six. He’s the one in the elven hood.” By the swing set a tall boy lay flat on the grass next to Hunter and Mercedes, who was still in her cape. “They’re playing nirvana. It’s a game we thought up for them, where they end up in a transcendent state, free of desires.”

Genevieve and Pierre still held forearms.

“Mercedes and Hunter,” said Sasha, suddenly peering into the bottom of her water bottle. “Those kids weren’t named in Nelson.” Genevieve’s face turned red.

“No, but we call our daughter Mercy most of the time.”

Pierre nodded in approval and stroked his soul patch some more.

“And I’m thinking of changing Hunter’s name. He seems like more of an Ocean to me. Or a Storm Song. Juniper Skookumchuck? I’m still figuring it out.”

“Does Martin like the name Skookumchuck?” asked Sasha, innocently. “Where is your husband?”

Genevieve removed her hand from Pierre’s arm.

“Setting up the scavenger hunt. I don’t know why it’s taking so long. We were going to do cake but we had to wait for Kit.”

Kit shrugged as Harrison and Sully ran over with Pip and Jeremy close behind. “Mom,” said Sully, “is it okay if we cut worms in half? You said they grow back.”

“Here, I’ll come and see what you’re up to.”

Kit strode away from the picnic table, choosing not to catch Genevieve’s eye. Sasha followed her. As they rounded the corner of the washrooms toward the boys’ mud pile, they ran into Martin sitting on a bench with his back against the washroom wall, drinking a beer.

“Busted,” he said, smiling. His hair, normally parted to the side, looked ruffled and unkempt as he scuffed at loose rocks with the toe of his tight-laced sneaker.

“What you doing?” Kit sat down next to him. Sasha did not. “You alright?”

“I’m hiding from the yogis. That guy, Pierre, is Jesus, I think. For real, we should alert the media.”

“His name’s definitely Peter. He’s not even French.”

As she spoke, Kit leaned to the side and bumped Martin companionably with her shoulder.

“He’s seriously weird,” said Sasha. “He sprinkles bee pollen on his granola. But he’s *so pretty*. Oh my God. He’s got the hot man muscle. You know, the one that curves down from the hip to the pelvis; I saw it in one of his yoga classes. And he’s got that whole Johnny Depp thing going on—if you’re into that, which everybody who’s alive is, including Genevieve who, by the way, has no chance.”

Martin cracked open a fresh beer and said nothing, while Kit glared at Sasha. She flushed and leaned back out of Martin’s view.

“He doesn’t look anything like Johnny Depp!” Kit snorted. “He looks like that bloke from *Lord of the Rings.* The one with the bow and arrow. Anyway, Genevieve just likes his guru thing. His *vibe*.”

She had hoped Martin might crack a smile, but he stared straight ahead.

“So . . . have you finished your scavenger hunt?”

“It’s mostly just leaves and worms. And from the look of your son, the worm count is doubling.”

Over in the grass, Sully led a dissection, watched closely by the other boys, while Pip dug a hole.

“Sully!” shouted Kit, her cheeks reddening. “That’s so rank! I don’t know why he’s doing that . . .”

She got up to take the twig out of Sully’s hands. At that moment, Hunter ran round the corner of the building holding onto his sun hat.

“Mom says there’s cake now, so come. Ooh, worms.”

He threw himself down beside the other three boys. Then, frowning, he stood up again.

“Mom says everything has a soul and if you hurt a bug, it’s like we all get hurt.” Jeremy, Sully and Harrison stared at him.

“Your mom’s a nut job,” said Sully.

“Sully!”

“Boys, let’s change the game. My wife catches you doing that, she’ll pass out.”

“And Jesus will have a conniption,” added Sasha. “He’ll have to perform a miracle worm healing.”

As Sasha was talking, Genevieve marched around the corner of the washroom gripping a cake knife. When she saw Kit trying to bury dissected worms, she raised both arms, the knife glinting sideways in the air.

“What is going on?” She turned and frowned at Martin and Sasha on the bench. “Beer, Martin? Oh, that’s just perfect.”

“We’re supervising.” Martin took a sip. “I’ve set up the scavenger hunt. We’re ready to roll.”

Genevieve tucked her hair behind her ears.

“Well, it’s cake time. Boys, go wash up. There’s food and then a fun game, let’s go.”

The children stood up obediently, and trooped past Genevieve back toward the washroom.

“You can come, too,” she said to the row of grown-ups. “And by the way, guys, alcohol in a public place? Illegal. And also, completely inappropriate. Because really, let’s all get drunk in a playground!”

She marched off and Martin groaned. He drained his beer and threw the can in the trash.

“Why *don’t* they serve alcohol at kids’ parties? My husband might show up if they did,” said Kit.

“Where is he?” Martin asked.

“At home, exercising his blanket-ban on toddlers’ parties when the toddler isn’t his.”

“I want to be friends with him. How does he get away with that?”

Martin licked a palm and smeared it across his dark hair, flattening it slightly.

Kit smiled. “I wouldn’t come either if I didn’t have to.”

Back at the picnic table, Genevieve had unveiled an enormous cake, on top of which sat a Christmas angel surrounded by candles.

“I chose the design,” she said, shaking her head like it was nothing. She lit each candle and blew out the match.

“Shouldn’t we do the scavenger hunt first?” asked Martin.

“No, we should not.”

“Seems a bad combo, cake and running.”

Genevieve ignored her husband and turned to Hilary.

“Pass me the plates.”

She snapped her fingers at Hilary as Pierre suddenly spoke, holding a nori chip between his thumb and index finger.

“Is there psyllium husk in the cake?”

Genevieve paused, her arm hovering outstretched.

“Otherwise it’ll do a real number on their digestive systems, eating before exercise. And if their digestion is out of whack their whole chakra goes out.”

“Psyllium husk! I knew I . . . I put in the agave nectar, like we spoke about, but . . . Well, okay, let’s save the cake for after.”

Genevieve took a breath and regrouped.

“Hunter, honey, we’re going to do the hunt now!”

Hunter watched, bewildered, as his mother blew out all of his birthday candles. Genevieve allocated pens and charts to the groups of children and then wiped her top lip with the inside collar of her T-shirt.

“Go on, off you go!”

“I don’t want to be with Angel Boy,” said Sully. Hunter looked at the floor. “I want a cool group.”

“Oh my giddy aunt,” said Kit. She took Sully by the arm and marched him five feet away to the side of the swing set, while all the other parents pretended they weren’t listening. Genevieve deployed the scavengers.

“What are you doing?” Kit said, inches from her son’s face. She was bent double, trying to look at him. “What is the matter with you?”

“Why can’t I go with Harrison? I like him best.”

“It’s not about who you like best, it’s about being kind, and fitting in. Being kind to everyone.” Kit made a global shape in the air, ending with her hands clenched together.

“Are you kind to everyone?”

“Well, I don’t go around telling people they’re nuts and their stuff looks stupid,” said Kit, wondering why it felt like a lie. “If you can’t say something nice, don’t say anything.”

The words came out of her mouth hollow and metallic.

Sully looked up at her face, listening. She had to get this right.

“You’re not always going to like everyone. But it’s not okay to say so out loud—just be nice! Go with the flow a little, or no one will want to play with you. It’s not that hard, Sul.” She tried to smile convincingly. “Now go and say sorry. You might have to catch Hunter up—he’s out there on the field—but I want you to say sorry and mean it.”

“Okay, mom. But his cake’s still lame.”

“So? Who asked you? Be kind!”

Kit sent Sully running off to catch up with the other children and then edged back to the picnic table, chewing her thumbnail.

“Taming the wild beast?” chirped Hilary.

“I’m sorry about that.” Kit stood behind Genevieve as she organized napkins. “I don’t know what that rudeness was all about.”

Genevieve turned around, her eyebrows arched. “Yes, it’s a total mystery. Who knows where he gets it from.”

“Discovery of self. The ego. It’s powerful, even from a young age.” Pierre had claimed the nori chip bowl now and ate steadily, the bowl clasped against his chest.

“Well, thanks for being so nice about it,” Kit said to Genevieve. “I’ll try and control my opinionated son for the remainder of the party.”

“Pass the chips, Pierre,” said Sasha, leaning across him to get to the bowl. “Don’t you know how to share?”

Her hair brushed the front of his T-shirt as she stretched.

“You smell amazing,” Pierre inhaled. “What is that? It’s . . . tropical. Beachy.”

“I think it’s oatmeal.” Sasha nibbled a chip. “It’s probably smeared on my clothing.”

Pierre grinned, his cheekbones high. “You’re funny.”

Genevieve’s throat made a noise like a garbage disposal unit.

“Where exactly are you from?” Martin smacked paper plates down onto the wooden picnic table, staring at Pierre. “As in, which planet? No, I’m kidding. Ha! No, but seriously.”

“I grew up in the city. Moved here a couple years ago so I could breathe.”

Pierre demonstrated how he did that.

“Which city?” asked Kit. “A French one?”

“Vancouver,” munched Pierre.

“You know Vancouver?” Sasha all but shouted.

“Have you always been into yoga?”

Martin slapped another plate down.

“No. Not really.”

Pierre studied his nori bowl.

“But you’re married, right?”

“Martin!” Genevieve whacked her husband on the hand. “Stop being so nosy! Pass the spoons.”

“What? You invite the guy to our son’s birthday, I’ve never met him. I’m just making conversation, honey.”

“Gaia’s mother is here in town but we uncoupled consciously a while back,” offered Pierre. “It was kind of beautiful—you know, we divided everything up. Though she fought pretty hard for the Audi . . .”

“He’s single, everybody. What colour was the Audi?” Sasha sipped from her water bottle.

“And what did you say you did in the city?”

Martin passed the spoons while mouthing *what?* at his wife.

“I was in the entertainment industry in Van. Now I’m in the enlightenment industry.” Pierre tucked blond hair behind his ear. “It’s better for everyone.”

“I was too!” yelled Sasha. “In the entertainment industry in Van, I mean, not the enlightenment thing. Christ, no. What did you do? I was in film.”

“Enlightenment is an industry, is it?” asked Kit.

Martin took a breath and got ready to support Kit’s sarcasm, but just then Harrison, Mercedes and Gaia ran back up to the picnic table. They plunked a bucket down, in which slithered an assortment of worms.

“Not next to the cake! Jesus Christ!” yelled Genevieve, pushing Harrison out of the way.

“Cheese and rice, she meant!” said Hilary to Harrison’s startled face.

Pierre placed the nori bowl down, brushing sea salt from his hands. “What I mean is,” hurried Genevieve, “do you want worms in your cake, little guy? Hmmm?” She threw fake punches at Harrison’s stomach, who pushed her arm away. “Worms for you, mister! Ew! Icky! Ohhhh-kay. Where are the others?”

“Eating Pop Rocks in the field.” Gaia wriggled into the gap between his dad and Sasha. “I told them it was sugar but they wouldn’t listen. Now they’re going to have sore bellies all the way home, and their bones will melt in their bodies. Right, Dad? They might not be able to walk or lift stuff by tonight.”

He nodded at his own diagnosis.

“Eating what?” Pierre and Genevieve both took staggering steps toward the edge of the field, staring out as if into an abyss.

“Guys! Come here!”

They stood together waving their arms, like lifeguards to ocean swimmers in peril. Out in the field, Sully, Hunter and Jeremy turned and started to run back, Pip toddling behind. The boys jogged with their tongues out, comparing fizziness, and from thirty feet away their tongues shone blue as they ran.

“We found a bug,” puffed Hunter, once they had arrived back at the table.

He smiled, showing indigo teeth, and put his bucket next to the cake. Genevieve let out a small shriek, while Martin took the bucket and placed it calmly on the ground.

“Have you been sucking pens?” Martin asked, ruffling his son’s hair.

“Not pens, Pop Rocks!” Sully beamed, holding up the empty packet in triumph.

Pierre grabbed it and read the small print on the back, wincing with each new additive. “There’s probably butylated hydroxyanisole in this stuff. Wow. Sodium benzoate for sure.”

“Hunter’s never had any before, his face was so funny.”

The boys flashed sapphire grins at each other. Hunter’s right leg jiggled.

“Where did the Pop Rocks come from?” Genevieve smiled tightly, steadying herself with one hand on the picnic table.

“Walmart,” said Sully.

Kit grimaced. “Yes, that’s my fault, actually. They were Sully’s treat; I didn’t know he was going to share them.”

“Thank you for explaining,” said Pierre, his green eyes heavy with sadness. “I respect your honesty.”

Genevieve opened her mouth and closed it again. “Yes, thank you, Sully. It is always a good thing to share.”

Sully eyed her like a wolf in a granny costume.

Genevieve took a deep breath and picked up the cake knife again, pressing her palms together like a prayer. The knife stood straight up, glistening.

“How about we do cake? Hunter! Cake! Stand still!”

While the boy fidgeted and sniggered, Genevieve lit all the candles again and lowered the cake down to Hunter’s juddering, freckled nose. In tremulous soprano, Hilary suddenly launched into the first verse of “Happy Birthday” and people chimed in, contributing a variety of octaves and keys.

“Blow!” shouted Genevieve.

When Hunter only got two candles on his first attempt, she pulled him in closer by the elbow. “I thought we’d practised this earlier? Come on, blow again. There, good. All done.” She thumped the cake back onto the picnic table. “Plates, Hilary. Let’s do small slices for the Pop Rocks kids. We don’t want their systems compromised any further.”

She began slapping slices onto plates.

“It’s delicious, Gen,” said Pierre, sucking his soul patch up into his lips for a clean. “I don’t get enough good home cooking these days.”

“You should have been at book club the last couple of months. Boy, Martin can really lay on a spread.”

She hadn’t intended to talk about book club, and there was a noticeable group flinch at the mention of it. Hilary looked at her shoes and mumbled. Sasha said nothing for a moment, but suddenly seemed interested in the pattern on her water bottle. Then an idea struck her.

“Hey, Pierre, you should totally come to August book club! It’s next Saturday at 8 p.m. at Gen’s house.” She picked at a fingernail, while Genevieve looked horrified. “That won’t be a problem, right guys?”

Genevieve simply shook her head. No problem.

“Which book is it?” Pierre asked Genevieve.

“Well, we try to pick books about beauty, love and acceptance. I left it with Sasha to pick this month’s, so she—”

“*Fifty Shades of Grey*. Read it? Don’t lie. And don’t pretend there wasn’t something you liked about it.” Sasha looked at Pierre, her fork raised. Among sideways glances, nobody spoke.

“I knew it!” Sasha cried. “You’re naughty! What exactly did you *do* in the entertainment industry?”

Pierre blushed. Kit and Sasha inclined a little, sniffing intrigue.

“Where are the boys?” asked Hilary, suddenly realizing that nobody had paid any of the children the least attention since the cake had been handed out. They scanned the playground, accounting for all except Sully and Hunter.

“Well, they have to be somewhere,” said Kit.

“Yes, thank you. How astute.”

Genevieve marched to the edge of the field, squinting into the afternoon sun. As she turned back to the group, she caught sight of two pairs of sneakered feet sticking out from under the picnic table, along with reams of torn Spider-Man wrapping paper. Squatting down and craning her neck, Genevieve found the two boys had wrenched the new monster truck toy from its packaging and set up a dirt arena made from gravel and the tipped-out worms from the scavenger hunt.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she shouted. “This is a no-present party!”

Kit, Sasha and Martin hurried over and squatted down too. Pierre stood behind them, ducking slightly. Sully ignored Genevieve’s intrusion and continued to smash the truck into the obstacles they’d built.

“Sully,” said Kit. “Hunter’s mum is talking to you.”

“Huh?” he looked up. His deep, dark eyes looked genuinely surprised to see faces under the table.

“I was explaining, Sully, that Hunter has chosen not to have gifts at his party and instead we’re going to give money to poor people.”

“I really like my truck,” whispered Hunter. “It’s Monster Mutt Dalmatian. He’s the best one.”

“No way!” yelled Sully, “Maximum Destruction! Or Mohawk Warrior.” He paused and frowned. “They didn’t have those in Walmart. Look out, a slap wheelie into the mush! He pulls it off! Yeah!”

The truck veered into the pile of worm debris.

“It’s so violent! Can’t you see it’s just brutal? Come out from under there. Hunter!” Genevieve turned to Kit. “Thanks so much for coming today. I don’t know which I’ve enjoyed more, the synthetic, carcinogenic candies or the hate toys.”

“Sully, come out. Hunter’s mum doesn’t want him playing with that right now.” Kit didn’t look at Genevieve. “Come on. You can play with your own ones when you get home.”

She steered her son out from under the table and sent him over to join the other kids by the swings. Hunter ran out after him.

Martin reached under the table, grabbed Monster Mutt Dalmatian, and put him in the green fabric bag that had held the cake.

Genevieve started to clear up the plates and napkins, her face taut.

“Martin! It’s time to go home. We’ve all had enough fun now. Martin!”

She muttered to herself as Sasha, Kit and Pierre wandered over to Hilary, who sat with her back to them. They walked around to stand in front of the bench.

“Wow, Kit, your birthday present went down well.” Sasha laughed. “Big hit. You know how to kill a party. Holy shitballs, Hilary, what in Christ’s name are you doing?”

Sasha stared in horror at Hilary, who was in the process of stretching a breast toward Jeremy so he could drink from it. Jeremy sat beside her, leaning in. He sucked placidly while checking time zones on his G-Shock watch.

Hilary shook her head. “I’m weaning him by a minute a day. I figure we’ll be done by Christmas. It’ll be such a relief.”

“I might have to get this on my phone,” said Sasha to Kit as they stood in front of Hilary, looking down. “It’ll go viral on YouTube. Wow. Were you prepared for that? I was not. At all.”

Martin joined the gathering, so that now everyone grouped around Hilary as she breastfed on the bench. Genevieve had packed everything up and given it all to Martin to hold. He stood, laden with bags, gaping at Hilary’s nipples.

“Thank you all for coming,” Genevieve said, arriving to the side of Martin and jumping slightly when she noticed Hilary and son. “It’s been great, hasn’t it?” Kit, Martin and Sasha exchanged glances. “So for book club next week, let’s just keep it a light discussion of the book and then maybe we could chat about our intentions? For our life journeys? If Pierre’s going to be there, it’s such an opportunity to learn more about the spiritual path. I was going to ask if he might lead a short yoga practice.”

Pierre stretched, nodding.

“That sounds amazing,” said Martin. “But I was going to ask if Peter might lead a short discussion of the Vancouver entertainment industry. I’m very interested in that life journey.”

Pierre stopped smiling.

“Me too!” laughed Sasha. “I love a dark past. The dirtier, the better.”

“So we’ll see you all at my house around eight?” Genevieve’s face quivered with uncertainty. “I’ll have to tidy the place up! But my *casa es su* . . . *mi es sor* . . .”

“Can I bring anything?” asked Pierre.

“A date?” suggested Martin.

Hilary unplugged her nipple from her six-year-old and stood up, tucking her breast back into her colossus of a bra. They walked over to the swings to gather up their children and herd them back to the park entrance.

“Right. Home time,” said Genevieve. “Martin, wipe your chin.”

Martin rolled his eyes and rubbed his T-shirt sleeve on his face, then bent to pick up all the green fabric bags. Genevieve held onto the back of Hunter’s collar and had her other arm around Mercedes’s shoulder.

“Are you sure you don’t want a ride home, honey?”

Martin loaded everything into the Buick.

“No, we have our bikes.”

She said the sentence very loudly, projecting it toward Pierre’s back as he walked ahead of her. Everyone stopped at the curb to see that attached to the back of Genevieve’s bike was a homemade cart into which she deposited Hunter and Mercedes. They gripped the sides of the cart, wide-eyed, even before the bike began moving.

“When you push your bike up the hills, are the handlebars higher than your head?” asked Hilary. “Gosh, you are brave.”

“It’s normal behaviour,” sniffed Genevieve. “Everyone does it in Nelson. Bye. Martin, don’t leave anything behind.”

She steadied the bike against the roadside, ventured a leg over the crossbar, and veered off, wobbling as she gathered speed down the vertical, salt-ravaged asphalt.

*If her brakes fail*, Kit thought, *she’ll only stop when she hits the lake*.

As everyone walked to their vehicles, corralling their children; few of the adults spoke. Only Sasha seemed upbeat.

“Last book club was a total fucking nightmare,” she said, as Pierre strolled beside her, “but I have a feeling this one’s going to be dynamite.”

He hovered next to her, but she touched him lightly on the shoulder and headed to her car.

Kit was parked across from her. “Am I dropping Sul at your place now?” she shouted.

“Oh, shit. Yeah. No. Jared’s sleeping. Hey, I have to tell you about LA!”

“You can’t babysit?”

Sasha sighed. “No, I can. Put his booster in here with Harrison. I’ll drive them both to the mall. You’re welcome. Remember it’s only for an hour. Have I told you I’m going to LA?”

“Who with? Pierre?”

Sasha shook her head, smiling. “Get lost! As if.”

She opened the door for Sully who climbed into the back seat.

“I’ll tell you about LA later. Wait, listen, are you sure this babysitting is necessary? Where are you going?”

“Sasha!”

“Okay, no, that’s fine.” She slid into the front seat and pulled down the flap of the sun visor in front of her, fixing her bangs in the mirror. “Just an hour, right? Starting . . . *NOW*.”

Hilary

Hilary ran into Save-On Foods straight after the birthday party to load up on comfort food. She bought more Pop Chips—the baked snack that boasted half the fat of regular chips, allowing her to eat twice as many. Walking back through the mall with her purchases, she noticed that Mark’s Work Wearhouse had a jeans sale on and she paused to look in the window. As her eyes adjusted to the glare of the glass, she noticed in the reflection that Sasha sat behind her on a bench, scrolling through pages on her iPhone. Hilary turned and hurried over.

“Long time, no see!” she chirped, nudging herself next to Sasha. “What a lovely surprise. For such a small town, I hardly ever bump into anybody I know in the mall.”

“What’s in the bag?”

Sasha still stared at her cell phone but tapped Hilary’s bag with her long leg.

“Just . . . celery and carrots and whatnot.” They sat in silence on the couch. Hilary batted at a palm frond that kept tickling her ear.

“So I’ll see you next Saturday at book club,” said Sasha.

Hilary nodded, unsure whether that was her cue to leave. “Can I tell you a secret?” she asked, quietly.

Sasha’s face flicked up like a switch. “Absolutely.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about book club. There, I said it.”

Sasha smiled and finally clicked her phone off. She looked straight at Hilary.

“Go on.”

“I’m not complaining or being a b-i-t-ch or anything, but I don’t know. It’s a lot of pressure. And last month’s was pretty stressful. You were there—you remember.” Hilary patted Sasha’s knee.

“I was there but, honey, I don’t remember.”

“It’s just . . . something’s wrong with Kit. Do you talk to her much?”

“Why? Do you?”

Sasha kicked her foot out, crossing her legs the other way, and readjusted her shirt with a tug.

“Not as much as I . . . well, she’s not very good at returning calls.”

Sasha nodded.

“We went for coffee last week and she almost started a fist fight in the Green Goddess.”

“Really?” Sasha put the phone away.

“It was bird related . . . but, anyway, to cut a long story short, she seems unhappy. Like she feels the town’s out to get her. And she’s not trying very hard with kids’ activities, either. She won’t come with me to any playgroups!”

Sasha chuckled again. “Kit’s cool, but she’s hard to get close to. She lays the sarcasm on pretty thick.” She darted a look at Hilary. “Don’t tell her I said that.”

“No, no, of course.” Hilary flushed a little, pleased at the sense of alliance. “Maybe we can have a chat with her at book club. We could stage an intervention! Just like the TV show!”

“What TV show?”

“It’s a show on A&E—”

“Called what?”

“I think it’s called *Intervention*.”

“What, and they do interventions on it? They need to fire the person who named that show.”

Sasha pulled her phone out again.

Hilary sat with her hands on her thighs while Sasha checked Facebook.

After a minute she said, “My favourite show is *My Strange Obsession*. It’s on A&E, too. I love that channel. Last night, there was a woman who eats cat hair! She rolls up big balls of it off the couch and eats them like apples. Or she licks the hair right off the cat’s back like she’s its mother. And I thought *I* had problems.”

“People are nuts,” muttered Sasha.

“Yeah! And last week, they had a woman who can’t sleep unless she has a hair dryer blowing on her hand. It’s ruined her marriage. She gets burns and everything.”

Sasha didn’t respond. Hilary waited and then said, “So, you know . . . it takes all kinds and whatnot. It’s like that *Humans of Nelson* book that’s out. Have you seen it? Oh, it’s super-duper awesome. It’s a celebration of all the town’s characters. It takes all kinds!”

“They have a book about Nelson? Why?”

“It’s photographs of lively, fun people. I guess the photographer just stops people on the street and—”

“Are the people good looking? He never stopped me.”

“I think it’s based on the *Humans of New York* book.”

Sasha snorted. “Yes, because Nelson and New York are so alike. Jesus Christ. We live in a small town in a valley socked in by fog seven months of the year, people. Stop getting so excited.”

Hilary ran her tongue over her front teeth. Her mouth tasted sour.

“Why are you here? In the mall, I mean?”

Sasha’s head wheeled round suddenly. “Scheisse!” She stood up. “Oh, there they are. What time is it?”

*Why not look at your phone for a change?* thought Hilary. “Two-ish.”

“No, *exactly* what time is it?”

Hilary checked her watch. “Two thirty-three.”

“Is that all?” groaned Sasha. “Okay, I’m going.”

“See you at book club!” shouted Hilary as Sasha stalked away down the hard-tiled mall, her heels clicking with every step.

Two hours later, Hilary loaded the Subaru. She’d tried to grab a quick nana nap in bed after the mall, but as she lay there she realized it was impossible for her to sleep until she’d delivered her garage sale gifts from the last successful outing. She needed Michael to load the crib, but the rest she could handle on her own. Driving along in her T-shirt and Lululemon workout shorts, she sang out loud to “I’m a Little Teapot,” her hands gripping the steering wheel. Hopefully Kit would be out, and she could leave her items anonymously at the door. Hilary had stopped buying things for Genevieve because Genevieve never said thank you. At least Kit had manners, deep down. Really deep down.

Kit’s house looked empty from the outside. Hilary grabbed the maternity bra and the diapers, bundled them into a green fabric grocery bag and hurried up the sidewalk to the side gate. She opened it gingerly and tiptoed through it, down the steps to the back door. The presents would be left there—a drive-by gifting.

As she reached out to hang the bag on the door handle, she tripped on a small wooden hockey stick, punting it hard into the side of the house. Hilary froze mid-tiptoe as a dog started barking inside the house. She scrabbled the bag over the door handle and turned to bolt for the car.

“What are you doing?” asked a deep voice behind her.

Hilary’s white face spun around. A man who had to be Kit’s husband stood in the doorway in track pants and a shirt that showed alarming arms and a full-sleeve tattoo.

The man yawned and rubbed his shaved head.

“I’m so sorry,” Hilary said. “Jeepers. I just wanted to leave these for Kit. Were you having a nap?”

“Who are you?” he squinted.

“I’m Hilary. Kit’s friend from book club. I’m so sorry. I was trying to be quiet. I don’t know your name, I’m sorry . . . Gosh, your dog sounds enormous. Is he a St. Bernard?”

“Why are you wearing a hiking backpack?”

“I don’t know.”

Hilary looked at her feet, which had Crocs on them, the toes pointed inward.

Clyde stared at her for a few more seconds, then looked down at his door handle. “What’s with the bag?”

He picked it up and looked inside, pulling out the tired-looking bra like he was pulling hair from the bath plug.

“I thought Kit might like it. Is she here?”

Clyde frowned. “How well do you know Kit?”

He said it with a sideways smile, but Hilary looked down again.

“I think we’re a little bit friends . . .”

When Clyde spoke next, his tone was gentle. “Kit’s out with Pip. How come you’re bringing this stuff here? Weren’t you at a birthday party with her a couple of hours ago?”

“Yes, but I wanted it to be a surprise. I’m trying to sneak it in before book club next week.”

Hilary’s chin was on her chest.

“Book club is next week? I thought that was over.”

“I did too.”

Clyde scratched his stubbly jaw line.

“Okay, come with me.” He opened the back door wider, gesturing inward with his head. “We’re having a drink together. Don’t mind the dog, he’s a teddy bear.” Clyde winked as Hilary edged through the mud room toward the kitchen table and slid into a chair. Her backpack pushed her up against the table as she sat. “Take that off. I’m making coffee.”

“Can I have tea?”

“No. So Hilary, what’s your story?”

He stood behind the breakfast bar, stirring with a metal spoon.

“I haven’t got a . . . I don’t know my story. It’s not a very good one.”

“I doubt that. Quiet people have the best stories. Here—coffee.”

Clyde sat opposite Hilary, pushing a red cup toward her.

“Black, no sugar. Tell me that’s not the best way to drink it.”

Hilary simpered a little and blew on her coffee.

Clyde sipped and put his cup down with a clank. “So tell me, do you like this town?”

“Gosh. I think so.”

She felt like she was at an interview and had forgotten to prepare. This man was so direct! Was he ex-military? Maybe he’d been a sniper.

“You think so. What do you like about it?”

Hilary squirmed in her chair.

“Well, it’s home. I grew up here. What’s not to like?”

He sipped again, considering her question.

“Kit thinks it’s a gated community.”

“I don’t really know what that is . . .”

“You know, hard to get in and out of, plenty of rules on how to live. I haven’t been here that long and I didn’t grow up in a town anything like this. In my town people roll out of the bars fighting; it’s one giant cowboy saloon.”

“Do the bars have swing doors?”

She didn’t know what else to ask. Why was this man telling her his life story?

“I’m not really a rules kind of guy. Perhaps soon they’ll chase me out of town.”

“Gosh, perhaps. Wouldn’t that be something? You’d be on the front page of the *Weekly Radiance!*”

He grinned and then broke eye contact, thankfully, while he took another slurp of his coffee.

“I did get told off recently by some woman at Home Hardware; she was one of the Bossy Enlightened. You know the type?”

“I’m not very enlightened.”

She tried to sip her coffee but it was scalding and sour and the dog had put his hot head in her lap, making it hard to lean forward.

“Or bossy, I’m guessing. The one I met might have been the Queen of the Bossy Enlightened. The Grand Poobah. Ah, she was pretty funny. But then I think Nelson’s pretty funny most of the time. You been hit by the Parking Meter Fairy yet?”

Hilary shook her head, her eyes wide.

“You’ll know if you get hit. You’ll have to think about unicorns and love hearts all day. It’ll be unavoidably great.”

“It doesn’t sound so ba—”

“I got to tell you something, Hilary. You seem like a nice girl. But this whole gift thing, you really need to stop it. Nobody wants this stuff.”

He watched her carefully as she began to stroke the dog’s eyebrows.

“I’m not trying to hurt your feelings. I just think you should save yourself the trouble—or give yourself the gifts. Why not?”

Clyde drained the rest of his coffee and put the cup behind him on the countertop. He turned back to face Hilary.

“So what else you got? How was growing up here?”

“Fine. I guess. Nothing unusual . . . I haven’t got . . . I don’t know anything you don’t,” she muttered, standing suddenly and forcing the dog’s head off her thighs.

“I should go home, I have . . . chores. Thank you very much for the coffee.”

She hadn’t taken a sip.

“Don’t leave because I . . .”

But Hilary didn’t stay to hear the end of his sentence. She left him at the table and hurried to the back door, waving behind her as she went.

The air outside hung low and clammy. Out of the house she ran onto the empty deck, fumbling sunglasses onto her face, rushing for the gate. Only when she was back in the safety of her vehicle did she allow herself to cry. The gulping sobs raked her, surprising her with their ferocity. She pushed the sliding sunglasses back up her nose and groped around as she tried to put the key in the ignition. Clyde stood with both hands cupped around his face at the kitchen window, yelling something to her.

*Good grief, get it together. Come on, ninny, get it in gear,* she thought, terrified that he might come out after her. She flung the Subaru into a tight U-turn and sped away down the hill toward her home.

Sasha

When Sasha caught up to Sully and Harrison at the far end of the mall, she grabbed Harrison by the Darth Vader T-shirt and ground the boys to a stop.

“Come on, you guys,” she said to the sweaty twosome, “I have to get some things at Walmart. Stay close, no monkeying around.”

As she spoke, she glanced back at Save-On Foods, but saw that Hilary had left the palm-fronded sofa and moved on. What a relief. The last thing Sasha needed when babysitting was spectators.

She strode forward purposefully, the two boys jogging behind her. The Walmart aisles were lined with shoppers who looked like they’d been dead for ten years and nobody had told them. Sasha smoothed her long, straight hair down, feeling safe within herown gene pool. She led the boys to the bathroom essentials section: she wanted to find a new set of scales, ones that felt reliable to stand on first thing in the morning, post-pee, pre-breakfast.

“Mama, look,” rasped Harrison, veering off into the DVD area and holding up a *Power Rangers* movie between his fingers.

“Harrison, this is a Mommy trip, not a you trip.”

Sasha followed him, squinting at the back cover in between the cluster of squatting shoppers wearing track pants, rummaging around on the floor with DVD box sets. *Wow*, she thought, her eyes wide, *a Walmart DVD aisle. Could it be any worse?* Here were the undead, hopelessly out of touch, still buying their DVDs in stores instead of streaming them.

“Give me that,” she shuddered, grabbing Harrison’s movie and putting it back on the pile. “Now come on. Follow me. Let’s get out of this place as quick as we can.”

She wheeled the boys out of the movie area, physically shovelling them along past the huge plasma TV screens on the wall, the ones that usually played *Monsters, Inc.* on a continual loop. Today they were broadcasting a zoo show, with a man cleaning an elephant’s backside with a broom and a hose. That guy must not have paid enough attention in school. And who’d sanctioned that channel choice? If she was Genevieve, she’d be making a beeline for Customer Service.

Sasha made it to the bathroom section and crouched down in front of the scales. There were the ten-dollar non-digital ones, but come on. You could go a whole week on those things and nothing changed, which is probably why they lingered on the shelves in dusty packaging. She scanned the digital versions, searching for one that weighed in .2-pound increments. The .5 models didn’t give her the support she needed. After a few minutes of comparing scales, she glanced behind her again to check on the boys. They had vanished.

“Harrison, come back round here,” she called out, looking each way down the empty aisle.

They had probably wandered back to the DVD section, or snuck off to watch the elephant’s enema on the giant plasmas. She gave it a few more seconds, stood up and walked around the metal corner of the shelves, leaving a little plinth of scales behind her on the floor.

“What did I say about staying near?” she said, but the two boys were gone.

Sasha stood still.

Her head moved from side to side, tilted. She pivoted around, then back again, then stumbled toward the TVs, where they ought to have been, underneath those mammoth screens. They should have been there in their bunched-up sweatshirts, their tousled heads craned upward. Why weren’t they there? The twenty-five elephants on the TV remained, trumpeting dread, a herd of rising panic. Fear flooded like lead into her legs, her heart pushing thickness around her body.

“Harrison!” she shouted and her voice sounded shrill to her, a bird voice, someone else’s distress.

Her legs jolted and moved her forward, but her joints jarred weirdly against each other, as if bending the wrong way. She felt suddenly angular and dry, even as her mind raced and she wheeled into new aisles, each one more awful than the last in its emptiness. A wider search—where to begin? She had only taken her eyes off them for a second, a second! This couldn’t be real, it wasn’t real.

“HARRISON! BOYS! WHERE ARE YOU?”

She ran now, her hand on her throat—back to the entrance, swearing under her breath, her eyes darting back and forth. Shoppers dove out of her way. *Please, God, please, don’t let them be gone, I’ll be a better mom, I’ll be better, please, oh please*. Back again to the TVs, then the sporting goods, the tents, the steering wheel covers for cars. She was completely, urgently, a mother as she watched herself from somewhere else. Sobbing, she grabbed at strangers, *Have you seen my son, have you seen two boys, this high, they were just here, they’re blond, one of them’s blond, they were just here, I didn’t take my eyes off them, Jesus Christ, have you seen my son?*

“Ma’am, are you alright?”

The woman stepped in front of Sasha, cutting into her panic. Sad eyes and a yellow happy face button. Blue tunic. Name badge. Marlene.

“Do you need help?” the woman said.

“My son, I can’t find my son. My son, and my friend’s son. Oh my God! Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God. They’re together. They were together, and I . . . it’s been ten minutes already, and he’s everything to me, and I don’t know where they are.”

“Ten minutes? Okay. Ma’am? Look at me. Let’s find them together. Describe them please.” As she spoke, she raised a walkie-talkie to her dry lips. “Code Adam. We have a possible Code Adam.”

Sasha staggered against the car battery display and slid herself to the floor, putting both palms on the cold tiles.

She leaned on the Customer Service desk with her face in the crook of her elbows, her hands laced at the back of her head. Marlene spoke on the phone, calling the RCMP, all the while rubbing the back of Sasha’s shirt.

“Two boys. Six. Both of them six?” Marlene put her hand flat on Sasha’s. It felt scaly.

Sasha shook her head and raised her face. “My son is only five.”

Any second now she might throw up.

“One six, one five. Red T-shirt on the older boy, *Star Wars* shirt on the younger. Twenty minutes. We’ve done that, yes. All exits are blocked. Understood.” She hung up the Walmart phone. “They’re sending squad cars.”

Sasha’s stomach rolled. Should she call someone? Who?

As she considered it, her cell phone rang in the pocket of her jeans. She pulled the phone out and stared at the caller display, the vomit rising in her throat. *Fucking fuck FUCK.* Shakily she raised the phone to her ear.

“Hi, it’s Kit. Listen, I’m finished early so I can head over to you now and grab Sul. How’s it been? Have you survived?”

“Fine.” Sasha’s voice was a toad’s croak.

“Okay, well I can come to yours, or . . .”

“I’m not home. I’m not. Home. I’m at the mall so I’ll just . . . I can drop him off.”

“Brilliant. I’ll be home in about ten minutes. Thanks a lot, Sasha.”

“Okay.”

She slid the phone back into her pocket and wiped her forehead with a sweating palm. She should have told Kit the truth, but how would that conversation have gone? *Yeah, it’s been good, Kit. Everything’s going awesome, yep. I’ve totally lost your son and mine. No real problem. If he shows up at home, could you call me? Bye then, see you soon*.

Sasha thumped the countertop with a clenched fist. Kit was going to go apeshit.

She’d just begun to cry when she felt a strong hand on her shoulder. Sasha turned to see a man in a plaid shirt, broad chested, dimple in the cleft of his chin.

“Lost something?” he asked.

Her eyes flitted downward, and she saw that he stood with an arm around both Harrison and Sully.

The shriek that came out of her was unrecognizable, a pterodactyl screech, relief melting her joints. She collapsed to her knees, pulled Harrison to her, hugged him as she sobbed. The little boy’s body stood straight and rigid, his arms by his sides. He kept looking up at the man.

“I found them by the bathroom items,” the man said, helping Sasha back onto her feet. “They were both sitting on the floor.”

“He’s a policeman, Mom,” Harrison whispered, admiration shining from his face.

“Off duty, ma’am. I’m just here to buy a TV.” He smiled, a hero’s self-deprecation, resting his hand on the badge attached to the belt of his jeans.

“Where the hell did you boys go?” Sasha wailed, wiping her nose and catching her nostril with a nail. “Jesus Christ, did you decide to totally forget the rules?”

“It sounded like one of them needed the bathroom in a hurry. Then when they got back, you were gone.”

Why was the man speaking on their behalf? She hadn’t asked him. And was he accusing her of something? Suddenly the dimpled chin looked less friendly.

“Well, of course I was gone!” she shouted. “I was looking for them!”

The policeman raised both palms at her, as if she were holding a gun. “Hey, lady, I’m just telling it like it is. Feel free to say thanks any time.”

Marlene arrived at Sasha’s side.

“Is this them?” she yelled. “Oh hallelujah, praise Jesus! I’ll call off the police and cancel the emergency code. Sir, we can’t thank you enough. You’re an angel sent straight from heaven! Listen, dear”—she took Sasha’s face in her cold hands—“go home. Have a nice, hot coffee. You’ve had a tough half hour.”

“Next time, ma’am,” the police officer said to Sasha, “you might want to set up an emergency meeting place ahead of time. Just to save yourself the heart attack.”

“I know that,” mumbled Sasha. “Boys, what do you say to the nice man?”

“Thank you, sir,” said Sully. Harrison copied him.

Sasha gave the man a tight smile of thanks and herded the boys out the exit of the store.

Kit must never, ever find out.

Sasha bundled both boys into the car and buckled them into their seats, her heart still palpitating. Harrison and Sully stared at the side of her cheek as she reached across them in turn. When she tested each strap by pulling it tight across Sully’s chest, air huffed out of him. She walked back around to the driver’s seat, pausing before she opened her own door. Her mouth tasted of bile and she had to keep swallowing.

She leaned her arms on the car roof, her keys shaking in her hand. *Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God*, *that was a fucking shitballs close one*.

Sasha took several deep breaths, whipped her door open, and eased noiselessly into the leather seat. She turned and looked at both boys in their booster seats. Their socks were ruffled above sneakers, and Harrison’s T-shirt was on backward. How had she not noticed that before?

“So, okay, that was scary. Mommy was very scared to lose you, Harrison. And you, Sully. Very scared, because Mommy loves you very much. Are you listening to me? Don’t do that again!”

“Harrison had to go pee,” Sully mumbled.

“I know that. But what have we learned here today? Harrison? Are you listening?”

“Don’t wander off. Tell you if we need to go to the bathroom.”

“I was asking Harrison. Harrison! What have we learned?”

“Stay. Near. Stay. Near.”

Harrison pressed the door lock up and down, up and down, and didn’t look at his mother as he spoke.

“Right. Let’s just go home, okay? Harrison, leave the lock alone. Harrison! STOP PLAYING WITH THE GODDAMN LOCK!” Sasha smoothed her hair and exhaled. “Right. I just need to take a minute. You sit tight, please. Don’t unstrap.”

She got out of the car and leaned on the roof again, breathing warm summer air deep into her lungs. Had she ever been more shit-scared than in those Walmart aisles? She couldn’t get her hands to stop shaking. Holy shit, this kid had wandered into her life and now held every piece of it. And that was okay; it was okay to surrender to it. After a few seconds of deep breathing, Sasha walked around to Sully’s side door and opened it. She put one hand on his shoulder, pressing him back against the seat. Her face was an inch from Sully’s as she spoke to her son on the other side of the car.

“Harrison, Mommy’s sorry she got mad just then. I’m just super stressed out and I love you and that was really seriously scary. For me. Was it scary for you guys? I’m not sure.” She smiled, aware that it might look ghoulish. “But Sully, look it, I think it’s a good idea to keep this little adventure between us. What do you think?”

Her lipstick was pasty and dry: she could hear it clacking as she spoke and knew the boy was staring at it.

“What?” he said.

“What, what? Let’s not tell about this!”

“This what?”

Was the child a moron? “This running off and not saying anything, and making me think I’d lost you, and making me look bad, and involving the police, for crying out loud!”

“Oh.”

“So, don’t tell your mom, okay. Are we clear? If you tell her, she’ll probably have you sit in the naughty place. Or whatever you call that thing. She’ll be super, super mad at you.”

Sully was frowning. Was her voice shrill? It felt a little shrill. She ruffled the boy’s sandy hair and withdrew her face from his, slowly, with poise.

With Sully delivered safely to Kit, Sasha drove back to her house, her mouth still dry. Behind her, Harrison made rolly-throat airplane noises with a pop bottle top he had found in his booster. Sasha flipped the mirror of her visor down and looked at her face. Pretty good, all things considered. She caught a glimpse of Harrison in the mirror and her stomach twisted again at the thought of how the afternoon could have turned out. Imagine the press conference! She’d have come across as a total dipshit.

“Harrison? Honey?” She reached back through the gap in the seats and fumbled for his kneecap. “When we get back shall we hang out together? We could, like, do some colouring or make crowns.”

He didn’t nod or blink, just sat staring out the window with his pale eyes.

Once at home in the kitchen, she opened every cupboard looking for alcohol. Holy Christ, did she ever need a drink. She found a half empty bottle of vermouth and unscrewed the cap, sniffing into the bottle. She balked and rethought her plan.

“Want to do some crafts, honey? You want me to watch a cartoon with you? Do you need cuddles?”

Her need to hug him felt urgent. By way of response, he decided to crawl under the couch to hunt for cars. His backside stuck out, high in the air like a puppy ready to play.

“Harrison! Come and give me a hug. What is it that you need? Are you hungry? Harrison? Do you need a snack?”

A whirring engine noise began under the couch, the signature sound that only little boys could make, like an extra syllable they pick up when they learn to speak.

She sat at the kitchen counter and flipped open her laptop. Harrison stayed under the couch.

Twenty minutes went by as Sasha scrolled from *Star Wars* website to *Star Wars* website. She ought to take notes, really—this shit was nuts. When she’d figured out what she needed and got it all straightened out in her mind, she slipped off the stool and went and sat on the couch.

“Harrison?” she said quietly. He stopped scuffling under there but didn’t emerge. “Is it true that real Jedis never die? They, like, live forever?”

His head and shoulders slid out from under the sofa, like a mechanic from under a car.

“Yoda lived till he was four hundred and he’s still in all the movies, right?”

“You can’t kill a Jedi.”

His face was so tiny and serious.

“And is it true that Darth Vazer was actually a good guy?”

“Darth Vader.”

“Whatever.”

“He’s Luke Sky—”

“—walker’s dad! I know! I knew that one!”

Sasha put her hand low for a fist-bump, which she got. Warmth flooded the inside of her, and she felt her eyes sting. Harrison slithered out of his hiding place and clambered onto the couch, ramming his body up close to hers.

“Jabba the Hutt has a pit below his chair with a giant monster in it that eats people.” He lisped every *s*.

“For real? Don’t walk near his chair then.”

“No way, I won’t. Vader saves Luke in the end, ’cause he’s his dad.”

“I bet if Vader was his mom she’d do that too.”

“He’s his dad.”

“I know, buddy.” Sasha pulled Harrison in tighter. “I saw him take his hat off.”

“Darth Vader?” He looked up at her, all freckles and milkiness. “He dies when he takes off his helmet.”

“What? Seriously? I wondered why it was such a big deal. But he doesn’t die really, right?”

“No, ’cause . . .”

“He’s a Jedi!” They both shouted together.

“You want to watch it with me?” Sasha asked. He nodded vigorously. She jumped up and turned on the DVD player.

Jared shuffled round the corner, sniffing a T-shirt before pulling it on. He scratched at his stubble. Sasha waved from the couch, where she still sat with Harrison.

“And why is C-3PO in pieces, again?”

“Stormtroopers blew him apart.”

Harrison rested his hand on Sasha’s arm.

“And stormtroopers are which guys? The red ones?”

“The white ones. The red ones are . . . what are the red ones, Dad?”

“The Imperial Guard.” Jared yawned, clanging the coffee pot out of a drawer. “Sasha?”

She turned and looked at him blankly.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m catching up.”

He smiled at her, shaking his head.

A couple of scenes later, she leaned down and kissed Harrison’s forehead.

“Buddy—I need to speak with Dad for a second here. You okay to switch to headphones?”

“But you’ll miss Luke falling off the bridge!”

“I swear to God I’ll watch it with you tomorrow. We watched one and a half already! I need a time-out.”

He sniggered and put on his headphones, waiting dutifully for her to plug in the other end. She tiptoed around him to the kitchen.

“Hi,” said Jared.

She bumped him over on the stool and let her head rest in the warm crook of his neck. Strands of his hair pressed against her face; they smelled smoky like a bar. His lack of shampoo was the only remaining vestige of an indie-band past and she breathed it in hungrily. He reached around and stroked the top of her head with his fingertips, making tears well up in her eyes. He’d slept through her entire afternoon; he had no idea.

“Jared,” her voice wavered, “do you think I’m a good mom?”

“Totally,” he said, though he seemed more interested in kissing her neck.

She squirmed as his beard rasped against her, then pressed his forehead back with her hand. He looked surprised with his eyelids pulled back, his nose slightly piggish.

“What do you think is good about me?”

“Everything,” he grinned, his vagueness unsatisfying.

“What though? Specifically.”

He leaned on one elbow, smiled a little. “You’re smoking hot. Your legs are amazing. They go on for, like, ever. Your cheekbones look like a movie star’s. You have great hair.”

“No, I know, but what about me as a mom?”

“Oh.” He took a sip of coffee and coughed, then tucked his hair behind his ear. “I think you’re caring and patient and . . . nice.”

The cadence of his sentence rose at the end, as if it were a question. A tear rolled down her cheek but she brushed it away.

Jared lit a cigarette he found in a packet by the toaster and took a deep drag. Those long eyelashes of his were backlit by the late afternoon drench of light. He really was a beautiful man, despite the recent swerve toward Nelson style. She’d cast Jake Gyllenhaal to play him in a movie; his character would join the Marines, complete basic training, get ripped, shave his head.

“I’m not caring or patient,” she said and covered her mouth with her hand, which had begun shaking again. “I’m gross, Jared. I’m, like, Jabba-the-Hutt gross.”

He looked unsure of whether to laugh or be frightened; his cigarette smoke caught in his throat.

“Baby? You’re being crazy. Are you seriously . . . crying?”

He reached over and pulled off a sheet of paper towel, floating it over to her. Every few seconds, he threw a panicked look at the back of Harrison’s head on the couch.

“I’m a shitty mom. No, I really am. I should try harder.”

Jared stood and picked up the cigarette packet, pulled out a fresh one. Holding it between his lips, the cigarette bounced as he spoke.

“Relax! We could all try harder.”

Sasha took a sharp breath. “No, you don’t get it. I nearly lost him today, Jared. I nearly fucking—sorry, I really should swear less—lost Harrison and Sully in Walmart. Both of them—gone—for twenty minutes. *Twenty minutes.* They called the police and everything. I wasn’t going to tell you but I figure you should know what you’re up against.”

“Where’d he go? Nobody hurt him?”

“No, he went to the bathroom, just fucking wandered off. I swear it was only partly my fault. Mostly my fault. Oh, God, I’m going to try harder.”

“Come over here.”

She leaned cautiously into him, and he put his arm around her neck.

“Aren’t you always telling me you can’t watch kids 24-7?” He blew smoke out behind him, but most of it gusted back into her face. “I know you love him. You’re doing your best. Besides, you and I are like toddlers ourselves; Christ knows why they gave us a kid to look after.”

She shook her head and let her body relax against his.

“But honestly, I didn’t really give into being a mom until today. If that makes sense.”

“You’re fine.”

“I’m really not, Jared. Most of the time I’m with our son, I’d rather be shopping for jeans. That’s the goddamn honest truth. Anywhere but here.” She took a drag of his cigarette and flapped the smoke away once she’d exhaled.

“At least you . . . admit it.”

“I’m a disgrace. I let him watch TV for four hours a day.”

“So?”

“He never eats vegetables.”

“Me neither.”

“When we go to the park I put vodka in my water bottle and drink steadily.”

Jared shook his head and blew more smoke out of his crooked smile.

“Other moms give me a facial tic. I hate Hot Wheels. I hide the playdough. I get sent chain letters about stickers for him and I throw them in the garbage without even opening them. I count the hours until he can go to bed. It’s not that I don’t love him; it’s that I can’t do it all the time.”

“Nobody can.”

“Seriously, if I told you I ate our son for dinner you’d say it was okay.”

“Are you planning on doing that?”

“No.”

“Because it’s crazy or because he’d be too high in calories?”

She smiled. “The first reason.”

“See, baby? You’re doing fine.”

“I guess I’ve just never felt Harrison needed me like he needs you. I’m super lonely.”

“Everyone is.” He wiped her wet cheek with his thumb. “It’s called being an adult. We all used to have different lives, Sash. Remember when we had twenty friends around the whole time, doing cool shit at the drop of a hat? We were immortal. Now we’re all in grown-up bubbles, freaking out. Listen, Walmart visits are always rock bottom. We’ll figure this shit out together. Okay?”

She rested her head on his shoulder and for the first time in a while, didn’t want to be anywhere else.

Hilary

By 7 p.m. Hilary’s house had been freshly vacuumed; she’d made a hearty casserole for Michael, which she carried to him on a tray while he watched Sportsnet in the living room; the surly plants had been watered and she’d remembered to take out tomorrow’s cutlets from the freezer; Jeremy was fed and bathed; she’d warmed a towel for him in the dryer as he splashed and hugged him with it when he climbed out of the tub; she’d combed and parted his hair, encouraged him into Spider-Man pyjamas, read him four stories, kissed him on his large forehead, and sang to him as she tiptoed backward out of his room, turning out the light.

“There’s ice cream in the freezer,” Hilary said, her eyes tired and puffy as she straightened the framed *Our* *Children Are the Future* embroidery that hung on the wall behind her husband’s armchair. She bent to kiss him near his ear.

“Sounds great,” he murmured, leaning around her to watch the TV.

“I’m going to go check Facebook now.”

She stood, her arms hanging by her sides. Was he going to notice she’d taken her contact lenses out? Her glasses were a sure sign of distress, not that he’d notice. He also hadn’t registered her new Mark’s Work Wearhouse bootcut jeans that were snug on her backside, a pleat ironed down the front of each leg.

“Okay . . . sounds fun.” He fanned a hand out toward her hip, patted her vaguely. “You sure you don’t want to stay here and watch the game?”

His eyes never left the screen. “Okay, your loss.”

Sitting at the desk in the spare room, Hilary stared at the sky through the window. It was that golden hour when everything is bathed in ochre, rich and lavish, gilded by heat. The light shone on her dry knuckles against the computer keyboard and the rings on her wedding finger. She slumped, staring at the lushness of the evening. Her pants felt tight.

Hilary had rag-dolled her way off Kit’s deck earlier, limp with the shame she’d been handed in return for her thoughtfulness. It was hard to recover from. First, Kit’s husband had looked at her like she was nuts—a crazy bag lady—and then, after the interrogation and the too-hot drink, he’d insulted her. Why didn’t people just keep quiet if they had nothing nice to say? Nobody likes your stuff, he’d said—why didn’t he just say nobody liked *her*? If you’re going to be a straight shooter, at least pull the trigger all the way.

She went on Facebook; surely someone had commented on the new photos she’d posted, the ones of the special offers currently on the shelves in the Co-op? *Natural peanut butter on sale, guys!* It was a banner day. And her new status update: *Prince Hans in* Frozen *is named after Hans Christian Andersen! Who knew?* would surely have gotten a few hits. But there was nothing. Zero likes, zero red alerts on her notification symbol, zero friend requests.

She lay her forehead flat against the keyboard, hearing letters press down and not caring. Why not type gobbledygook in as a status update? It’s not like anyone paid any attention. She squeezed her eyes shut.

Her own family took her for granted, didn’t wait for her on Fun Family Activities, and didn’t think to abort a hike if she happened to do a triple somersault off the side of the mountain. What was the goddamn point? She had nowhere to turn. She might have been born in Nelson, but the more she thought about what Kit’s husband had said, the more she agreed with him. How sad it was to grow up in a town and still feel like you don’t belong! Who were her friends? Who, of everyone she knew, really cared about her?

The tears were starting again, however much Hilary tried to stem them by clamping her eyes shut. *I hate book club and I’m not going!*

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She couldn’t keep up with fast talkers like Sasha. Or Kit and Genevieve, for that matter. Kit was sarcastic and ungrateful and spent all her time pointing out the things that irritated her, rather than anything good. That kind of negativity could really sink your battleship. Sasha thought she was super cool and spent all her time flirting with that yoga guy, while Hilary sat there fat and invisible, and Genevieve had her beady eye on every single finger food Hilary tried to eat at book club—Hilary couldn’t sneak a single morsel past her. Despite having so much to offer these women, she still couldn’t seem to make any headway.

She shut down Facebook and went to Google instead. *Can you suck snot from child’s nose?* she typed. How else was she going to find out? The screen loaded with helpful tips. There was even an appliance you could order online called a NoseFrida—some kind of tubing device that meant the sucked snot didn’t actually enter your own mouth, but pooled in a rubber valve. Jackpot. See, this was time well spent. She considered updating her Facebook status again to pass on the new knowledge, but stopped herself by beating her fists on the table. *Hilary, keep the gifts for yourself, missy. It’s time to be friends with* you*.*

Next, she went to YouTube and searched *Captain von Trapp*. There he was in his handsome-man nautical jacket with his whistle! There’s no way he’d have let a family member plummet off the path during their hike to freedom in neutral Switzerland!

She watched the scene where Captain von Trapp kisses Maria in the gazebo in between lines of singing. Leaning back, Hilary smiled and wiped her watery eyes. *Here we go, this is where it’s at. It’s all turning out well for Maria, and she was in a real pickle earlier*. Hilary knew all the words to the song. Mumbling them at first, she lifted her head up and started to sing out loud, garnering strength.

“For here you are, standing there, loving me,

“Whether or not you should!

“So somewhere in my youth or childhood,

“I must have done something good!”

She stood up to get more volume. This was more like it. Why was she getting herself so worked up? *Next week’s book club will be different. There’ll be all the support I need. My girls will be super pumped to see me.*

She clicked on the arrow to replay the video and inhaled deeply, ready for more loud singing. After this she’d click on the von Trapp marriage scene in the cathedral with the triumphant organ music, and from there it was an easy jump into the cuckoo scene at the Salzburg concert.

Hilary looked out as the sun set over Nelson and smiled at her own reflection in the window pane. Her chin still felt trembly. *It’ll be fine, missy. They’re your girls!* *They’re your gang!* Maria von Trapp’s face was dappled in moonlight. Magic happens. She put her hand to her chest and waited for the song to start.

Genevieve

Genevieve sat with her back against an old crate in the basement, a bottle of vodka clenched in one hand. It was late—maybe ten-ish—and the kids were asleep, worn out from the birthday party. Martin was in bed, as usual, watching *My Fair Lady*, or *Oliver!*, or some other show where everyone sang their feelings and did heel-toe, heel-toe dancing in pantaloons.

The birthday party had gone okay until goddamn fricking Sasha with her long legs had asked Pierre over to book club next week. What the hell was she thinking? *Hey, here’s an idea, let’s take someone else’s house and fill it up with anybody we want and don’t even ask first.* Jesus.

Now Pierre would have access to all kinds of information about her. She would have to do a sweep of the house—make sure Martin or the kids hadn’t left an inappropriate item out on display. She’d come this far in her spiritual journey; she wouldn’t want Pierre to fail her over a bottle of canola oil or a stray hockey card.

She took a swig of vodka, hearing it splash up the glass sides of the bottle. The tenth sip tasted less harrowing than the first. That was the trick with drinking she’d forgotten—you just had to push through the early grimacing. The bottle was empty to the top curve of the neck now, so she’d done well. *Well done, Genevieve. Way to commit. Well done me.*

Of course she was hiding out.

When they’d first met ten years ago, Martin and Genevieve had spent all their time in the bars, high-kicking to Aerosmith songs on the jukebox. She was definitely fun then. In the box to her left, there might even be a photo in one of the old albums of the two of them laughing like braying donkeys, slanting on late-night bar stools with carved-out watermelons on their heads. They had pumped the melons full of vodka, eaten them and worn the rinds as hats the whole night. Beside them was a plate of chicken wing bones. There must have been at least fifty of them piled there, which meant twenty-five chickens had died for their snack. It was a massacre; it was genocide; they were the Pol Pots of the pub scene. Genevieve snorted.

She took heavy steps over to the photograph album box and pulled the lid off in one fierce rip. Digging elbow-deep, she heaved the biggest of the albums out and slumped with it on her lap. Three pages in was a photo of Martin and her in the Australian Outback. That must have been taken a decade ago, back when they were twenty-five. Martin had pulled his socks up to his knees to match the bush guide and Genevieve’s head was thrown back in laughter. She stared at it, her eyes adjusting to the plastic sheeting over the picture so that she suddenly she saw her own reflection. There wasn’t a single contour in her face now: it was all bones and flatness.

“Goddamn it all anyways,” she said, pushing the album off her and watching it leaf itself closed. “I’m better than I was then.” She stood up and rummaged deeper into the box. “I’m better than Kit, too,” she mumbled, her hands clawing past books and old letters to the bottom layer of derelict CDs and DVDs. “Kit,” she announced, pausing with her finger raised, “thinks England is goddamn awesomely awesome. Well, I’m here to tell you it’s not. I’ve been there, thanks for never asking. I’ve been to the airport and the carpet was filthy.” Genevieve spotted a yogurt stain on the bamboo fabric of her shirt and began to pick at it, muttering, “That’s what I think of *your* country, Your Majesty. Ooh, look.” Her eyes darted to the side as she grabbed an old CD in its case and weaved it back up through the mess of junk in the box.

Clasping it in front of her like a lit torch, Genevieve lilted over to the CD player and fumbled the disc into place. She peered at the disc case then stabbed forward to the eighth track. Kicking her yoga mat out of the way, she waited in a hunch for the music to start and when it did, she threw her body out into a star shape and began to jog on the spot.

“Shot through the heart and YOU’RE TO BLAME! Darling, you give love a BAD NAME!” she yelled, the song’s lyrics flooding back to her. “An angel’s smile is what you sell, you promise me heaven and you put me through HELL!” She jumped in circles, her hair flying wildly around. Jon Bon Jovi knew where it was at. She stopped only to fudge a few lines she couldn’t remember and had just picked up the strand again with, “I play my part . . . and you play your game,” and was kung fu kicking the washing machine when she noticed Martin standing at the bottom of the basement stairs.

He held one arm across his waist, the other palm flat on his cheek.

“Oh,” she said, stopping still and pushing hair from her eyes. “Too loud? What the hell time is it?”

“It’s late. This looks like fun.”

She squinted at him across the shadowy room. Was he being sarcastic? He and Kit were peas in a pod lately. She threw her arms up then let them drop to her sides. “Who says I’m not fun?”

He sat on the lowest step.

“Jesus, Martin. Now I missed the song.” She stumbled over the CD player and turned the volume dial down.

“You haven’t drunk in a while,” he said quietly.

“Well, pardon me for cleaning up my act.” She hiccupped. “I thought you were busy with . . . what’s her name?”

“*Roman Holiday*?”

“Is that a woman? Sounds mannish.”

“Audrey Hepburn? She’s not my type! How come you never watch shows with me anymore?”

“’Cause television can mess with your water molecules. We’re seventy percent water, Martin, and our molecules change shape if we watch violence and fear.” She nodded, then added, “Who is your type?”

“Have you seen *Roman Holiday*?”

“I’ve been having nightmares lately. Violent fear ones. I’m in Spain in that bull race thing through the streets . . .”

“Pamplona?” He edged closer to her, ducking into a cross-legged position ten feet from where she lay.

“Like *you* know. They release the wild bulls to chase people. It’s terrifying. Oh, no!” She sat up. “Room spin!”

“Were you a bull or a person?”

She frowned with one eye closed, swaying. “What kind of question is that? Jesus.” She shuffled her legs around and sat with her back to him. “I can’t believe you just said that. Why would you ask that? You know what? That’s it. I can’t do this anymore.”

“Drink liquor? Or . . . ?” His voice was gravelly. “Honey, I know it hasn’t been eas—”

Upstairs, one of the kids called out and they heard the stamp of feet jumping out of a bunk bed.

“Shit a brick,” Genevieve said, still facing the wall. “I can’t deal.”

“I’ll go.” Martin stood up. “Shall I bring you back some water?”

“I’ll manage.”

Once he’d gone, she lay back down on the floor, took as deep a breath as she could muster and began to kick and punch at life’s injustices. Martin didn’t want her, Pierre didn’t notice her. And then this nightmare she couldn’t shake of running, running, never sure if she was chasing or being chased. Her body seizured in frustration, a slow high note escaping her like the sound of a small balloon deflating. She only stopped flailing when her breath ran out, not her fury.

Kit

Kit and Clyde drove over the big orange bridge and along the North Shore in Clyde’s truck, his heavy metal music cranking from tinny speakers. Clyde’s parents had shown up for a few days’ visit so Kit had suggested they sneak away for a child-free hour or two. The windows were open and warm air swirled and billowed Kit’s T-shirt, though the sky above them looked volatile.

“Are you serious about swimming?” asked Clyde suddenly, craning his neck forward in the driver’s seat to check out the first few drops of rain. “That water’s freezing. You must be nuts.”

“Just for a bit. It’ll do me good.” She chewed at the nail on her thumb.

“Well, let’s eat first. I’m starving.”

To the right of her, Kootenay Lake lay smooth like mercury, glinting and metallic. Kit felt more connected to the water than anything else in Canada; whenever she swam she felt better about living so far from home. Most days in summer, she’d jump off the dock at Lakeside Park and power away in a straight line from the beach—just enjoying water on skin.

They’d gone first to get supplies for their picnic from Cottonwood Market, forgetting that it was also the Saturday prior to Shambhala, a dance festival of such massive proportions that Nelson saw an international influx of 1968 try-hards, like it was Mecca, the word sent out across the oceans of the world by dodgily played bongo drums.

The fairy children flew into town on magic carpets, dreadlocks trailing behind them in the ganja-spiced wind and, for seven days, the town became the hemp capital of the world, the hub of all things Rastafarian. Wizards arrived in a puff of smoke complete with sleeping bags and pillows. Stores ran out of bottled water, hacky sacks and rolling papers. A&W salt, pepper and mustard sachets ran suspiciously low. It was pixie week, cloak week, free-hugs-on-Baker week. Kit and Clyde drove down Baker Street toward the market, hitting the brakes from time to time as festivalgoers stumbled unpredictably into the road, their journey toward the messiah only just beginning.

“Check it out!” said Clyde, pointing at a spiritual being outside the bakery with a sign that read: *Need $ for tickets. Can’t jump fence.* “At least he’s honest.”

Every year as the festival finished, mud-splattered revelers shambled back to town, their inner eyes burning bright, their outer ones desperate and drooping. Last year Kit and Clyde had made the mistake of going to Ainsworth Hot Springs with the kids the day after Shambhala, where they had sat for three minutes with their backs against the pool wall, only to realize that the lineup of woodland party-survivors to their left were all scrubbing their private parts under the water. Kit had walked past the launderette in town and seen a woman standing in the sink, scooping water under her armpits, and on the beach, she had watched a woman in front of her get out a wash kit, shave her legs and bikini line, then rinse off the pubic shavings into the lake.

They walked into Cottonwood Market behind two bare-chested men in their twenties chatting.

“Want to get some dinner later, man?” said the first guy, tucking his flip-flops into the back pocket of his jeans. “Where should we go?”

“Who knows, man? I’ve eaten breakfast a bunch of times in this town, but I’ve always been too high to get dinner.”

Clyde laughed out loud and put his arm around Kit’s neck. They pushed into the throng of Woodstock revivalists heading for the waterfall that roared at the back of the market, where teenagers rolled joints ostentatiously while adjusting their paisley bandanas. Pushing past stalls of cloth bags, scented candles, hand-carved soup spoons and organic soap, it was still a fifty-foot scrum to get to the homemade cinnamon buns.

“I’m pulling the pin,” said Clyde. “Let’s just go to the gas station on the way out of town.”

They bought sandwiches at the 7-11 and drove north on the curving road beyond the bridge. Clyde parked near an empty dock and they walked to the end of it with their sandwiches. Kit picked at hers, concentrating more on the silkiness of the water as she ran her toes through it. It was pick-axe cold.

“You’re quiet,” Clyde said. “What’s going on in there?”

She shrugged and shook her head, managing a smile.

“I think I’m still thinking about book club. Or . . . more than just that, I’m wondering how it is I’m part of a club that spends valuable time on books like *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It’s like I’ve stumbled into a satanic rituals meeting and the door’s swung closed behind me.”

“Have you read the book properly?”

“Why do you always . . . No, I can’t say I’ve read it cover to cover, Clyde, because my brain might turn to jam and start to leak out of my nose if I did.”

Clyde hooked his arm around his wife’s neck. “I was just asking! Relax! Don’t take it all so seriously. Maybe there’s something about the middle of the book you missed. There might be gems in there you’re skimming over.”

He laughed at Kit’s outraged face.

“I’m not joking!” she cried. “Book club is a right load of rubbish.”

“Look, you’ve had a couple of shitty book club meetings and you’ve been in a funk ever since. You’re spiralling! I’m telling you that club might end up being your thing. So—you know—chill out or something. Are you going to eat that sandwich?”

She handed it to him.

“I was in the post office this week. The clock in there has no hands on it. It’s just a face with *Kootenay Time* written around it.”

“That’s annoying.”

“And then later, I got a hot dog at that stand outside the Jeep dealership and this guy in front of me has, like, zero money and expects the hot dog vendor to give him a dog for free. Which he does, because it’s Nelson and he’s a nice guy, but then the guy with no money hands it back and asks him for a whole-grain bun and a bison dog because the meat’s cleaner.”

“Are you telling me these things to make me think the town’s less weird? It’s backfiring.”

“I’m saying, see the funny side, my dear.”

It began to rain harder and they scrambled back into the truck. They sat in there for a while, raindrops darting the roof as Clyde tried to find a song they both liked on the limited radio stations.

After a pause, she turned to him.

“I need to go for a swim now.”

“What, now? It’s really coming down out there.”

“It’ll be wicked. Do you mind?”

He didn’t, and she pulled on her old Aussie wetsuit and sprinted to the end of the dock, whooping as she jumped in. She swam hard into the storm, so that when she finally paused and looked back to shore, she was entirely alone save for the rain hissing around her head in the gunmetal water. Clyde’s headlights blurred in the downpour. Along the shoreline, trees washed their branches together, the air pungent with pine cones and a hint of fall. Even in August in this country you could smell October coming: it was an earthy, comforting fact.

Once she’d gone as far as her lungs could take her, Kit turned and headed back to the beach. As the water got shallower again she veered off toward an old dock, hauling herself out of the water and sitting cross-legged in her wetsuit facing the horizon. To the left of her was the ferry, chugging over to Balfour. The wind whipped at the tops of her ears and she burrowed down into her knees. Was Clyde right? Was it just a matter of taking oneself less seriously? But all joking aside, how on earth could anybody actually read *Fifty Shades of Grey*? It was like eating nothing but mud for a month and considering it an acceptable meal plan.

“Bollocks to the bloody whole lot of it,” Kit whispered to herself. Her teeth were chattering. “Get me back in the water.”

For a glacial lake, it was surprising how warm it felt to slide down under the surface. She took her time swimming back, letting the lake fold over her head, dipping under with each stroke. Once at the beach, she picked her way gingerly over the rocks and jogged back up to the deserted car park. Clyde grinned at her, shaking his head, as she stripped off her wetsuit by the passenger window and trod it into a puddle to release her feet. He leaned over and opened the door, threw her a towel from the back seat as she clambered in.

“How was it, sharkbait? You looked good out there.”

She grabbed another towel and sat on it, then shook her short, wet hair like a puppy, covering him in spray. She leaned toward him and laughed, then kissed him full on the mouth.

“Wow,” he said, “you’ve cheered up. What’s in that water?”

“I don’t know,” she said, zipping her favourite sweatshirt over her bikini and nuzzling into the hood, “but I love it. It’s worth living here just for the lake. In fact, that’s the only reason.”

She leaned over and kissed him again.

“That’s the only reason you want to live in Nelson?” He backed away from the kiss, looked almost hurt. “I could think of ten without trying.”

She pulled the sweatshirt over her knees and sat in a little ball, watching him. “Is one of your reasons Guinness at the sports bar?”

“Might be.”

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. “And are all your other reasons ice related?”

He reached out and pulled her to his chest. With her knees tucked, she rolled into him. “You’re serious—you don’t have a top ten of things you like about living here? That’s kind of sad, Kit. We need to change that. What about the cheese pizza at the bakery? The ribs in that wine bar you like?”

“All yours are food.”

Kit picked at the stitching around the gear stick with her forefinger, thinking.

Clyde sighed. “Nothing, hey? Well, try harder at book club, maybe. Give it a real shot tonight.”

“Christ, if book club ends up in my top ten it’s definitely time to leave.”

The window to her side was fogged and Kit squeaked her hand down it.

“Promise me you’ll give it a fair chance; don’t just write it off. It’s worth a shot.”

She smiled and nodded, watching the rain on the windshield. After a moment he reached forward and pulled a scrunched Post-it note from the dash.

“I forgot to tell you, I got nailed again. This one’s even better: *There is no angry way to say the word* bubbles*. Have a bubbly day!* See, the Parking Meter Fairy should for sure be in your top ten! If you don’t have a list yet for Nelson, at least tell me there are things you like about Canada? This country rules.”

She squirmed in her seat, staring at the rain streaming down the windshield. “I like frosted-glass beers. Jukeboxes that play Lynyrd Skynyrd. Red plaid?”

She sounded like a game show contestant who’d beeped her buzzer too soon. After a second he turned the key in the ignition.

“Well, I know a place you can get all of those. And it’s right here in town. See? You stick with me; I’ll show you how good we got it.”

He pulled the truck onto the highway, heading back to Nelson toward his favourite dive bar, the wheels splashing in the winter-wrecked potholes.

Later the same evening, after she’d kissed the kids goodnight, she found Clyde doing dishes in the kitchen. With all the windows in the house open, they could hear the neighbour trying to start his lawnmower.

“He’s going to flood the engine,” Clyde muttered. He dried his hands on a dish cloth. “Are you leaving for your book club right now?”

“I can be late.”

She stood with her back against the kitchen counter listening to the clump of his boots on the deck. One minute later the neighbour’s lawn mower roared and there was coughing. Clyde reappeared wiping his hands on the back of his Dickies pants.

“I absolutely don’t want to go.”

“You’ll be fine.”

He wandered past her into the living room and sat down in the zebra chair, a furry-armed monstrosity that looked like an animal and was the first piece of furniture they had bought together. Behind him was a bookshelf stacked with his books on conspiracy theories, Hells Angels and world travel.

“Have you left me diapers and a soother?” Before she could reply he added, “Oh, I never told you. Your buddy was over here last week. She brought you diapers and a dirty bra. If you ever wear it, I’m leaving you. I liked her though.”

“Which friend came over?” Kit opened the fridge and pulled out a little pot of chocolate mousse, holding it up to the light. She put it back again.

“Hilary. She brought you cloth diapers that you have to wash with your fingers.”

“Were you nice to her?” Kit opened the fridge again.

“Of course! We had a real heart-to-heart. I told her to ease off on the gifts a little. I swear I did it nicely.”

Sully emerged from his room in pyjamas and wedged himself into the chair with his dad.

“You’re meant to be in bed.” She walked over and ruffled Sully’s hair vacantly. “Poor Hilary. I’ll see her tonight and tell her I don’t need anything from any more garage sales.”

“No, you won’t. Anyway, I think she got what I was trying to say. Sully, shift over.”

Kit opened the fridge and leaned down again.

“So how will you spend your time tonight, boys? Not you, Sul, you’ll be asleep.”

“Lenny’s coming over.”

Kit stood up straight.

“Lenny from work? You never told me he was coming over.”

Lenny liked beer, darts and talking about asteroids. He didn’t have kids or any reason to be responsible.

Clyde reached back to the bookshelf and took down his *SAS Survival Guide*—a pocket-sized book of handy tips on subjects such as how to trap a weasel and cook it, even when hypoglycemic and snowblind. He opened the page casually.

“Why? Is that a problem?”

“Just make sure you stay in here; don’t go out to the Man Shed. You won’t hear the kids out there.”

“Did you know that following a nuclear holocaust, you can’t go outside for thirteen days?” Clyde asked Sully. “And under no circumstances should you eat a bird.” He scrolled his finger down the text. “Burrowing animals only. What is that, like a rabbit? Ferret? Do skunks burrow?”

“Clyde! Remember you’re on kid duty.”

He snapped his book shut.

“Buddy,” he said to his son, “go get into bed.” Sully padded out. “Why don’t you like Lenny?”

“I don’t not like h—”

“You don’t like the guy! Why don’t you get your own friends before you start bashing mine?”

Kit paused and spoke carefully. “I’m not bashing anything. All I’m saying is be a parent, don’t play darts all night. And thank you for your sensitivity about my own lack of friends in this town. Believe me, I’m trying my best with these impenetrable, hermetically sealed networks, but I’ve yet to be given the password.” Her tongue felt clammy. “I bloody had friends in England.”

“Did you?” He opened his book again. “Who were they, then?”

“Clyde! I’m not the weird one! And I’ve been trying really hard here! The pottery guild found me insufficiently political and the EcoSociety freaked out that I wrapped my sandwiches in ClingWrap. I can’t believe you think it’s my fault I’ve got no friends.”

“I never said that.”

He flipped a page.

“I’m only going to bloody book club for a third godforsaken time because you suggested it. If I had my way we’d pack up right now and move home where everyone’s normal.” She felt suddenly sweaty. “We could sell the house, set fire to the town and watch it burn on the way to the airport!”

He shook his head. “You’re yelling.”

“Well, stop turning everything on me! All I said was don’t go mad with Lenny round here. And suddenly it’s about me and how weird I am and how nobody’s ever liked me . . . bloody . . . internationally.”

She opened the fridge door just to slam it shut again so the pickle jars rattled on their shelf.

Both palms raised, Clyde looked like he was talking a jumper down off a ledge.

“I’m saying, and lower your voice, are you sure you’ve given this town enough time? We’ve only been here—what—a year, tops? That’s nothing! You have to build it; it takes a while. You’re not *that* weird—give it time! You’re always in such a hurry to fold. Who knows what you’ll get in the next hand.”

“What kind of metaphor’s that?”

“Poker.”

“Stop it.” She stared at him coldly. “Know your audience.”

“Dad!” Sully’s voice sang out from his bunk bed. “Come check out my scab!”

Clyde and Kit stared at each other. Clyde got up and hoisted his pants.

“What’s your plan here, Kit? Have you really thought it through?” He put both hands on his hips. “You say there’s nothing you like about Nelson, and now all of a sudden you want to leave the town, our house, my job, all the kids’ programs, Sully’s school, the lake—” He pointed at her with the thumb. “The long swims in summer, the mountains, skiing in the winter, fresh air, space, all the sports imaginable—and go where?”

She shrugged and flicked a potato chip crumb off the counter onto the floor.

“I mean, no one’s saying this town doesn’t have its . . . characters. Some people are uptight, but you’re talking about a ten percent faction, a tiny sliver of who lives here.”

“Ten percent?” she snorted. “Well, you certainly hear from them one hundred percent of the time.”

“Who cares? It might be annoying at the time but you need to let things roll off you. Didn’t we talk about this earlier?” He scuffed his toe against the fuzz of the armchair.

“Dad!”

“Coming, Sul!” He looked at her, his head tilted. “Look, if you’re miserable in five years, we’ll go live in Mexico and open a lemonade stand. Whatever you want. But it’s not going to be easy wherever we go and if you’re serious about leaving, I’m telling you I think it’d be a mistake to pull the pin this early.”

“Fine,” said Kit. “We stay in Nelson. Fantastic. Well, I’m glad that’s settled. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have to go to book club, which I love. Another night of serious literary debate. Brilliant.”

“Good. Have fun.”

Clyde always disarmed her sarcasm by pretending to take her literally. He took a step toward Sully’s bedroom.

“Wait!” Kit rubbed her forehead with the heel of her palm. “Will you call my mobile in an hour or so? Just so I have an excuse if I want to get out of there?”

“Leave if you want to leave.” He stood with his arms crossed in the doorway of Sully’s room. “Kit, it’s not that complicated. I’ve got friends in this town so it can’t be impossible. And okay, I’ll call you and yes, I’ll watch the kids properly. I’m not an idiot.”

He walked into Sully’s room and she heard the creak of the bed frame as he sat down.

“Wow, buddy,” he said to the boy, “that’s a good one. Save a bit for tomorrow. You don’t want to get it all in one go.” She heard Clyde crawl further into the bunk, imagined him sitting with his neck crooked to fit in.

“Dad?” Sully’s voice rasped. “Do I have to like *everyone*?”

Kit whipped her head around at that one. Why was he asking that? She tiptoed down the corridor and hovered near the door, peeping into the dim light of the bedroom.

“What? Who told you that?” Clyde asked. He was lying down with Sul, sharing the pillow.

“Mom. Last week at Hunter’s party. She said we have to be kind to everyone. But I’ve been thinking about it and I don’t know if I can. Not everyone’s like me.”

“Well, buddy, maybe what your mom means is it’s good to try and be nice, but if you asked her again I don’t think she’d say she’s friends with everyone. It’s normal to pick and choose a little.”

*She’d probably say she’s friends with no one*, thought Kit from the hallway. She sighed and turned to leave. As she tiptoed out the back door, Sully was talking about a show he’d seen on TV where a guy had a job cleaning an elephant’s butt.

“Is that what you’re going to be when you grow up, Sul? An elephant butt cleaner?”

The giggling suggested tickling. Kit left without saying anything more to Clyde.

As Kit drove past Hume School toward the liquor store, she realized that Canada did summer better than any country she’d known; she had to give it that. As she travelled along in the warm evening air, Kit thought about that moment every spring when she dared open the living room window. She did so with such a sense of triumph each May that it had become her favourite Canadian ceremony. Window Opening Day really ought to be a public holiday.

On any other evening, she might have felt uplifted by the leftover heat of summer around her, but tonight as she glanced in the rearview mirror, all she could think about was Clyde. They argued rarely, and that had felt like a humdinger. Was he right about her? Had she really not had friends in England? Had she always been a floater?

The light changed green and behind her somebody honked a horn.

“Alright, mate, keep your hair on! Namaste!” Kit shouted out the window.

She turned up The Stone Roseson the stereo and frowned. Surely he was wrong. She wasn’t to blame for not fitting in here; none of this could be her fault.

Kit opened the car door and got out, the air thick and the asphalt spongy beneath her flip-flops. Once inside the liquor store, the polar air conditioning slowed her down and she took a few deep breaths before staring into the fridges.

“Off to a party?” the store clerk asked when she clanked her wine onto the counter near the cash register. He wore a flight suit, bright orange, unbuttoned far down his chest, and rubbery bracelets on his wrist, bought from a teenage-girl accessories store.

*See, Clyde would find you funny*, she thought. *He’d remember your flight suit and tell me about it later.* Oh, it was fine for Clyde to poke fun at Nelson, but when Kit had anything to say about it she was being difficult and short-sighted and not trying hard enough.

“I wouldn’t call it a party,” she said, handing him her debit card. “I’m survival drinking.”

She made it to Genevieve’s house but then stood on the curb holding her wine bottles, the condensation dripping onto the sidewalk by her heels. Sasha’s car nudged the front steps—she’d made sure she was first one in this week. Throw Pierre into the mix and Sasha’s timekeeping became impeccable. Kit didn’t recognize the low-to-the-ground car parked behind Sasha’s; it was decked out with stereo speakers. She assumed it had to be Pierre’s. There was a miniature Bodhisattva hanging from the rearview mirror. No sign of Hilary.

Kit sat down on the curb with a sigh. Above, the sky gave her sweeping reds; she wondered how long it had been waiting for her to look up. As she considered going to the park to drink wine on a bench alone, Hilary’s Subaru pulled up and out hopped Hilary, pausing to pat at her eyelids with a gentle index finger. She jumped when she spotted Kit hunched on the side of the road.

“You had me worried! I thought you were a hobo!” Her cheeks looked red and her eye makeup was unusually streaky. Without contact lenses, Hilary’s brown eyes behind thick glass reminded Kit of a seal in an aquarium.

Kit cracked open the cap of her white wine and took a graceless swig. “This is the before party. Want some?”

Hilary shook her head but sat down, staring doubtfully at Genevieve’s house. Kit caught the look.

“Are you thinking how excited you are for another round of book club?”

“I’m thinking . . . I’ve been thinking about you and how maybe you’re homesick,” Hilary blurted. “I can’t imagine leaving my hometown, let alone my whole country!”

“Yeah.” Kit frowned, caught off guard. “It’s . . . unsettling.”

“No way I’m doing that if Michael ever suggests it.” She paused. “Mind you, how many countries have Sportsnet? I’m probably totally safe.”

“Moving to a town where there’s some kind of secret handshake doesn’t help, either. Nobody round here will tell me what it is, or let me in without it.”

“Do I know the secret handshake?” Hilary looked doubtful.

“Let’s run away,” Kit continued, squishing the metal of the wine bottle cap in on itself as she edged her thumb around its rim. “Let’s elope under cover of night—they’ll never find us.”

She threw the cap, spinning it into the bush.

“Well, I guess you’re finishing that bottle,” said Hilary. She paused and then looked sideways at Kit. “Don’t lovers elope?”

“What, you don’t find me attractive?” Kit’s mouth raked sideways, hidden from Hilary’s view. “I’m kind of over my husband tonight; I’m open to offers.”

“I do, you are attract . . . you’re a . . . you’re a fine-look . . . it’s just, I’m not really . . .”

“Hilary, I’m just joking. Why can’t anybody tell when I’m joking?”

Hilary sat knocking her toes together in her shoes, her heels on the road. Kit looked down the slope of the hill, at the sprinkled lights of town. It was a while before she spoke.

“It’s not just about homesickness, if you’re really asking. And it’s not just about loneliness. I think I feel robbed. Like everything that’s mine has been taken from me.”

“By who?”

“Name one thing you used to love doing, that you still get to do now. One thing.”

“You’re talking hobbies? I really enjoy garage sailing.”

Hilary’s eyes shone in the dusk.

“No, God, no, not garage sales. Something you were passionate about before. Are you telling me you garage saled *before* you had children?”

Hilary blinked.

“You know what, mate, maybe it’s just me and I’m the only one who feels they’ve had to hand everything over. I’m trying to be a good mum but I’m sick of everyone telling me how it’s all positive, it’s so completing, haven’t we all arrived in our lives. Is that a Nelson thing? I think it must be. I love my kids, but I don’t know where my life *is* half the time. Becoming a mum isn’t only about what you gain.”

Hilary looked like she was stuck in an elevator with an escaped felon. Was she edging away down the curb?

“Nobody would dare own up to anything like that in this town. They’d rather write odes to bubbles and stick them on parking meters. You know what? When Sully was born I couldn’t look at him for the first hour. I couldn’t even *look* at him. They don’t warn you about that in everything-is-beautiful prenatal classes.”

“Didn’t you do any reading on the subj—”

“They don’t warn you about anything. Parenthood’s a ghost train—you never know what’s going to jump out next. You go mental on hormones, gain five stone and get hit with mastitis, hemorrhoids—don’t lie, I know you’ve had them—then baby rashes, croup, fevers, poo that shoots up your baby’s back out their nappy like an erupting volcano, toddlers doing faceplants onto cement three times a day, night terrors, bullies in pre-school, pink eye, lice, anal strep, yeah that was a good one, weirdo kids telling your kids weirdo stuff, and on and on. I feel I could have been better prepared. You know when they give doll-babies to teenagers in Life Skills class to carry around for twenty-four hours? You know, plastic ones as practice for motherhood? Do they do that here? I put mine in a cupboard. I never told anyone that.”

“At least you didn’t do that to the real baby,” whispered Hilary, shooting a quick glance at Kit to make sure.

“What they should do in those classes is have someone follow you around for the entire twenty-four hours going, ‘Mummy? Mummy? Mummy? Mummy? Mummy?’ On a continual loop, never a pause. Even when you’re in the shower or on the loo. That’d be so much more helpful.” Kit swept her arm out in front of her. “Because I think about it now, I never had a single thing to worry about until I had kids. Until I had kids in a town this bloody uptight. I thought I did, but I didn’t. Now I worry about everything all the time—it’s relentless, and that’s just zero to six! The list will lengthen.” Kit gargled on a full mouthful of wine. “The situation will worsen before it improves.”

Hilary giggled.

“Do you know what I worry about as a mom?”

*Here comes an amazing admission*, thought Kit. *At last.*

“Marble runs. I’ve never built one that works and they never come with instructions. The kids’ marbles just plop to the floor like they’re dropping them down a well.”

“That’s it? That’s the only thing you can’t do?” Kit shook her head. “You’re doing alright. You know what I’d like to say to pregnant women? I’d like to say, ‘Congratulations, you’ll never sleep again.’”

“I’ve read it gets easier. You know, they’ll hit their teens and want nothing to do with us. Perhaps that’ll just be a new set of worries.”

Hilary beckoned for the wine bottle at last and took a healthy swig.

“Like I say, we’ll never sleep again,” Kit said. “Mind you, you’ll be fine. You’ve probably Googled Jeremy’s every stage from now till retirement.”

She didn’t mean it to sound so sharp and felt bad when Hilary lost her smile and passed the wine back silently.

“I’m going in. Genevieve will be wondering where we are.”

“Hold on, wait a sec. I’ll come with you.”

Kit stood the almost-empty bottle of wine on the curb and started to cross the road.

“You’re leaving that there?”

“I don’t want any more of it. It’s warm and too sweet.”

“You can’t leave it there! Jeez, you wonder why you can’t fit in here? Give it to me.”

Kit watched as Hilary grabbed it and marched across to the bush where Kit had thrown the bottle cap. She emerged holding it, and was on the top step and knocking before Kit had made it to the stairs.

“Ready for another profound literary journey?” Kit grinned from behind Hilary’s shoulder. The wine buzzed in her head; she wanted fun, like a kid who’d escaped from a dorm at summer camp.

Hilary turned. “Did you get my garage sale gift last week? You haven’t said. I came over and met your husband but I didn’t get his name. He’s . . . unusual.” Kit was about to reply, but suddenly Hilary turned back to the screen door. “Why does Genevieve always take so long to answer her door? Is it a control thing?”

“With Genevieve, everything is a control thing.”

Hilary rapped on the screen door again.

“Three knocks and I’m going home,” Kit heard her mumble. “It’s not like I . . . Oh, wait, I hear movement. Here we go. Deep breath,” she said, pushing her glasses up her nose with the hand that held the half-empty wine bottle.

Kit stood quietly behind her, watching her brace herself, her body rigid and straight. From the side, Hilary’s face transformed into a wide smile. Kit quickly rearranged her own face into a ventriloquist’s dummy grin. She stood holding her breath under the porch light, waiting for her cue.

Book Club III

Martin opened the door. He had floury hands and held them upward like a surgeon on his way to the operating room.

“Come in, ladies. Excuse these.” He waved his hands, dusting the air with flour. “I’m making more appies because Sasha and I ate the first batch.”

“Liar!” Sasha called out from the kitchen.

“Okay, I ate them all and she watched. Gen’s in the living room with Jesus Pete. Or you’re welcome to join us in here.”

He turned and jogged back to the stove while Kit and Hilary took off their shoes.

“You’re cooking again?” asked Kit, following Martin as Hilary wandered into the living room. “You should be drinking, not cooking. Hi, Sasha.”

“Who says a guy can’t multitask?” Martin pointed at his drink, the slurry of cream up the side suggesting frequent motion. “Sasha’s drinking water. She’s not a team player.”

Kit’s eyes flitted between the two as they laughed. Had they bonded over appetizers?

“So how is the Messiah? Did he bring a date, as requested?”

Martin paused with his frying.

“My wife’s his date, apparently. Few more drinks and I’ll put a stop to that. Wine glasses, top left. There.”

Martin nodded as Kit pulled wine glasses down from the shelf. She poured two generous glasses and offered one to Sasha, who shook her head.

“What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m just . . . pacing myself.” Sasha’s makeup looked light. She hadn’t done her hair. “I’m getting my life together.”

She smiled shyly.

“Yeah? I’m not. Quite the opposite, actually.” Kit sipped her wine. “So why are you doing that? Oh, hold on. Is it to do with LA?”

Before Sasha could answer, Martin drained his White Russian and wiped his moustache with the back of his hand.

“She’s going there with her guy who’s some kind of hotshot musician.”

“How good is he? If he’s really good you should start worrying. Have you seen the girls in LA?”

Kit was joking, but panic washed Sasha’s face.

Martin burped. “What did Pierre do in Vancouver? Does anyone know yet? Asshole won’t tell me.”

Hilary appeared in the archway. “Hi-de-ho, everybody. Hi, Sasha. Hello, Martin. How is everybody doing? My mom used to say the best parties are always in the kitchen!”

“How’s it going through there?” Kit offered Hilary the wine Sasha had refused and she took it, flushing with gratitude.

“They’re talking about chai, or chi. I forget which, and I couldn’t really comment on either. You want me to carry those for you?”

Martin had just transferred the yam tempura to a plate and was removing his Snoopy apron.

Hilary took the plate.

“Come on, gang. Let’s mingle and have some laughs! You guys need to say hi to the hostess with the mostess.”

She led the way out of the kitchen, around the dining room table and into the living room, with Kit, Sasha and Martin following her. Tea candles flickered all around the room and a CD of sitar music played. Genevieve had leaned several moist-looking yoga mats in assorted colours against the wall near the french doors. Genevieve sat near the fireplace with a bindi at the centre of her forehead. It glinted in the dim light.

Next to her sat Pierre, in scuffed jeans and a well-cut V-neck T-shirt. He had bare feet and wore a leather band, like an archer’s, on one wrist, and a thick Celtic ring on his thumb. He looked up when Sasha walked in and adjusted the line of his shirt.

“Oh, how nice of you to join us,” sniffed Genevieve.

“You’ve got something stuck on your head,” replied Kit.

Genevieve put her hand to the bindi, tutting.

“Sit here,” Pierre said to Sasha, jumping up.

“Thanks?” said Sasha, her eyes suspicious.

Pierre stood with his hands in his jeans pockets, tightening his triceps and rocking on his heels.

“Sasha, I just figured out why I recognized you at Hunter’s party earlier. Genevieve told me you used to come to my classes. I didn’t make the connection.”

“Or maybe you know her from Vancouver. Before you were a good boy.”

Kit was just guessing, but the speed with which Pierre turned toward her told her she was onto something.

“We all have our past lives,” he said, sitting down overly close to Sasha. His mouth seemed dry, his lips stuck to his teeth a little.

“I only have the one life,” pondered Martin. “I don’t know where you’re all getting your other ones from.”

Over in the corner, Hilary let out a wheezy laugh. Everyone turned to her in surprise.

“It’s just so funny,” she said, her hands on her cheeks. “The things we do to find friends and then there are people who might have known each other for years and stumble upon each other! Isn’t it a small world! Can I have a yam? I yam what I yam!”

She took three of Martin’s appetizers and started munching.

“I doubt they know each other, Hilary. Three million people live in Vancouver.” Genevieve rolled her eyes at Pierre, before sniffing and reaching for her drink. “You’re fashionably late this evening, Kit.”

“I was helping Martin with the catering. Tempura yam? Don’t mind if I do.”

Kit stood up and grabbed a few, then sat down next to Hilary. She kept her voice low.

“By the way, I only just found out tonight about the presents you got for me, Hilary, else I’d definitely have said thanks earlier. It was . . . kind of you.”

“Whatever,” said Hilary, swallowing. “You hated them. You don’t have to lie about it.”

She got up and walked out of the living room into the kitchen, carrying her glass. Kit bit her lip.

Sasha stalked over and sat where Hilary had been. “What’s the deal with Pierre? He’s, like, totally hitting on me.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” said Kit, monotone.

“No. Not these days.” The two women stared ahead until Sasha took a deep breath. “Look, I don’t know if now’s a good time, but I need to talk to you about something really important that happened last Saturday.”

“Right now?”

“If you’ve got a minute. I have to get something off my chest.”

“Don’t tell Pierre that.”

Kit’s jokes were becoming more and more half-hearted. She was about to tell Sasha to go ahead—her interest piqued—when Genevieve stood and clapped her hands together like a kindergarten teacher.

“People! Hello! Thank you, stop talking. I was thinking it might be time to get into the main event of the evening? The yoga? I’ve come to understand that we can all benefit from the power of positive healing. After some healthful meditation, I was thinking we could call for some take-out if everyone kicks in some money. Indian? Or Thai? Something meat-free. Martin’s failed to come up with any food this week, beyond fried potatoes. And then after dinner there’ll be time for a short discussion on this week’s book if anyone wants to talk about it. I don’t mind either way. So does that sound okay with everyone?” Nobody said anything. “Awesome. I hope you all brought a change of clothes. We’re so blessed to have Pierre here. I have some spare Lycra in my bedroom if you need. Grab a mat, they’re by the door.”

Kit chugged her wine and beelined it to the kitchen, head down. She opened the fridge and leaned her face in, looking for more wine.

“Why do they make such massive fridges in this country? Is it really necessary to keep everything known to man cold?”

Defeated, Kit swung the fridge door closed and took a step straight into Hilary, who was standing to the side like a sentry.

“Hilary! I didn’t see you there! Bloody hell, that was like one of those scary films, where they close the fridge and the psycho’s there with a knife.”

Kit grinned and then recoiled as she saw Hilary was crying.

“Oh. What’s the matter? Is it about the garage sale presents, ’cause honestly they were lovely.”

“I have no friends,” whispered Hilary, tears rolling down her cheeks.

“Oh,” said Kit, looking around the kitchen for a suggestion. “That can’t be true?”

“You’re not even my friend. You never return my calls. Your husband hates me!”

“I never return anyone’s calls! My husband does not hate you!”

Kit put her hand out and rubbed Hilary’s shoulder, like she was touching a new and strangely furred animal.

“I don’t get it. I try and try, and all I get is further away from everyone. It’s . . . it’s . . . it’s bullshit!”

“It is bullshit! It’s all a big pile of bloody bullshit. Well said!” Kit put her arm round Hilary and guided her to the cupboard, finding her a fresh glass. “Now, my advice to you is to drink steadily. If you must be friends with the people here tonight, you’re going to need to keep your alcohol level high.” She poured Hilary a huge glass of somebody else’s red wine. “Who cares what anyone in this town thinks, anyway? They’re all a bloody bunch of psycho meany-mums, or people who write notes about echidna puggles like we’re all meant to be interested. You’re too good for all of them.”

“What about echidna puggles?” Hilary sniffed and blinked.

“The Parking Meter Fairy has a lot to answer for,” said Kit.

“Kit’s very confused.” Martin wandered into the kitchen with the empty tempura plate. “And to be clear, she has no friends either. I’ve been watching closely. Her main problem is she’s trying to get people in this town to accept her, when actually *she* needs to accept that they never will.”

“Wow.” Kit looked sharply at Martin. “Dr. Phil.”

Martin shrugged and clattered the plate into the sink.

“Did you for real like the gifts I got you?”

“No. But you’re a nice woman. You really, truly are.”

From the living room came the sound of Genevieve’s voice. “KIT! OTHER ONES! Come here! We’re ready to start our asanas!”

“Oh my God, our what? Why are we doing yoga at book club, for crying out loud?”

“You’re so negative, Kit.” Martin linked Hilary’s arm through his and led her out of the kitchen. “No wonder nobody likes you. Come on, Hilary, let’s form a back row.”

He walked around the corner with Hilary, who stared up adoringly at him.

Kit trudged behind them, swerving away at the last second as her cell phone buzzed in her back pocket. She doubled back to the kitchen.

It was Clyde. “You okay?”

“No.” She cleared her throat. “Thanks for calling me. I wasn’t sure if you would. What are you doing?”

“Chuck Norris marathon on TNT.”

“What you eating?”

“Corn chips.” She could hear the crunch of them.

“Listen, Clyde, I’m sorry I made out you couldn’t parent prop . . .” Kit heard a man’s voice in the background. “Who’s that? Is that Lenny?”

“Yep. We’re drinking non-alcoholic beverages and watching TV. You going to make something up and leave?”

“Yes. I think so, yes. I don’t know what I’m doing here. I’ve lost my wine.”

“Can you drive?”

She shut her eyes tight. “Shit! Bollocks! No, I probably shouldn’t. I’ve drunk half a bottle.” She groaned. “Why did I do that?” *Survival drinking means you can’t actually escape. They should warn you of that on the label.* “I can ring for a taxi.”

There was a lull while Kit heard more crunching.

Clyde swallowed audibly. “Want me to come get you?”

Kit exhaled loudly. “Oh, will you? I would love it. I’m sorry I was a cow earlier.”

“Give me the address. Lenny can stay and watch the kids. Give me half an hour though; this is a really good bit.”

Kit tiptoed back into the living room to see that Genevieve had changed into a sleeveless T-shirt with the slogan *Exhale Only Love* across the front. Her yoga pants had a band of bright blue around the hip. Martin had put on a pair of shiny yellow running shorts from 1978 to expose milk-white thighs, sock marks and toenails that needed cutting. Seven yoga mats lay curly-edged on the bamboo floor and the chairs had all been moved to the corners like a middle school dance. No sign of Pierre.

Kit hovered by the dining room table, unsure of whether to tell anyone she’d be leaving soon or just slip away unnoticed. Sasha limbered up in the back row, her jeans stretchy enough to accommodate a perfect downward dog. Her top bagged at the front, exposing a jewelled bra to those in the front row. “Where’ve you been?” she hissed at Kit. “I saved you a spot. We’ve had to do loving kindness chants while you were in the kitchen. Fuck knows where Pierre’s gone.”

As if on cue, Pierre strode into the living room. He had stripped right down to his black trunks—he’d even taken off his leather band and silver ring. Around his lowest rib was a tattoo, the Aztec lines concentric like a maze that ran up the side of his stomach. He had pulled his hair into a bun at the back of his head and he held his hands palm-to-palm in front of him, the muscles of his body taut.

“He’s a Calvin Klein ad,” whispered Sasha.

Martin turned around and curled his lip to the back row. “If you want to look original these days, *don’t* get a tattoo. Although that is a spectacular tan.” He exhaled. “But we could all have tans like that if we didn’t work nine to five. Some of us have real jobs.”

“Let’s start by focusing on our breath,” said Pierre, his voice so soft and hypnotic that Kit found herself settling down beside Sasha. He sat down on his mat and crossed his legs, the tops of his bare feet touching the floor. “Find a position that’s comfortable. Let go of the daily fabric of your lives, the distractions that lead you away from your centre. Breathe. Notice the rhythm of your breathing, how it moves through you like a tide; relax and let it flow. Think of your body as a series of rooms and with each breath you exhale, move yourself inward until you find the chamber where everything is quiet. Everything is calm. Light the fire in the quietest centre of yourself.”

Pierre unfolded his muscular legs and crept up from his mat. He walked quietly around the group, straightening backs, laying his palms on shoulders, adjusting the tilts of heads. Even Kit felt a strange sense of pride when he patted her in passing. He tiptoed back to his mat at the front.

“Yoga is a journey of deep self-knowledge—of befriending the universe and everything in it—and with it comes unavoidable empathy. If you can fuel your inner selves, you can radiate in every way in your daily lives, in your outer *I*. You can live compassionately, reverently, with peace.”

Genevieve let out a satisfied murmur of agreement. Kit glanced around the room, seeing everyone’s eyes closed, their faces soft and at ease. Though she’d long ago decided yoga was weird, she’d never actually attended a class.

Pierre was on the move again and as he passed behind Kit, he pressed her gently on the shoulder as he spoke.

“Come to a kneeling position now. Widen your knees and exhale forward, sink down into your mat. Let your back lift you up, lift you up to the sky while the earth grounds you and warms you from below. Child’s pose is the marriage of earth and sky.”

With her face squished against the mat and her arms slapped out behind her, Kit considered making a joke about how this felt more like parent-after-a-day-with-child pose, but for the first time in a while she preferred to be quiet and concentrate. Pierre walked to the back row, talking gently as he moved.

“Since we’re at book club, let us think of Henry David Thoreau, when he wrote that ‘what lies behind us and what lies ahead of us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.’ Everything we need we already have, so just allow yourself to be.”

He passed behind Kit, unaware that he’d just provided her with the most literary comment that had ever come out of this book club.

“Thoreau and yoga?” said Kit, truly surprised.

Pierre bent low to her ear. “What do you think *living deliberately* is all about?”

He moved on to Sasha’s mat.

“Lift your back up from child’s pose and move yourself gently into downward dog. Raise your tailbone to the gloriousness of the night sky and plant your open palms to maternal earth. Take a deep breath, feel the balance flowing through you: you are a vessel now. Walk your feet forward and rise up, lunge your right foot forward and turn the trailing foot, good. Good! Swing your arms up over your head into warrior stance, lift your pelvis and feel the energy of your warrior power into your heart. Now you are light in its purest form.”

Kit stood with her arms over her head. She felt a tinge of excitement at her warrior self and frowned at the recognition of it.

Pierre soothed the group onward. “Now gently walk your feet together, shoulder width apart. Let yourself flow down into squatting pose. Malasana, the openness of the first chakra to Mother Earth’s abundant energy. Open your pelvic floor, receive the blessings of the earth.”

He crouched in front of Sasha and placed a hand on each of her knees as she squatted. His shoulders almost brushed her face. “Open, Sasha. Breathe into your tightness.” He pushed down on her as Kit suppressed a smile. “Inhale down your spine, sending breath to the tightness, and exhale all the things you’re holding onto.”

Sasha caught Kit’s eye and gave her a what-is-he-doing? face.

“Nice form, Sasha. Beautiful.” Pierre touched the nape of her neck with his fingertip as he moved away. “Way to open your pelvic floor.”

Sasha crossed her eyes at Kit, who had to cough. Genevieve turned round, eyes daggered.

“Now relax down into hero’s pose. Sit back on your heels, that’s good, good. Breathe into your centre, place your hands slowly on your heart. Listen to what it is telling you.” Kit put her hand uncertainly over her heart. “And from there, stretch back into camel pose,” continued Pierre. “Let energy flow as you arch back and lift your heart into snow-white light. Your heart is released into joy and love.”

*What, already?* thought Kit. *Maybe he really is Jesus*.

“We’ll finish tonight with Savasana, but in partners. Find a soul to be with.”

Like a Grade 4 gym class, there was a moment of confusion where everyone looked around, wondering who to partner with. Genevieve turned to the back row and raised her eyebrows at Hilary, who put her hand to her chest and beamed. Martin and Kit shrugged at each other and shuffled over until they were side by side.

“I’ll partner with you,” Pierre gushed to Sasha, the excitement in his voice hinting at a suspiciously un-yogic motivation. “You lie down. Excellent. Let’s treat this pose like a gift we’re all bestowing. Let love flow through you into your partner. Take their heels in your hands and gently massage them.”

Kit, who was sitting by Martin’s toenails, lent back and whispered in his ear, “Mate, you’re great and everything, but there’s no way I’m touching your feet.”

Across the room, Genevieve kneaded Hilary’s toes with commitment. Suddenly she halted, her head jerking to the side, listening. There it was again, a faint cry from one of the bedrooms at the back of the house. Genevieve stood and bowed to Pierre, her hands in a palm prayer. “Hunter,” she said. “Night terrors.”

Pierre returned her bow.

“Go. Be with him.” His serenity was peaking. Genevieve drifted out of the room.

“Now sit by your partner’s head and cradle it in your hands. Bless them with your heartfelt love. Cradle their skull as if it were a newborn child’s. Feel its weight drop trustingly into your palm. Pull their head gently toward you, stretching their spine with kindness. Here, allow me to demonstrate.”

He cupped Sasha’s head in his hand, sweeping his fingers over her closed eyes and along her forehead, caressing her hair. Martin tapped Kit on the forehead. He switched places with her and fumbled with her head as he motioned for her to check out Pierre. Kit sat up on her elbows, the top of her head grazing Martin’s crotch as he knelt over her. Sasha looked like a stroked cat.

The calm was broken by a sharp clattering at the front door. Footsteps thudded through the hall as Pierre’s yoga sanctuary was shattered by Clyde’s arrival. He stood staring at the people on the floor. The fabric of Martin’s short shorts draped over Kit’s forehead. Pierre stood up in his underpants.

“Book club?” said Clyde, pushing his baseball cap back on his head. “What the fuck—?”

“Can we help you?” asked Pierre, stepping over Kit’s legs and walking over to Clyde, who stood rubbing one hand over the stubble of his chin. “Are you lost?” Pierre’s tone was warm, helpful.

“Buddy,” Clyde said, “I could ask you the same thing.”

“Okay,” said Kit, pushing Martin’s knees out of the way and clambering up. “This is Clyde, my husband.”

She took him by the elbow and turned him toward the hallway. Behind her, Martin knelt up eagerly, while Hilary tried not to be seen.

“Has it been half an hour already? That flew by . . . ,” Kit whispered. “Is everything alright?”

“I could ask you the . . .”

“Oh, stop it with that. Thanks for coming.”

“Why’s that guy’s nuts on your head? What happened to all the book reading?”

“Yes, there’s a lot to explain. Genevieve sprung a yoga thing on us, I’m playing along. Is Lenny with the kids?”

“So it’s yoga club now? What’s with the guy in his undies?”

They stood by the front door, their voices hushed. As they looked into each other’s faces, Pierre came around the corner, followed by Sasha.

“You’re welcome to join us, Clive. We were just finishing up with some loving Savasana, allowing the flow of . . .”

“Stop it,” said Clyde, wincing. “You ready to go, Mama?”

“You finish without us,” said Kit to Pierre, feeling suddenly guilty about her early exit. Pierre bowed slightly, and Clyde rubbed the side of his eye with his finger. “Let me just get my things.”

As Pierre turned and walked back into the living room, Sasha, who had been hovering behind Pierre’s back, turned too. Clyde leaned out around his wife.

“Hey,” he said. Sasha stopped walking. “How’d the play date go last week in the mall? Was Sully good?”

When Sasha turned around, her eyes took up most of her face.

“Why? What did he tell you?”

“What did who tell me?” Clyde looked like he’d wandered into a psych ward and was struggling to adapt. “Tell me about what?”

“Did he say something? I knew he’d . . . I knew it! Goddammit. Blabbermouth! Kit, I’ve been trying to tell you it wasn’t my fault. Or, it might have been my fault a little bit but I’ve been trying to apologize.”

“What are you going on about?” Kit said to Sasha’s ashen face. And then to her husband, “What’s going on?”

Clyde took his hat off and held it high in the air. “Fucked if I know! This place is off the map.”

“Wait, what? He *didn’t* say anything?” asked Sasha, her head tilting.

“Who? Said what about what?” shouted Kit.

Martin’s head peeped around the hallway. “Guys,” he said. “Why not go out on the front porch for a minute? My kids are sleeping just behind that door there. Maybe it’d be better if you took this outside?” He smiled weakly.

Clyde pulled the front door open and shrugged, encouraging Sasha to walk past him onto the front porch. They huddled on the top step.

“Okay, listen.” Sasha’s lips clacked. “Just so you know, obviously everything turned out totally completely fine, and, you know, the boys got home safe, but I have to tell you in Walmart last week there was a little tiny problem for a while.”

She stared at her shoeless feet.

“What kind of problem?” asked Clyde, leaning against the wooden beam of the porch.

Sasha cleared her throat. “A little tiny not-sure-where-they-are problem. Which, you know, all got resolved. End of story.”

“You lost Sully?” asked Kit, the blood heating up in her body.

“Well, Sully *and* Harrison actually, but I found them again.” Sasha tried a smile. “You know how it goes: kids move fast, you take your eye off them for a second, it’s like herding cats. But I am very sorry about it and . . . yeah, it was pretty fucking horrifying for me. I’m okay though, don’t worry.”

“How long did you lose them for?” Clyde leaned forward.

“Twenty minutes. There. Yup. Pretty much close to twenty. Shit, guys, I’m fucking really sorry. I didn’t think it was worth bringing up . . . after it was all . . . fine.” Sasha’s voice petered to a whisper. Her hands shook and she stuffed them under her armpits.

Clyde picked at a molar with his fingertip. “Look-it, I’m sure you didn’t *mean* to lose them. Sully wanders off, he’s in his own little world most of the . . .” He glanced at his wife. “I think you probably could have mentioned it earlier.”

“I tried to, I swear. That’s why I came to this book club thing tonight, the only reason. So I could talk to Kit properly. I swear to God that’s the truth.”

“Wait, sorry,” said Kit. “I’m unclear on one thing. Did you actually tell our son he wasn’t to say anything to us? Did you make him promise? You bloody well did, didn’t you?”

“Whoa. That’s not okay.” Clyde leaned forward, his grey eyes intense. “That’s very uncool. More apologies needed.”

Just then the screen door opened and Genevieve strode out onto the front steps.

“I heard a ruckus,” she said. “I hope there’s no problem out here.”

She looked at Sasha on her right, taking in her pale dismay, and then at Kit, further right. Kit bristled silently, gathering heat.

“There’s no problem, Genevieve,” said Kit. “We’re just sorting some stuff out.”

Genevieve looked to her left for a full scope of the scene and found herself staring straight into the face of Clyde, who was still leaning against the post. It took her a moment to place him.

“Oh good Christ!” she screamed. “YOU!”

Clyde squinted back at her. His face cracked into a grin and he shook his head in amazement.

“*You’re* Genevieve? Wow. The Grand Poobah. This just gets better and better.”

“Inside! Everybody get inside! This man attacked me by my car at Home Hardware! Martin! There’s a violent man out here!”

She wheeled in panic between Sasha and Kit, her Exhale Only Love T-shirt flapping as she grabbed both women by the wrists and reefed them toward the front door.

“How do you know my husband?” Kit asked, being bundled into the house in a fresh wave of confusion. The three women crashed straight into Martin who was running through the hallway holding a meat tenderizer.

“Honey? Are you okay? Do I need to call 9-1-1?”

Genevieve spun on her heels by the shoe cubby, spitting like a witch’s cat. “*That* is your husband?”

“Hi.” Clyde waved through the mesh of the screen door. “Great to see you again.”

“He’s here to hurt me! I reported him to the police a few weeks’ back and he’s come for revenge!”

“Are you here for revenge?” Martin asked, his brow furrowed, as he stepped into the hall with his culinary weapon.

“Nope. Here to pick up my wife.” Clyde put his hands in his pockets. “You reported me to the police? For what?”

“They were supposed to leave you a message. Step away from the door handle!”

“We never check the machine.”

Genevieve stared hard at Kit, as if trying to finish a jigsaw puzzle. Then she marched to the screen door and whipped it open. Clyde took a few steps back, putting one hand on the banister.

“I hope they charge you. What you did to my car was disgraceful.”

“What did I do to your . . . the antenna? When I pinged your antenna? That’s what this is all about?”

“So glib. So clever. I can see where Kit gets it from. In fact it’s all starting to make sense.”

“Starting to make sense?” he said. “Really? I’d say the opposite.”

Kit pressed her face to the other side of the screen door.

“You’re the antenna twanger?” she asked Clyde.

“For the longest time”—Genevieve crossed her arms—“I’ve been trying to figure out why Kit’s so . . . sharp. What’s eating her up? Why can’t she just love, embrace and accept like the rest of us? Now I get it. She lives with you.”

Kit pressed her mouth to the screen. “I have no idea what’s going on. This evening’s gone bonkers. And what are you saying about me being sharp? Sharp in a good way? Do you mean astute?”

Neither Clyde nor Genevieve answered her. Clyde, instead, put both palms onto the top of his baseball hat and stared.

“You know what I think? I think I might go home now. This is one high-strung book club. Kit, are you ready to leave?”

“No. I want to sort all this out.”

“Sweetheart, you’re on your own. I’m heading back to my TV.”

“This isn’t . . . I’m not weird—I’m loving, embracing and accepting!” seethed Genevieve.

“I don’t know; I think you’d give Chuck Norris a run for his money.” He beckoned for Kit to join him and she walked out onto the porch, past Genevieve, and down the steps with her husband. They stood by the side of his truck. “Are you serious? You want to stay?”

“I’ll be fine. I want to get the truth out of Sasha, see what that was all about. And Genevieve needs to apologize too. She doesn’t even know you.”

“Don’t go getting in any brawls. Call me, I’ll come back. Or get a cab, that’d be even better.” He kissed her on the cheek and climbed up into his truck, hand-cranking his window down. “I can see now why you think Nelson’s so tough to deal with. Holy cow, better you than me.”

He pulled out onto the road and drove off over the lip of the hill.

Kit turned, her jaw set, and strode back up toward the lights of Genevieve’s house.

At first, Kit could find nobody inside. She wandered through the empty living room, the yoga mats abandoned on the floor. All the candles had been blown out, roughly, judging by the splatter of wax along the shelves. The kitchen lights were buzzing, but the stove had been switched off, the only sign of life the array of empty bottles on the countertop. From outside on the bamboo deck, shouts of laughter rippled in through the kitchen window.

Kit peeped outside, standing on tiptoe, leaning over the sink. She could just make out four feet on the ground in a row. Two people, sitting with their backs against the exterior wall of the kitchen. Kit went to the sliding patio door and peered out. There on the deck were Martin and Pierre. Pierre had put his jeans back on and a woollen hat, pulled far back on his tanned forehead. They murmured companionably, their voices low.

“You know what, Pete?” Martin said. “When I met you at my son’s party I thought you were a total asshole, but I got to tell you, I’m coming around to you.”

“That’s good, that’s important.” Pierre looked out over the deck and yard, his eyes lined with deep inner thought.

Martin sighed. “The problem is my wife’s crazy about you.”

“No . . .”

“She is, you don’t have to . . . she is.” Martin swirled his drink around the bottom of his glass. “But hey—I guess you’ve got more going on than me.”

“Take up yoga, man. You’ll get more women than you can possibly imagine.”

“I only want the one.”

Kit turned away from the patio and walked into the quiet of the living room.

From the kitchen Kit could hear the steady, earnest rhythm of three women talking. None of them interrupted each other: the goddess circle must be in session. Kit crept down the steps to the basement, keeping close to the wall. Hilary, Genevieve and Sasha sat on a futon near the far wall under the limp glow of a bare light bulb. They’d found a plaid blanket and covered their knees with it.

“When you get the flu,” Sasha was saying dreamily, “people take your kid for the whole day. It’s amazing. Last winter, my neighbour, Alison, took Harrison from, like, nine till five. It was the best day. I lay on the couch and watched MTV for eight hours. I fucking love the flu. This year I might lick random kids’ hands in the kindergarten coat area just to keep my germ count high.”

The three of them laughed together as Kit hid, wondering when Sasha had become the funny one.

“You should go sit in the Nelson police station. Talk about germy.”

“What on earth were you doing in there, Gen?” Hilary pulled the blanket up to her chin as she leaned forward.

“Reporting Kit’s hideous husband. Somebody has to take a stand.”

Kit could take no more and stepped out of the shadows. The three women stared at her like barn owls on a branch.

“Busted,” gaped Hilary.

“Could I have a word with you in the kitchen please, Genevieve?” Kit said.

“It’s Gen-vi-eve. And we’ll all come upstairs in a minute.”

Were they holding hands under the blanket? Kit looked from face to face. Genevieve’s was stony, Sasha’s guilty, Hilary’s downright horrified.

“Fine,” said Kit. “But just so you know, I heard everything you said just then. In case you weren’t sure.”

She turned and trod back up the stairs and into the kitchen, waiting for the others to exhale and start giggling, but everything stayed silent.

Pierre and Martin were still outside, and as Kit walked past the fridge she realized how hungry she was*. There’s never any decent food at book club*. She stopped and opened a cupboard, pulling out a bag of musty-smelling bread. She put one damp slice into the toaster and looked in the fridge for butter, finding something pasty and lard-coloured that appeared spreadable. At that moment the other three reappeared from the basement; Kit grabbed a knife from the sink and stared intently at the toaster.

“Feel free to help yourself.” Genevieve kept walking to the patio.

“Feel free to order takeaway,” Kit called after her retreating back.

“Are you okay?” Hilary bobbed by Kit’s shoulder. Kit didn’t reply, but took a large bite of toast and chewed it loudly. “I’ll just be outside if you need me.”

Hilary scampered out of the flak zone, leaving Kit alone in the kitchen with Sasha. They stood against opposing counters, facing each other.

“So, twenty minutes, hey?”

Sasha took a second to catch Kit’s meaning.

“I’m so sorry, Kit. I won’t let them out of my sight again. And I’m also sorry I told Sully to keep quiet about it. I probably shouldn’t have done that now that I think about it.”

Kit raised her eyebrows. “Now that you think about it?”

“You know, no harm done and all, like I said. And in the future, I won’t take them to the mall. I find it hard to concentrate on kids when I’m shopping.”

“I don’t know what the future looks like in your brain, Sasha, but in mine you’re not babysitting my kids.”

“No, but I’m happy to watch them if you and Clyde want to go for din—”

“Next time I go for dinner, I’m bringing my kids with me, handing them in at the coat check and taking a ticket. I think they’d be safer.”

Kit pushed forward off the kitchen counter, walking slowly with her toast onto the deck of the patio. Martin, Pierre, Genevieve and Hilary all sat in a line on a low wall. Sasha hung back in the kitchen, pivoting her toe on the linoleum.

“Oh, thank God,” Martin said, as Kit settled herself down between him and Pierre in the line. “We’re trying to guess what Pierre used to do in Vancouver but apparently we’re way off. It’s the entertainment industry, so I had TV presenter and Genevieve had model.” He paused and turned to his wife. “Don’t you think he’s too smart for a model? You’re being kind of insulting.”

“Will you tell us if we guess right?” Kit asked blandly. Pierre’s shiny self-confidence was clearly wearing thin. “Alright, then. Escort. Porn star.” She snapped her fingers. “Stripper.”

Pierre hung his head and nodded at Kit while Martin stared at him blankly.

“You’re shitting me!” Martin lifted both arms out in front of him, as if thanking the universe for a gift. “You were a stripper? How long ago? And where, exactly?”

Kit let out a long, droning laugh.

Pierre smiled ruefully.

“Strippergram. I made great money. Though when I go back to Van next month, I won’t be looking up my old boss. Not to sound materialistic, because obviously I’m beyond that, but yoga is so hot right now. It’s a gold mine.”

“What were you?” asked Kit. “I mean, what kind? Were you a naughty policeman?”

“I was Legolas, Lord of the Rings. I had a bow and arrow.”

“Did I call that or what?” Kit nudged Martin.

“I love Orlando Bloom. I think it’s the sad eyes. And he’s dapper. Have you seen him in a tux? Honey, did you hear that? Pierre used to be a strippergrammer. How totally un-Nelson.”

Martin folded his hands in his lap, grinning.

“We all have pathways, Martin, that lead us to—”

“Oh, stop talking like that,” snapped Kit, cutting Pierre off. “When are you leaving?”

“September.”

“And what’s the new job, then? Poster child for the new inferno extreme hot yoga? Paddle board hot yoga? You know it’s coming.”

Pierre frowned. “I’ve been asked to teach yoga, yes, at a new studio on the North Shore. It’s an American company with links to TV; they’re talking about a network deal right now. So . . . yeah. Very exciting.”

“I’ll be sure to set my PVR.” Kit gave Pierre a fake thumbs up as Sasha stepped out of the patio door holding a full bottle of tequila.

“Who’s got a network deal?” she trilled.

“Guru-boy.” Kit tilted her head at Pierre and yawned. “On some random Vancouver TV channel.”

“You’re moving back there? You have a place in the city?”

“My old apartment in Kits. I’ve had renters in it this whole time.”

“Kitsilano?” She said the word like it was an exotic treasure. “I love that place.”

Pierre got to his feet.

“Come visit,” he said to Sasha. “Or come get food with me right now. It’s time to refuel my system.”

He held his hand out to her, to an audible gasp from both Genevieve and Martin.

“She’s married!” Genevieve blurted.

“You are?” Pierre asked Sasha, his posture deflated.

“And even if she wasn’t . . . ,” snorted Kit.

“Actually, I’m not,” said Sasha. She took several swallows of tequila straight from the bottle and held it out for Kit to take.

“You’re seriously going for dinner with him?” Kit stared up at Sasha.

“But we can order in!” Genevieve squeaked.

“I’ve got the *Lord of the Rings* CD downstairs. Were there actual dance moves you had to learn? Stick around!”

Martin drained his glass. It was his fifth or sixth White Russian: he must have drunk a pint of cream by now.

Pierre didn’t take his gaze off Sasha and once everyone had stopped shouting, simply offered her his hand again.

“I’m not hungry and I’m not married and I’m not going for dinner. For fuck’s sake, you guys, why is everything such a drama? Take the fucking tequila!”

Sasha shoved the bottle into Kit’s hand and moved over to sit down on the wall next to Genevieve.

Pierre hesitated by the patio doors.

“Okay, well another time, maybe. Thanks Genevieve. Namaste, people.”

Martin waved, his neck craned forward. Kit swigged tequila and didn’t look at Pierre, who was taking his time leaving. What did he want? Applause?

“Thanks for inviting me, Genevieve. Good luck with . . . everything, Sasha.” Pierre’s eyebrows arched. “Have a good night. Maybe we’ll see you all next week in class?”

“I’m sure our spiritual paths will cross again soon.” Kit yawned and passed the tequila to Martin.

“A stripper?” Genevieve said to her husband as soon as Pierre had stepped through the sliding door. “That can’t be true.”

“He certainly has the physique.” Martin nodded, rubbing his chin. “And the charisma. It’s kind of a shame he switched jobs. For him, I mean. Financially.”

“Why does everyone love Pierre? The man’s a caricature!” Kit said.

“Oh, shut up. I don’t need your seal of approval,” Genevieve snapped. She grabbed the tequila bottle from her husband and sucked back the alcohol.

Kit’s face flushed and she headed to the kitchen for another piece of chalky paste on toast.

The five of them sat silently on the deck—Martin, buffering Kit from Genevieve, picked at the label of the tequila bottle, which now had only an inch of liquid left in it. Kit’s shoulders touched Sasha’s, causing each of them to shift away. Hilary perched on the wall of the Zen garden. Behind her, water trickled through an intricate Buddha shrine.

“That’s bad news about Pete moving away, eh?” Martin rolled up peelings of the bottle label and flicked them into the Asian lily pond. “Though perhaps it’s for the best.” He glanced sideways at his wife but she stared stoically ahead.

After a silence, Martin added, “Well, are you ladies going to talk about the book at all? If not, I’m going to bed.”

“I loved it,” said Kit, throwing both arms wide with her fists clenched. “Great writing. Really in-depth, considered use of the richness of language. You can tell the writer really pored over it and took her time crafting her sentences. There’s such originality, it’s not at all predictable. I especially like how Damian Grey, or whatever his name is, is forever showing up in jeans and a crisp, white shirt. He employs the same stylist as Homer Simpson, apparently. He has no other clothes.”

“Christian Grey. I love a man in a crisp, white shirt.” Hilary nodded.

“Maybe he goes to The Gap and buys them in bulk. Perhaps he thinks he’s found his look and is afraid to change it. *Look at me in my manly tailored shirt*. *I am really nailing it today*. He’s a rich bloke, isn’t he, so maybe he throws one away at night and rips a new one out of a package in the morning. Who needs a washing machine? Or he might be colour-blind and actually think he’s wearing a different shirt each day, and nobody’s thought to mention it to him yet. Maybe that’s why it’s called *Fifty Shades of Grey!* It’s a colour-blind thing.”

“You didn’t really love it, did you?” Hilary looked tired.

“Not really, no.” Kit chewed her fingernail. How could she go on in this book club with these buffoons? She had nothing to work with. “My real opinion, if I’m honest, is that if this is the book everyone’s reading, it’s the demise of Western civilization.”

Martin, who had gotten up from the deck and tiptoed into the house while Kit was talking, jogged back out holding his well-leafed copy of the novel and a bottle of vodka.

“Look what I found! Let’s take a look at the first page, shall we?” Martin’s face was eager, now that he seemed to have been promoted from cook to full book club member. “My high school English teacher used to say there’s nothing more important in a book than the first paragraph. She was so hot. She had hair like a Charlie’s Angel.” He settled down on the edge of the low wall next to Hilary, handing her the vodka. “Shall we have a read?”

“Let’s,” said Kit.

“Which Charlie’s Angel?” asked Genevieve. “Hot hair how?”

Martin didn’t answer that question, his eyes on the page. His voice sounded surprisingly smooth in the wash of the summer night as he read, and the further he got in the paragraph, the more his toes wiggled.

‘“I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror. Damn my hair—it just won’t behave, and damn Katherine Kavanagh for being ill and subjecting me to this ordeal. I should be studying for my final exams, which are next week, yet here I am trying to brush my hair into submission. *I must not sleep with it wet. I must not sleep with it wet.* Reciting this mantra several times, I attempt, once more, to bring it under control with the brush. I roll my eyes in exasperation and gaze at the pale, brown-haired girl with blue eyes too big for her face staring back at me, and give up. My only option is to restrain my wayward hair in a ponytail and hope that I look semi presentable.’” He smiled around the group. “Shall I read more?” he offered.

“If you do,” said Kit, “I’m going to have to get a fork from the kitchen drawer and stick it into my eye.”

“What’s the matter with it?” asked Hilary.

“That is the worst opening paragraph I’ve ever heard in my life.”

Martin blew air out of his lips like a horse.

“Well,” he said, “let’s see here. It’s not so bad. There’s lots going on. Well, okay, it’s mostly about hair. Huh. What else . . .”

“Do you have a thing for hair?” asked Genevieve, her eyes dead like a fish. “You never said.”

“I like that she’s mad about how she looks. I have days like that.” Hilary spoke meekly, awaiting Kit’s next thunderous wave to hit her from across the deck.

“Her hair. Riveting.” Kit crossed her arms on her chest. “Here, give me that vodka, Hilary. Let’s have a drinking game: every time we hear the word *hair* we have to drink. Who’s in? We might have to call an ambulance by page 4.”

“I think it’s good you get a picture of her from the start. We know her eyes are blue and her face is pale,” offered Sasha. “Though that does sound gross. I’d have preferred it if she was attractive.”

“Yes, it’s very sophisticated writing to have a character stare in the mirror in paragraph one and describe herself for us. That’s not basic writing at all.”

Martin and Hilary paused, confused by the thickness of Kit’s sarcasm. Kit groaned, throwing her hands up.

“It’s just . . . it’s like nobody cares anymore how a story is told, or how a sentence is written. It’s lazy, it’s just pop culture . . . I mean, could the writer have come up with more clichés? And she writes *taciturn* about a thousand times a page. It’s just junk, junk, junk. Why are readers around the world so keen to devolve?”

Kit licked her lips. Nobody else spoke. She stood, walked the few steps across to Hilary, snatched the vodka bottle and sat back down again against the wall, cracking the bottle cap. She drank and then breathed for a minute before launching into a fresh tirade.

“Don’t worry, though, because there’s sex coming, as if you didn’t buy the book for that reason. Some rich Prince Charming CEO is about to appear, to sweep us off our poor little feet, in a thrilling modern-day let’s-all-be-dominated kind of way. The world is lapping this shitty writing up, gorging itself on it. I thought it was a gigantic pile of shite. Along with every other book this club has come up with. I mean, what will next month’s literary paragon be? *Twilight: Breaking Dawn*? Shall we sit around and discuss the beauty of vampire love? Maybe one day somebody will let *me* pick the book.”

“That’s never happening,” muttered Genevieve.

“I liked *Fifty Shades*!” chimed in Martin, White-Russian delayed. “I found that after I’d figured out the plot, I could really just scroll to the naughty bits. I read the whole trilogy that way.”

“Well, that’s sad.” Genevieve’s face creased. “Is that what you call a sex life? Those people aren’t real, you know, Martin. Neither are the Morris dancers.”

She grabbed the bottle from Kit. Martin’s bewildered face looked around the group.

“I liked the book. For me it was fun to escape into it,” said Hilary.

“Yeah, well. You probably watch reality TV, too.”

Kit didn’t notice Hilary’s face redden and instead leaned forward past Martin’s thin frame to get a straight shot at Genevieve.

“What the hell were you doing reporting my husband to the police? Are you completely off your head? I think you owe me a little more of an explanation. Or, here’s an idea—an apology?”

“I don’t owe you a thing and even if I did want to apologize I’d never get a word in edgewise, the amount of time you take up with your railroading, intimidating rants on book after book at every single meeting of this club. Perhaps if you gave someone else a chance to speak and spent less time airing your superiority complex, you’d hear more.”

“We’re not talking about me. We’re talking about my husband, who has nothing to do with—”

“Your husband was seriously rude to me and violated my property when he had no reas—”

“Violated your property? He pinged your antenna, for God’s sake! You can drop the attitude. Get over yourself, Jen-a-veeve.” Kit punched out the three syllables, knowing they’d each hit their target.

“It’s Joh—” began Genevieve.

“No, it’s not. Your name’s probably not even Genevieve! It’s probably Jennifer, said the plain old English way, just like Pierre’s is definitely Peter. You two are as pretentious as each other.”

Genevieve’s face reddened and she turned her back on Kit, raising the vodka bottle high into the air and chugging from it.

Martin sat up straight and threw a pebble at Kit.

“She can call herself whatever she wants! Who made you Sergeant in Charge of Names?” He burped and shuddered. “You’re just mad Pierre doesn’t like you as much as he likes us. And don’t call my wife pretentious.”

“Don’t defend me, Martin, it’s degrading. Also, Pierre doesn’t like you.”

“As if he could defend you. He’s half the size of you,” muttered Kit.

“Kit! What has Martin’s height got to do with anyth—” Sasha piped in.

“Coming from you, Sasha? You choose friends based on what they look like. How come none of your friends are better looking than you?”

Hilary perched on the edge of the wall, as if about to stand. “Can we get back to the book, please?” Her voice shook when she spoke.

“Let’s hear from Sasha!” shouted Genevieve, waving the vodka bottle. “She’s the genius who chose this month’s book! Let’s hear what she has to say about it.”

“Fuck off,” said Sasha.

“She’s waiting for the movie,” grunted Kit.

“Ladies, ladies, stop the madness!” Martin staggered up and turned to face the line-up of women along the wall. “You’re all under arrest.” He wiped his mouth and suddenly pressed his fingers together in an imaginary handgun. “Isolated!” he shouted, shooting at Sasha, ending the word with a boyish ricochet of a bullet. He turned on Kit. “Misfit!” Another gunfire crack. “Uptight!” He fired at Genevieve, then blew on his finger and holstered his weapon. All three women stared at him, stunned, as he sat down on the pony wall next to Hilary and picked at a piece of skin on the palm of his hand.

“You forgot me,” Hilary said softly.

Martin shrugged. “You’d be Sad,” he said, “but I ran out of bullets.”

He didn’t make the gunshot sound. There was silence on the deck. Martin chewed at his palm and after a moment, cleared his throat. “You know, they’re just . . . adjectives. Who cares what I think?”

“Exactly,” said Genevieve, her voice dangerously quiet. “Who cares what you think?”

“*Misfit* isn’t an adjective.” Kit stared back at everyone.

“I apologize, girls, for the behaviour of my husband.” Genevieve wiped her chin. “He thinks he’s clever. His sister’s the same way.”

Martin raised his face; his voice, when he spoke, was measured. “You invite your friends over to our house to boss them around. You force me to make dumbass appies month after month and you never say thanks. You think you’re better than all of us. You tell your guest she has a superiority complex, failing to notice your own. You worship the yoga teacher, to the point where it’s embarrassing to watch. You don’t speak to me, except to tell me to behave, like I’m Hunter and I’m six. The only thing you’ve given me in months is a to-do list.”

“Oh, stop it, Martin. You sound pathetic.”

“Where’s my wife gone? You never used to be this . . . pinched.” He threw his arms out to the side, blocking Hilary’s head from view. “It’s all about everyone else’s failures and never about yours. You could take a minute, look at yourself.”

“Look at myself?” Genevieve roared. “Well, it’s not like *you’ve* been looking at me! And excuse me for noticing, Martin, but I think someone else around here is all about the yoga teacher too!”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake! He was hitting on *me*!” Sasha blew air through her nostrils.

“She doesn’t mean you,” said Kit.

“What the hell do you think I’ve been doing the past year?” Genevieve continued, leaning up from the wall. “I’ve been bettering myself and bettering myself and what have you all been doing?”

“Oh, shut your face,” said Kit.

“You didn’t *need* to better yourself! Who told you, you did?” Martin’s ears were bright red. “Jesus Christ, what’s happened to you? The weight of the universe hangs over our house: how is that *better*? You won’t even eat Mini-Wheats anymore because they’re artificially frosted. We should never have come here.”

“I am *trying* to be a better person!” squawked Genevieve, sitting up straight on the floor, her fists clenched.

“You are trying to be a *different* person. It’s not the same thing,” Martin snapped.

“I don’t even know where you’ve . . . You’re not even . . . Why won’t you . . . I’m not . . . I don’t even . . .” Genevieve slammed the bottle down by her thigh, where it tipped and spilled vodka into the cracks of the deck. Genevieve’s eyes were tightly closed, her mouth jabbering in a white rage.

“I want to go home,” said Hilary.

“I am fun . . . How can you say . . . I have no . . . You’re so . . . Why is it always me that has to . . . Life’s so . . . You never even look at . . . You’re meant to . . . We need to . . .”

At some point soon, Genevieve’s neck vein was going to burst. Sasha and Kit stared at her, transfixed by the venom.

“I WANT TO GO HOME!” screamed Hilary. She stood up to shout, her fists clenched together at the top of her thighs. She took a raking breath. “This is the worst book club ever! I get nothing from any of you! Some sisterhood this turned out to be! I come here to feel stronger—how stupid is that? Nobody notices me, that’s the problem: in my house it’s like I’m wearing a magical coat that makes me transparent. And you know what the stupid thing is? Every month when I come here, I don’t *want* to be seen or heard! Especially not when I’m trying to eat a goddamn finger food, pardon my French, and Genevieve’s beady eyes are boring into the side of my face. A girl’s got to eat, you know! It’s basic biology! No, the best I can hope for is to be invisible here, rather than actually told I’m an idiot. What’s the point? I hardly recover from one book club before the next one rolls round and if I ever run into any of you in between meetings you hardly even acknowledge me. What was that in the mall last week, Sasha? Your phone’s more interesting than I am! We’re supposed to support each other, like Mother Abbess and all the nuns in the nunnery! I put a lot of time and hard work into trying to make other people’s lives nicer—and you know what, here’s a good example of not being thanked: I AM THE PARKING METER FAIRY! Yes, I am! I am and I do a lot of work—it’s not common knowledge that echidnas have babies called puggles, you know! Nobody knew that until I pointed it out on a Post-it note and yes, you can say I have a lot to answer for, Kit, and you can snigger about it when I’m not in the room, Sasha, but what do you two contribute to this town? You two have nothing nice to say about anything, ever, and nobody likes a Negative Nelly. Why is everything such a coolness test? God knows life’s hard enough these days without you guys piling on the pressure. The only person who’s noticed I’m hanging by a thread is Martin, and he’s not even in the goddess circle! You can take your stupid meetings and you can stick them in your butt. I’m done. You’re a bunch of horrible people; not one of you said thank you for my presents or any of the million things I do for you guys, apart from Kit and she was lying. That’s IT. It’s over. I’m taking you all off speed dial as soon as I get home!”

She walked through the patio doors, and marched on through the house. The front door slammed shut.

Genevieve breathed hard, spit glistening on her chin. Martin sat down on the wall again. He raked his hand through his thin hair and then held the back of his neck with his palm. Kit’s mind raced. She was stuck on a carnival ride, with everyone shouting and everything spinning, and she couldn’t remember where she’d got on or how to get off again. She was aware she had a husband she ought to defend, but she didn’t know where to start. And Hilary was the bloody Parking Meter Fairy?

Standing up, Kit wiped grit from her bare feet. She took a deep breath and steadied herself in front of Sasha and Genevieve, clasping her hands together, as if delivering a speech at Grade 12 assembly. Sasha and Genevieve stared up at her, swaying slightly, dark circles beneath the hoods of their eyes.

“If this is telling-the-truth night, then here: I’m pissed off, Genevieve, because my husband is a good bloke and you have no right to comment on him if you don’t know him. He is not in the least bit hideous.” She scratched her head. “People talk a lot of bullshit around here, or perhaps it’s only me that thinks that. Is it just me?”

She looked around, taking in all the faces—Martin’s was unhelpfully blank.

“Maybe you all make sense to each other. Martin told me earlier tonight I don’t fit in and I need to accept that. I think he’s right. It’s like there’s a set of rules on how to live in Nelson and nobody’s told me them, so maybe it is impossible for me.”

“I thought we were friends,” said Sasha, still looking up at Kit. “You’re the bullshit.”

“I’m not . . . I wasn’t . . . we are friends. Kind of.”

“Well, isn’t that nice? Talk about a vote of confidence.”

“Don’t act so superior—you don’t think we’re real friends either! You only call me when you want me to take Harrison. I’m just part of your roster for child-avoidance.”

“Wow,” said Martin. “The fun doesn’t stop.”

Sasha closed both eyes and held both forefingers up straight as she spoke.

“Say what you want about my shitty parenting but the goddamn truth of the matter is I had a . . . a moment of clarity when I lost my son and yours—yes, sorry about that—and I’ve been fucking trying very hard ever since to be a better mom. I even know where the rebel alliance attack base is in *The Empire Strikes Back* now. Do *you*? I mean, granted, I’d rather have gone on a shopping trip to Spokane with you than hang out at Mama Banana any fucking day of the week, but wouldn’t everyone? I mean, come on! Who of us would seriously choose to spend a single second in a room full of rubber floor mats with some song about a nickel and a pickle playing at five thousand decibels? Apart from Hilary, I mean? I swear it’s not just me who finds certain things about parenting gross; it’s just nobody else will admit it. And it’s bullshit that I only want you around to babysit my kid. Bullshit! I counted you as one of my best friends. I thought we were buddies and then it’s like a light goes off. You flick a switch and sorry, no more friendship for you. I don’t understand it. I might have issues, but you’re a crappy friend. A really seriously shitty one. I didn’t just call you to use you.”

She glanced up at Kit. In the pause that followed, it was expected that Kit would speak, or explain herself in some way. Instead, she chewed her lip, looking at her own hands.

“Feel free to cut in,” said Sasha, her face flushing. “I mean, it’s kind of upsetting being dumped. What? I’m not good enough for you?”

“No, it’s just I expect people to be a certain way, I suppose, and they turn out to be different. I can’t find people who are like me. Or maybe I’m just homesick.”

“If you hate it here so much you’re free to leave town any time,” Genevieve was suddenly able to form sentences again.

“Why do we all have to be like you?” Sasha tilted her head.

“Believe me, I’m trying to leave town but my husband won’t allow it.”

Kit only realized after she’d said it how insulting that sounded.

“So what, we’re your consolation prize? You come here because you didn’t get a better offer?” Genevieve sniffed. “I’d rather you just left us alone if you think it’s such a jail sentence. I’d be happy to drive you to the airport.”

“You say you want friends but you’re impossible to get to know,” Sasha said.

Genevieve and Sasha seemed to be forming an unexpectedly united front.

“Do you consider me a jail sentence?” Martin turned to his wife.

Kit and Sasha both winced. The awkward silence that ensued gave Kit enough of a gap that she could regroup.

“I’m not going around trying to hurt people. What happened to having a laugh and talking about telly? You can’t take a single breath in Nelson without someone telling you you’re doing it wrong and meanwhile everyone’s congratulating themselves on how open-minded the town is! It’s the smuggest, most fascist place I’ve ever lived and I’m sick to death of all the judgment.”

“You’re sick to death of judgment?” Genevieve laughed. “Judging people is all you do! You should run for mayor!” She noticed the vodka bottle seeping to her right and picked it up again, sipping with one eye closed.

“You want to have a big heart-to-heart therapy session? Then here, how’s this? The women in this book club, all of us here—we’re only friends because we panicked! Everyone with kids is panicking! We’re all so frantic for support that we rush in helter-skelter; we’re drowning, we’ll grab onto any old life jacket. Any port in a storm. Then we wake up and see who we’re in with. And believe me, it’s very surprising.” She rubbed her forehead, over-widening her eyes at the relentless heaviness of everything. “This town loves to over-analyze, over-parent, over-legislate; I’m opting out of all that, and I don’t care anymore where it leaves me.”

“I’m not friends with you out of panic,” said Sasha. “I’m lonely, Martin’s right, but that’s not why I chose you.”

“You’re so arrogant! Everything you say is narrow-minded. There’s a lot to be said for acceptance, you know. And loyalty.” Genevieve slammed the vodka bottle against her chest. “My heart is open.”

“Oh, for crying out loud,” said Kit. “Drop the act! Pierre’s gone, you know! Why not admit you’re miserable, just like the rest of us?”

“My heart is open. I am a conduit of pure love.”

With each word, she staccatoed a thump of her fist on her thigh.

“Pure love, my arse. You’re lost and sad and brainwashed. And Martin agrees with me.”

“Don’t drag me into it,” said Martin.

Genevieve threw the bottle aside. It rolled across the deck into a storm drain. “My heart is open! My mind is pure! I am a serene swan! I am a being of light!”

She screeched the sentence over and over in a gritted mantra as she flew up from the wall and tackled Kit into the vegetable garden. Kit screamed, covering her head, shouting for Martin to help her. Martin snapped alert and rushed to separate the two women while Sasha twirled her hair, watching.

“Nutter!” shouted Kit, pinned by Genevieve, who was busily grinding dirt into her face. Kit grappled to contain Genevieve’s fists as she grunted out breathless words. “If the . . . Dalai . . . Lama . . . could see you . . . now!”

She grabbed the back of Genevieve’s head and started smearing mud, too. Martin threw himself on top of the two women in a frenzied dog pile, slapping each woman on the forehead, shouting for them to stop.

“Bitch! I hate you! I’m kicking your sorry ass out of book club!”

“I know! I hate you too!” shouted Kit.

“Genevieve, do you hate *me*? Am I out of book club?” yelled Martin from the top level of the sprawl.

“Fuck *off,* Martin!” Genevieve batted behind her with a flat palm. “Fuck off! You were never in book club. And of *course* I don’t hate you; it’s you that hates me.”

Everyone exhaled and went limp then. There was no more writhing. Martin lay on top of both women, spread-eagled like he’d been pinned by a tree.

“Well,” he said as he laid his head flat against his wife’s back, “talk about a muddle.”

It was Kit who first saw the legs standing by the patio doors. A pair of legs in jeans and well-worn flip-flops. She craned her neck up to see who stood there, straining her neck against the weight of two people.

Pierre stood just in front of the patio doors, both hands on his head. Martin pushed Genevieve’s face flat onto Kit’s chest, propping himself up. He pulled his knees back under him and staggered onto the safety of the deck, smoothing the part in his hair. Then, fumbling a hand backward behind him, he waved himself over to the wall and sat down. Genevieve rolled off the top of Kit and rested beside her. The two of them lay flat on the ground, arms out to the side, palms up.

“What’s all this?” Pierre said sadly.

“Nothing,” said Genevieve. “How much did you see?”

Kit saw Genevieve’s desperation, how it beat out of her face like heat.

“I’ve been having some trouble with my Savasana,” Kit said quickly. “Genevieve was just giving me a few pointers. Goodness knows I need a cleaner heart-centre.”

The corner of Genevieve’s mouth twitched then and Kit caught it.

“Martin said Genevieve’s uptight.” Sasha sat on the deck with her back against the wall of the house. She ran a strand of hair between her thumb and forefinger, her voice flat. “Genevieve said Kit’s a bully and super arrogant, which—newsflash—she is, though it might just be because she’s foreign. We didn’t solve that one. Kit’s a crappy friend and bails on people once they love her and Genevieve also told her to leave town and that she’d happily drive her to the airport. Kit said Genevieve’s miserable, just like the rest of us. Hilary told us we’re all crap and went home. She’s the Parking Meter Fairy. Genevieve went fucking bananas and started a mud fight, and kicked Kit out of book club, but then just now Genevieve told Martin she doesn’t hate him, so that’s something, and it sounds like Martin still digs her, although what the hell those yellow shorts are all about is anyone’s guess. I think I got it all. I’m just sitting here. Did you come back for me?”

Sasha inspected a split end and then blinked up at him.

“I forgot my yoga mat. I need it for class in the morning. But . . . unless . . . you sure you don’t want to come get food with me? No? Just checking.” Pierre shook his head and turned toward Genevieve. “And as for you, what a shame. You’re supposed to be finding your inner truth.”

Genevieve leaned up on her elbows and sucked mud from her teeth, spitting it into the flowerbed. “Oh, whatever, Legolas.”

Pierre took a step through the patio doors, exhaling noisily as he left.

“False prophet!” Kit shouted after him, her eyes darting again at Genevieve while she pulled clumps of dirt from her hair, inspecting each handful before sprinkling them back onto the ground. Genevieve said nothing. Kit stood slowly and put her hands on her hips.

“Is that it, then? Is book club over? Right, then. Good stuff. I’ll see myself out, shall I?”

She paused for a second. Everyone slumped on the deck apart from Genevieve, who heaved herself up from the vegetable garden and clambered down to sit next to Martin. Kit wandered toward the door, waiting for someone to say something or call her back. She walked on through the still of the house to the front door, and nobody followed her.

Kit

Driving home from town, Kit noticed all the pumpkins on the front stoops of people’s houses. They glowed in various shades of orange, making each home cozy. One house she passed had about twelve crowding the front deck; it was a miracle they could even get in the door.

“Mom,” Sully rasped from the back seat. “Can I have a play date this weekend?” It was the last week of October, six weeks into kindergarten.

“Who with, buddy?” Kit glanced in her rearview mirror, then back at the leaf-mulched road.

“Hunter?”

“Maybe!” she cringed. “He’s around, buddy. We just need to phone him and set something up.”

“Can you text him, Mom? Right now?”

“Not while I’m driving.”

Kit turned the stereo up.

They parked and walked through the gate and onto the deck. The latch barely opened, rusted by the damp of colder weather: Clyde hadn’t got around to fixing it before he’d been shipped off to his new job in the oil patch. He’d been transferred there—three weeks in, one week out. At least the money was good.

Walking around the corner to the back door, Kit glanced at the door handle like she did every Saturday these days, but the procession of crumpled linen bags full of garage sale gifts had stopped. Kit unlocked the door.

She had seen Hilary only once since the August book club. They’d passed on a narrow street, the wing mirrors of their vehicles practically nudging. Hilary sat in her minivan, staring steadfastly ahead. The pom-pom on her toque was absolutely massive, and through two sets of closed car windows, Kit could hear the uplifting chorus of “Climb Every Mountain.”

Kit, Sully and Pip piled through the mud room and into the kitchen, kicking off sneakers high into the air. There was a crispness to the month, and with the tableau of fall colours, it was the town’s prettiest season. Kit always liked the return to jeans and sneakers; there was something friendly about it. People in England used to lament the end of summer: to them fall was depressing. For Kit, the Canadian fall felt reassuring. It smelled good. It felt like a season of knowing who you are. She cooked turkeys, drank red wine, shouted at the hockey on TV like Clyde had taught her. Of course, all of that was more fun with company.

“You’ve got hockey in half an hour,” she shouted to Sully as he ran to his room.

Kit zipped Sully’s clean shirt and shorts into his bag. Saturdays were now swamped by hockey. This fall, her schedule had sped up and she had little time now to wander around, or walk the dog, or sit in a coffee shop on a Saturday. She wondered whether the same was true for the other moms—whether it was still part of the same rite of passage. Were Sasha, Hilary and Genevieve this busy?

The last time Kit went grocery shopping in Safeway, she had passed Sasha in the cereal aisle. On top of a pile of fat-free items in Sasha’s grocery basket glinted a pregnancy test, the blue of the box shining bright under the store’s electric light. The sight made Kit stand stock still, but Sasha had floated on by, clearing her throat but never actually speaking. That day Kit went home without all the groceries she needed.

Kit was grappling with Sully’s hockey stick, trying to angle it past the stove and out the back door, when the phone rang. She considered letting the answer machine get it, but it might be Clyde so she dropped the body-sized hockey bag in the doorway and leapt over it to get to the phone before the machine clicked in.

“Hello! Hi,” said Kit, breathless from the scramble. From the back door, Sully shouted, “Mom let’s go! Come on, Mom!” Kit flapped her hand at him, frowning. She plugged one ear with her spare hand.

“Oh. Hello? I didn’t think you’d be in.” It was Genevieve’s voice, the unmistakable clip of it.

Kit paused, her mind racing. “No, I’m in. It’s me,” she said, cringing at the obviousness of her statement. “Is this Genevieve?”

“It is.”

There was another long pause while the line fizzed electricity between their heads. Kit fiddled with the pages of the Fall Leisure Guide in front of her on the counter.

Genevieve coughed. “It’s October, as you . . . It’s October. I am calling you with the title of this month’s book.” Kit sat down then, hard onto the ledge of the old heritage radiator. She didn’t speak. “I know we missed September, but book club is next Saturday, so you have a week to read it. I hope that’s enough time. I hear you’re solo parenting.”

Kit took a breath. “I thought you . . . I thought I was . . .”

Another crackling silence. “October’s book is *The Lucky One* by Nicholas Sparks.”

“Nicholas Sparks? Is it a beautiful love story?” Kit smiled.

“I’m only on page 21, but so far it seems to be heading in that direction, yes.”

“I bet it is. Did you choose it?”

“No. I let Hilary.”

“Hilary’s back in?” Kit gaped. “How is she?” Outside the kitchen window, Sully chased his sister down the yard with the garden hose. Kit shifted her back to the glass, ignoring the yelling. “And how’s Martin? Is he doing the catering?”

“No. It’s a potluck. Which means we all bring something.”

“I know what a potluck is, Genevieve.”

“Okay, but from what I’ve heard, immigrating is a learning curve.” Was Genevieve making a joke? It was the first time she’d let the pronunciation of her name go uncorrected. There was a pause. “Anyway, Sasha says she’s bringing the alcohol even though she won’t drink. She’s detoxing, apparently. She says she’s only coming because they just made a movie of *The Lucky One* with Zac Efron in it. I’ve no clue who that is.”

“He’s about twelve. Sasha’s a perv,” said Kit.

Genevieve exhaled sharply in what might have been a laugh or a smile. Kit smiled too.

“So, if a potluck means we all bring something, who’s *we*?”

Genevieve took her time to answer; Kit waited while she heard Genevieve fidget, the receiver scraping against her chin.

“It’s all of us,” she said, finally. “It’s book club.”

Sully and Pip thundered back into the house, both of them soaking wet and outraged: *Mom, mom, look what she did! Mommy, wet! You! No! Get off!* On they bickered, while outside the window, the dog chased the neighbours down the line of the fence.

Kit stared at her life, at the yelling children in the mud room, at the dishes in the sink, the dust bunnies of dog hair under the sofa. Gripping the phone to her ear, she turned and leaned her shoulder against the window pane, her head resting against the glass. “Just us four?” Kit asked.

“Yes.”

“I’ll be there at eight,” Kit said, and with no intention whatsoever of reading the book, she hung up the phone.