



“Transporting storytelling (in more ways than one).”

ANDREW PYPER

THE
SOCIETY
OF
EXPERIENCE

+
a novel

+
MATT CAHILL

A black and white photograph of a street scene. In the center, a utility pole stands tall, topped with a street light fixture. The background is filled with the dense, dark foliage of trees. The foreground shows the blurred, light-colored roofs of buildings, suggesting a street-level perspective. The overall tone is somber and atmospheric.

**THE
SOCIETY
OF
EXPERIENCE**

MATT CAHILL

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For Ingrid

“Time is no law of nature,” she said. “It is a plan. When you look at it with awareness, or start to touch it, then it starts to disintegrate.”

Peter Høeg, *Borderliners*



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I WAS IN TWO PLACES. Half of me sitting up in my bed in St. Mike's Hospital, early March, waiting for something other than the certainty of my breath and the sound of footsteps outside my door to break the vacuum. Half of me was stuck in January.

The nurse was due; it was seven p.m. I tried to focus on whatever routines were available to me, whatever I could look forward to, as opposed to being whisked into the past. Her green eyes tracking me, wary when we exchanged glances. Being observed wasn't comforting, especially when it was just the two of us. I remember her dark, short hair, and her tenuous manner, as if figuring out what it was she was supposed to be doing.

Anyone could see what I'd done to myself. It was naive to wish otherwise, though I continued to do so. She'd been pleasant and attended to me efficiently. Sometimes I'd think I was alone, but she would be in the room, snatching glances at me in the mirror.

I'd arrived on a stretcher smeared with blood, unconscious, oblivious to the voices of people shouting out the details of what I'd done. I couldn't help thinking of the mess waiting for me when I'd get home, and I kicked myself for not being lucid through it all, as if I'd missed out on a good story to tell.

I couldn't remember her name. Did she even wear a name tag? All I knew was that she never mentioned my suicide attempt when she was tending to me, inspecting the stitches, never poking her fingers into my shame. But I wanted to be punished. A part of me wanted someone to walk in, slam the door and yell at me – give me what I deserved. I didn't feel like I merited the nurse's attention. She caught me once, crying, my sewn-up forearm exposed. Nerves under sutures, under cotton bandages, on fire. She'd come from behind the dividing curtain. I'd assumed my sobbing was out of earshot. My face was flushed and covered in sweat.

I wish I could be one of those people who could do terrible things without regret, or at least do them well enough that I didn't have the opportunity to look back and regret them.

“Are you okay, Mr. van der Lem?”

Her green eyes. I could barely look up.

I was under observation for obvious reasons. She stepped closer, tentatively, locking eyes with me, then she formed a word that never passed her lips. I couldn't figure out what it was she tried to say – maybe she did say it and my body was too busy processing the remnants of the pills. I smiled politely and waved her off with my good arm: I wasn't worth it. She hesitated, as if wanting to say more but unsure, glancing over her shoulder toward voices in the hallway. She left my room and I couldn't remember her name or whether I ever knew it to begin with.

All of the things I didn't want to think about worked themselves into my mind, crowding out the rest, past versus present. January versus March. Sometimes I sat up for hours, waiting for her – not the regular orderly, but her – to come and break the silence. And for the life of me I couldn't remember her name, or even her voice.

“Derrick.”

I’m convinced it was a dream. I woke up on the second night and saw someone in the dark who I thought was her, leaning over, doing two things: sorting through my clothes and staring at me.

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I HAD ONE eye on the alley, the other minding the ice puddles dotting the asphalt. I sauntered along in the January chill, snapping photographs and collecting my thoughts. It was part of a network of tucked-away lanes stretching several blocks along the northern length of West Queen West. I was craving a cigarette, the little kick it used to give me. Nancy Sinatra’s Bond ballad, “You Only Live Twice,” played in my earbuds. I was scanning for new graffiti, new arrangements of debris casting shadows in the noon sun, away from the white noise of shoppers and brunchers. I was looking for answers. No matter that I came home with more questions. No matter that Karen kept asking for her Leica back.

I got a call on my cell. It was the daughter of the brother of my dad’s second wife. I called them step-somethings.

I lost track of what I was doing in that moment, straining to understand what I was being told. Someone I barely knew was telling me something profound that I couldn’t process. Her voice on the phone sounded pre-recorded. Then something inside me popped loose and all of my movements felt automatic.

A stranger turned the corner ahead, walking toward me, his dog on a lead. He was younger, maybe by five years, rimmed hat, unshaven. It was just the three of us and there was no way for me to turn around or look away without drawing more

attention to myself. I would've preferred to be alone with my thoughts, whether or not I liked them, and not have people invade my space while I was on the goddamned phone, struggling to hear something I was trying very, very hard to both clarify and dismiss.

Tattoos. Tattoos on his neck. I bet if he took off his jacket his arms were inked like high school textbooks. We passed each other, inches from each other's shoulders, his shepherd obediently minding its business. Ink was cheap and tattoos were permanent. Not even my most basic beliefs felt assured. I hated him. I hated the permanence of his commitment.

The phone call ended. It was a completely mundane, completely forgettable conversation.

My dad had died.

I lost my footing on a patch of ice and nearly fell on my ass like Josée Chouinard. I recovered, knees awkwardly bent for balance, arms outstretched as if walking a circus tightrope. Karen's camera dangled from its thin leather strap, the tip of the lens inches from hitting the asphalt. After a moment of deep breaths I turned around. The dog walker hadn't paid attention. Nancy Sinatra was still singing in my ears.

Dad had died.

+ + +

INSTEAD OF CLARITY — or the nostalgic regret I assumed would organically materialize after he died — I felt a vacuum. The first thing I did was call the person who had hurt me second-most. We hadn't spoken in months, but we settled into post-coital intimacy like snakes coiling.

"I read his book, Derrick." Karen lying naked, spooning. She meant the new one.

I couldn't form words – my windpipe swollen. I'd called her as soon as I'd ambled home, and she invited me over too easily.

"Little essays," she said. I hated the way she filled the silence. "Pieces about little . . . obscure locations in Europe and South-east Asia. He was so good at that."

I preferred silence to her voice. I wanted to grab her copy of *Rosado's Atoll* and tear it in half. I lay numb beside her, my erection subsiding like a tantrum. I didn't have time to know what I was doing – good or bad – sex with the ex, staring at her flame red hair in the tungsten bedroom light, hoping that she wouldn't turn around, that I could leave her here whenever I wanted, encased in amber.

He travelled extensively. Had. Thirty-seven countries articulated in a store of notebooks and papers sought after by aficionados, and catalogued by York University and the National Archives. All said, they contained his musings on at least 138 cities, hamlets, counties and states across the world; places portrayed as alive, uneasily inhabited by less-alive people. Yet, over a forty-year career, Peter van der Lem rarely wrote about his hometown of Toronto, referring to it only as "the abandoned cathedral." He refused to explain what that meant. In our sporadic conversations, which I kept brief for my own sake, he sometimes tried to instill a conspiratorial notion: the city's shape and behaviour had been constructed by more than greed and circumstance, the same elements that underscored the creation of other major centres. He treated Toronto with suspicion, but was paradoxically unable to abandon it himself. He told me once there was a flow of power beyond city hall and the pink palace of the legislature at Queen's Park. Something buried long ago in a drunken mistake, like Garrison Creek forced into a pipe, active underneath the soil of everyday life but invisible. There was

a star chamber, a group who dealt with the real business of the city. He neglected to go into detail, and I always found the topic off-putting, so I never pushed him to elaborate. I figured he was making excuses for his lack of belonging, and creating straw men to do his bidding.

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It was his heart. They found him in his car, parked outside a grocery store. His leg was locked in place, his foot pressed firmly on the brake pedal for the better part of an hour before someone discovered him and called an ambulance. People thought he'd fallen asleep, his white Audi TT idling restlessly.

I remember the sound of my voice when I called Karen, the distracted urgency of the shock setting in.

"My dad's died," I said. You only get to say that once.

I couldn't remember what we'd talked about when I got to her place. I had to keep checking that I was breathing. She had herbal tea and managed to remind me that I still had her camera. In a fit of desperation I reached for her, I held her. Without him around everything felt unformed. Past, present and future walk into a bar, stunned.

+ + +

"EXCUSE ME, SIR?"

I turned around and this older guy approached me, a weathered face wearing a blue denim jacket. His hair swept back in a wave of grey and nicotine gold. He was unshaven and his lips were cracked and swollen.

"Excuse me," he said.

He'd caught me standing in the middle of a parking lot, on the outskirts of the Distillery District in the east end. I was holding two bags of office supplies. I can't remember what I'd bought. Toner? Paper? I was rooted, gazing into

the distance, and must have looked like a performance artist. I was staring at an old warehouse; its archways, which once framed busy carriage ports, were censored with brickwork. I'd walked aimlessly, crossing downtown as if waiting for someone to stop me. I couldn't do it. I didn't have that sort of skill, the filters and instincts other people had.

"I've run out of gas," he said, pointing uncertainly beyond the parking lot. "Was wondering if you knew where the nearest station was." 9

He reeked of cigarettes and was holding a red plastic gasoline container. It looked like a child's toy in his hand.

"I don't know," I said, pointing as precariously as he had. "Probably twenty minutes' walk west?"

He followed the direction of my arm then turned back to me and smiled.

"That's gonna be a hike, eh?"

I nodded and shrugged as honestly as I could. The last thing I wanted to do was talk to anyone.

"Look," he said, "I've been on the road for the last fourteen hours – I'm goin' to a job – and I only have enough for the gas, so . . . don't suppose you have a dollar or so for a cab, so I could get to the station. It's gonna be a while if I have to walk there an' back and it's gettin' cold."

He flipped the collar up on his jacket, the plastic gasoline container awkwardly hanging from his fingers.

I had fifteen bucks. I was waiting on cheques.

As if tapping into my thoughts: "Please, sir. Anything . . . I'd really appreciate it."

I took out a five. "It's all I got."

"Thanks, sir. That's wonderful. Thank you very much," he said, raising his arm in a weak salutation as he turned around and walked somewhat obediently in the direction I'd pointed.

I spotted him later on my trudge home, in an alley off of Bathurst, beside a Vietnamese karaoke bar. He had his back against the wall but even then seemed like he couldn't remain standing. A shorter man in a Chicago Bulls jacket lit his cigarette. I kept walking.

Everything felt rehearsed. The stranger. Karen's tungsten bedroom. My dad.

I remember getting home and lying on the futon, the winter sun on my face as I stared blankly at a wall. Eggshell. A streetcar roared past beneath the apartment, its steely wake threading itself into my head.

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[Notebook excerpt | Derrick van der Lem | February 13, 2008]

There were so many people coming in and out of the café, their entrances and exits over the floorboards amplifying off the walls, like on a theatre stage.

There were many people coming in and out of the café, the floorboards amplified by the empty basement directly beneath, their entrances and exits sounding like a theatre stage.

Locals came in and out of the café regularly, footfalls on the floorboards amplified by an empty basement beneath; every entrance and exit sounding to him as if performed on a theatre stage.

Patrons came in and out of the café regularly. Footfalls on the floorboards amplified by an empty basement beneath; each entrance and exit sounding as if on a theatre stage.

People came in and out of the café regularly, their footfalls on the floorboards amplified by the empty basement beneath; every crossing sounding to him as if on a theatre stage.

People came in and out of the café, their footfalls amplified by the empty basement beneath; every crossing sounding as if on a theatre stage.

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+ + +

“I’VE SPENT YEARS trying to avoid this question.” I fidgeted with my stool, moving it first back then forward. “I didn’t have to deal with it until now.”

Paul and I were upstairs at The Rivoli, on Queen West near Spadina, ostensibly to shoot pool. I just wanted to drink and soak in the atmosphere. I couldn’t avoid seeing the happy-go-luckiness around us. I couldn’t unhear the shitty grunge rock someone had filled the jukebox with. For my own sake, I kept Paul within an arm’s-length periphery; conversation safe, not looking directly at him, not exactly listening closely to what he had to say because the last thing I needed was advice-advice-advice, which people who might as well have been strangers had been attempting to offer me over the last week. Paul was a better friend than a stranger and, even though he could be odd, I valued his perspective.

“I’ve hit a brick wall, and everything in my life is being questioned right now. It’s all up for grabs.”

He nodded obligingly. He was taller than me, with a semi-permanent smirk.

“Derrick, didn’t you say once that you wanted to open a bar?”

I stared straight at him, my spell broken. “What? Did I?”

“That’s a cliché.”

“W-what is?”

“Hitting a brick wall. Isn’t that a cliché?”

I looked at him, confused, running my hands over my thighs.

“I remember you told me once that you wanted to open a bar,” he leaned forward. “Just asking . . .”

“I think so?”

“Well, would you rather run a bar?”

I shook my head. “Rather than what?”

“I don’t know. The music rights stuff. Writing.”

He bent over and, with a swift jerk, struck the cue ball, which collided with the others at the far end of the table.

I didn’t want to telegraph an answer so I didn’t budge on my stool. I didn’t even exhale until I could think of a proper response. Paul sank two stripes on his break, the bastard.

“I don’t know,” I said.

He nodded encouragingly, perhaps falsely; in brief moments he would glance back at me, smiling.

“Look,” I said, staring at a few tables around us, making eye contact with whoever happened to stroll by. “Once upon a time. I don’t know. I probably said something about a bar. Five years ago I wanted to do things. Start things. Hell, ten years ago. And then I just put things off and then there was . . . the back and forth with Karen and shit. It’s like I just woke up one morning and discovered I’d gotten lost. All I have is writing. That’s the only thing, I swear, that keeps me from becoming some sort of fucking psycho. But, with Dad gone . . .”

Paul put up his hand. It was also my turn.

“Derrick, I don’t know anything about writing. I’ve read one of your stories once, but like, who am I? I’m just a guy who

likes watching basketball and having a good time. In spite of this, I think I qualify – as your lawyer – to, you know, say you have some talent,” he smiled and sipped his gin and tonic.

I was staring at a crowded mess near the corner pocket, as if all the other balls had decided to gang up on mine. Paul had a degree in law – JD/MA from U of T – even though he never took the bar exam. Instead, he abruptly changed course and decided to focus on an acting career. He lived with his common-law partner who, despite them being together for as long as I’d known him, he still referred to as his girlfriend. She was a lawyer.

With my cue stick angled high, I tapped my way out of the mess, pocketing one of Paul’s in the process.

“One story,” I said, taking a sip of my drink. “I’ve had just one story published . . . three years ago, under a fucking pseudonym because I was scared shitless my dad would read it. And then there was the stoner essay I wrote about camera lenses.”

He looked at me critically. I remembered that look from when I told him I’d cheated on Karen.

“But you’ve started something lately, right? It’s not like you haven’t been writing, right?”

“The cowboy stories,” I mumbled.

“The cowboy stories!” he said.

He was the life coach I never quite felt I needed. I stirred my glass. He dropped two more stripes into their respective pockets.

“You haven’t really had a clear shot yet,” he said, taking inventory of the game. “What’s it called again? The Empty something? It’s not a novel but a . . . thingy-thing.”

I cleared my throat and tried to speak in a calm, deep voice.

“It doesn’t have a name yet. It’s a collection of stories.”

“Yeah, but what’s it about?”

A party settled at the table next to ours. Everyone was happy. The music got worse. Foo Fighters.

“Uh... They’re about the... ah... Injured Cowboy. The Injured Cowboy.”

“Go on.”

“Well, it’s a short story collection – it’s not a novel. It’s about a mysterious drifter in a kind of self-consciously clichéd Old West. He rides into town on a horse, or he comes in on a bush plane, or on a wagon with immigrants. That sort of thing. And in every story, he has to confront...” and then I paused, rolling around my words, “a sort of existential heart-break.” I waited, wondering if that phrase made any sense to him. “And there’s a sort-of running tragedy as well: he has a handicap that keeps him from settling down and forging a newer, happier life.”

“What’s the handicap?”

“Well... you know, that’s sort of a secret. I’d rather you read it in the book.”

“Okay. Let’s say I’m your editor. Let’s say you just tell me what the handicap is.”

“It’s his heart. His heart was broken long ago when his bride-to-be disappeared just before they were to be wed.”

He nodded and came over to fetch his glass. I could never read his face, which made everything he did unpredictable.

“She left him a note,” I added.

“And what did the note say?”

“I don’t know, Paul.” I raised my arms helplessly. “It’s not sketched yet. I’m not sure. All I know is that he’s trying to kill himself over the course of the book. He puts himself in worse and worse situations with a kind of subconscious desire to find something that will obliterate him. But, after resolving each conflict, he only gets stronger. It’s this weird,

elaborate self-deception and at the same time he's only half-aware of it."

He nodded, staring off into space. "Well, it certainly sounds neat."

"If I can get it past the concept stage, yeah. But..."

Paul's attention turned to the table. "Wait... whose turn is it? Did you go? Did I go?"

I've tried this before – not just this, but other things: novels, short stories. They don't go anywhere. They sit on my hard drive like photographs of dead relatives. I considered how naturally I allowed that idea to appear in my head, without hesitation.

Paul shrugged and opted to take another turn, perilously leaning across the table to make his shot. It made me wonder if he was ever actually competing with me.

"Look, I think you're being a little hypercritical," he said, trying not to brush the 7-ball aside with his sleeve. "I know your father's gone..." he paused. "And I know from, you know, our previous conversations that he was, for better or worse, an influence, let's say," his eyes darting up to mine. "But it sounds to me like you're kinda chastising yourself. And these are classic symptoms – self-recrimination, guilt." He tapped the cue ball so that it banked off of the side table and knocked a striped ball into the opposite side pocket. "I know it's natural, but fuck, it's not healthy."

I let out another slow breath. I was looking at an empty glass and had forgotten what the hell I was drinking. I needed to answer him. I saw him looking at my glass. He raised his eyebrows, offering me another one. I nodded.

When he left for the bar I noticed a woman with short, black hair staring at me a few yards away, standing alone. I thought it was accidental because she happened to be behind

Paul and it was only as he stepped away that I caught her looking. Or I was making this up – maybe she was looking at something else, maybe at Paul. Her cheeks were flushed and she was dressed for the winter. She turned away and reached into a pocket. It occurred to me I was just as visible to her but doing nothing about it. She pulled a card out from her pocket.

“Derrick, sorry. I need you at the bar. My debit card’s not working.”

It was Paul, flustered.

16 “I guess I’m just realizing what an idiot I’ve been,” I said, turning to follow him to the bar, craving a cigarette, the woman in the parka downgraded in my mind. “I convinced myself of so many things that required the constant orbit of his presence. It was the reason for so many decisions that I regret, Paul. And so many of them were reactive – meant to piss him off, or do the opposite of what he’d think was the right thing to do.” When we got to the bar, I fixed a gaze on him. “Do you know how pathetic that sounds?” I asked. “Wasting so many fucking years?”

“It’s okay,” he reached over and put his hand on my shoulder. “My apologies if I’m bringing this up at a bad time.”

I gave the bartender my debit card.

“You’re not,” I said, staring down at my shoes. “You’re just saying the same shit everyone else probably says about me. Sometimes it feels like everyone is talking about me, and all the things they’re saying are shitty, critical things. And then I feel like an idiot for not being more self-aware. It makes me feel immature, like I’ve spent years stuck on autopilot.”

“Derrick,” he turned to allow me to complete the debit transaction, “you should go get lost and get some perspective and stuff. It’s not going to go away, for sure, but...”

“I know.”

“Yeah, I know. I know you know. You scare me when you get like this, that’s all. You’ve got this dark part to you. You’re your own worst enemy like this, and I just hope you’re not sitting at home stewing like a crazy guy, planning to destroy the world.”

We picked up our drinks and went back to our table. The woman, whether she was coming or going, was gone. A buser was clearing our glasses. While he swept away some used napkins I thought I saw a white card gathered in the debris.

Paul paused in front of me, before I could get to the table, stopping me from figuring out what it really was. A card. For me? For everyone? Was she publicizing someone’s gig? We looked in opposite directions: me leaning against our pool table, spying around the hall for her; Paul appearing to appraise the tip of his cue. He rubbed some chalk on it.

“In case you are interested in opening a bar, let me know,” he said. “I’m looking for a tax writeoff.”

+ + +

IT WAS THE beginning of March and people were traumatized from February. Winter’s fury came later than normal and all signs of spring had been taken captive in the process. I walked along a side street to Karen’s house, not far from my apartment in Little Portugal, staring down at the shadows of my legs against the snowbank, listening to the tick-tock metronome of my boot heels as if in a trance.

She wanted her Leica back.

The clearest, sunniest days are the most bitterly cold. It was easier to distract myself with the rhythm of my footsteps, dodging ice puddles. Today marked the point I experienced

every year between winter and spring when I wanted nothing more than to throw the three sweaters I owned into an oil barrel and set them aflame.

My lungs were pinched by the freezing air, my mind buzzing with the pot I'd smoked before I left. It was the morning after her appearance on *She Says*, a local TV talk show. Her and two other women were invited to talk about singledom. I watched it, of course. It was Karen, a dancer and a something whatever. Unsurprisingly, the conversation came around to the subject of being single and dating.

☞ "I've had a lot of dates," Karen had said, smiling modestly into the studio lights above, "and it's really . . . Well, there's no real science to it. I'm afraid I don't see a series of platonic meetings as any sort of necessary step toward sex, or some sort of relationship for that matter. I'm totally comfortable with the idea of sex on a first date. It's not like that's never happened." As if she knew I was watching her, Karen interrupted the dancer's attempt to respond: "But I also want to add, I don't really have boyfriends either, come to think of it. I honestly don't see it that way. What I've had – how I would prefer to see it in any case – is a series of partners."

That's when I turned it off. I'd felt my fingers digging into my leg.

It struck me as odd, considering how many times I'd been frustrated with her, that of all the people she could've prioritized – her parents, her friends, her "partners" – she had chosen to call me, to see if I'd seen the show after it had been broadcast. Mind you, a Leica is a very expensive camera. Once I'd finished my diplomatic comments, she'd asked for it to be returned.

I didn't understand why the camera was such a hang-up for me. I hated her half the time. I'd asked to borrow it after

we last broke up, a loaner until I was able to afford one of my own. In the end, I enjoyed hers so much that I had no motivation to replace it. Furthermore, it had dawned on me that if I returned her camera I'd be giving up the last tether between us.

Her tone of voice over the phone was familiar. I didn't need to hear the words. I could see the colour of the conversation ahead.

+ + +

"I WORRY ABOUT YOU when you drink."

It came out abruptly, like the symptom of a disorder.

She'd mentioned the interview and I began to talk about it. I began by offering a piece of constructive criticism about how she tends to cut others off in conversations, then slowly, almost pathologically, I unwound until everything coming out of my mouth was completely offensive. I knew going in that the show – her appearance, her answers – was up for discussion. How could we not talk about it? I didn't understand why I wasn't able to simply talk about the obvious and do so in a way that wasn't opinionated. I marvelled at how, up to seeing her ten minutes ago, the last thing I wanted was conflict and yet...

"You end up this loud, confused person," I continued, my face blushing. I had my arms crossed. It sounded completely terrible as it rolled out of my mouth like a script.

She sat at her editing station, the cool glow from the monitors accenting her face as she stared me down, even though I was the one standing.

"Loud. Confused," she mimicked. She turned around in her chair. "How about rash? Am I rash, too?"

I stared at the floor, blanching at the sound of my words being repeated back to me. I could storm out at any time, but leaving peacefully was what I wanted, a logic that flew in the face of what I was spewing.

We were in her basement. It was half-finished, poorly insulated and damp. We both wore several layers of clothing. I don't know what had possessed her to insist on moving her editing equipment down here. I wished I'd postponed everything, at the risk of being taken to small claims court for the fucking camera. Every impulse was compounded by a grief that blanketed anything I had to offer.

"You're a fucking snob," she said.

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She turned in her chair to shut down an application, shooting me a quick glance. I allowed the insult to flow through me without much immediate damage.

"Come on, Karen," I whispered.

I rarely spoke the first names of friends and loved ones. When I said her name, the foreignness of its sound struck me, as if I'd never been entirely sure about her name all this time. Karen's name had little mark on the present for me and I sensed somehow she tuned into this — her shoulders lowered as she stared at the monitor, seemingly at nothing.

"Why the hell should I take advice from you? You're aloof about everything so nothing has any meaning."

"Come on, Karen," I said, not believing I'd said the same sentence twice, in exactly the same tone.

She turned around, gripping the arms of her chair, as if she couldn't decide whether to sit or bolt toward me.

"Something is fucking wrong if you can't deal with me being on television, alright? I asked you to come here because you had my fucking camera and the first thing you

do is accuse me of being an asshole when I drink? What the hell do you think I'm supposed to do with that?"

I shrugged helplessly and rolled my eyes, realizing I was stuck acting like a character in a sitcom. My cheeks burning, I turned and made for the staircase.

"Fine, fine. Fuck it," I said.

High school. This was high school.

The Leica was sitting on her desk. If it had been within arm's reach I would've grabbed it by the strap and run out.

"I mean, what do you want me to say, Derrick?" she yelled from behind me, her voice betraying a hurt I tried to deflect as I marched up the wood plank steps. I couldn't believe that for the last three months since we'd split I'd spent nearly every night thinking about her. The warm body I'd nestled beside in grief growing cold. A voice stripping me bare.

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I felt covered with burning sores as I climbed up to the kitchen, her voice triggering memories of my parents fighting when I was young. My face was numb, my heart beating defiantly. There were stars in my eyes and it took me a while to find my coat and boots, all the time fearing that she was going to follow me up the stairs and kick my ass. I gripped the handle to the screen door and took a moment to linger over the familiar elements of the place we'd once shared – the main floor of a house on Euclid Avenue. There was a brief, absurd relief when I saw the same brand of rye bread we liked sitting on the kitchen counter, its familiar blue-and-yellow wrapper. I looked down. She'd bought new boots. Red.

The wind had picked up, and no matter which direction I turned – whether I chose the alley system or the sidewalk along Dundas – it lashed my face the entire way home.

THERE WERE NO leaves on the fire escape. No songs coming from the stereo. Only the dim churn of someone cleaning plates somewhere – it was hard to tell in the hollow chest of the low-rise. When the lights were dimmed, the TV not humming.

It was the first time I thought: there wouldn't be another.

I stood above the kitchen sink, head bowed, trying to listen to the rumbling of pipes and not the hostage pleadings of my common sense.

I prepared in secret, knowing the turn would happen: the point at which my conscience would discover it was being tricked. I spent the day popping sleeping pills, but never so many at one time as to risk passing out. I was disciplined; it allowed me to preserve an important bit of strength I'd been searching for.

22

I stood staring at a serrated carving knife in my hand.

Thank God, I remember thinking, angling the blade in the incandescent light of the kitchen. Thank God it's not so reflective that I could see the look in my eyes. The stupid fever.

My knees were weak and drunken, pressed against the cabinet under the sink for balance. I was afraid my lower back would cave in and I'd fall back on the floor and mess it all up. It was like my brain had been stitched into a mannequin.

This time's for good. You can't undo something like this. You can't uneat that many pills. One for every poor bastard who remembers me.

I swung around, my elbows supporting my torso along the edge of the sink, the knife pointing away clumsily so that I could stare out the window at the other end of the narrow kitchen. Blackness. Nothing. I glanced at the half-empty bottle of wine on the table, humoured by the idea of a last

swig, the pills making it harder to focus, stand. My lips were dead, my breath was burning. I turned and looked at the blade suspended in mid-air. It couldn't be cleaner.

Before I could find another distraction (the garbage bags were on the fire escape waiting to be disposed of, I'd forgotten to mail the misaddressed Canada Revenue Agency letter to the previous tenant) I did something magical. I watched myself slit open my left forearm with the blade while staring into the light bulb above me. Blind.

Split seconds. Surprised by how fast it happened, how fast I'd done it. Surprised by the resolve with which I'd finished it off: every tooth of the blade sunk deeper as if my arm were a turkey's neck. The drugs managed the pain, but the euphoria of what I'd done made me spin spin spin and fall to the floor.

My arm pulsed hot water all over my hand and leg and belly.

Hot water, by God.

The knife was still in my hand. It took a second for my eyes to adjust, having been blinded in the light. I threw it to the side only for it to rebound off the wall, nearly back into my face. Adrenaline bursting through the blur. I rolled over onto the numb-armed side, gasping for air as if I hadn't breathed for hours, propping myself up with my good arm and using whatever I could reach for leverage. Hot water gushed all over me. I felt like I was floating above the floor.

RAISE IT ABOVE YOUR HEART.

I could barely stagger, leaning against the walls for balance like a stupid drunk, from the kitchen to the bedroom to the phone. Inflatable castle.

Phone.

I fell on the mattress like diving into a backyard swimming pool, rolling over, stars in my eyes like tiny cartoon fireworks,

reeling with the want to roll forever like a seven-year-old on a day off from school.

PHONE.

Oh God...it's so soft.

PHONE.

PHONE.

I don't know whether it was the bleeding arm that reached for the receiver...

Red pillow...and dialled 9...

Rolling in red leaves...1...

Rolling in soft, red leaves, all over me...1...I...just...

I...just...

"911. How may I dir -"

+ + +

I COULDN'T REMEMBER her name.

When it was time for this abandoned dog to leave the hospital, two days after my arrival – after being intubated, stitched up, bandaged and made to think about what I'd done – I pulled on a shirt Paul bought for me at the gift shop: a long-sleeved black sweatshirt with *Toronto* printed on it in large block letters, with red maple leaves on either side. Anything for a laugh.

The nurse was nowhere to be seen. When I inquired, not knowing her name, only knowing that she was "the one with short black hair," the ward manager didn't seem to know whom I was referring to. Fair enough. I didn't have the will to pursue it, and I didn't want to let on that I was more unwell than I looked. Anything to avoid another psych eval. Elevator doors opened and I had just enough energy to find my way to the street and flag a taxi.

I was curled up on the futon in my living room, grazing on TV news with the sound turned down. It had a distorted rhythm that soothed me like white noise. Places and names washing over me in waves: up, down, across. Every light in the apartment was on. I kept thinking back to the night before I woke up in the hospital. How it wasn't, in the end, the end. How I was now given the task of putting that terror and sick sense of failure – and everything else – into perspective. The place below me played Lou Reed. Bad Lou Reed. Silly, indulgent Lou Reed. Even Lou Reed wasn't that Lou Reed anymore.

I could get up and stomp on the floor.

I could get off my ass and call the hospital and get the name of that stupid nurse, maybe under the ruse of privacy concerns.

Or I could just . . . rest.

Waking up and seeing someone who I thought was the nurse, in the dark, leaning over. Sorting through my clothes, staring at me.

In the rear pocket of my jeans I found a card. On one side was an ornate black insignia. I couldn't figure out what it meant. On the back was a name – Wallace Turner – and a phone number. It obviously wasn't hers.

+ + +

“LOVE IS AN ENIGMA, and, like all enigmas, it inspires religion.”

I couldn't even say whether it had been quoted accurately but hearing it always gave me a cramp in my gut. What little my father had written about the city was toxic. In essence – how provincial it was. Perhaps he used a different word.