



**With
My Back**

to the World

Sally Cooper

With My Back to the World

Also by Sally Cooper

Love Object

Smells Like Heaven

Tell Everything

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My Back
to the World**

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*To my dad, Garry, for giving me the stories and
to Isis and Raven for expanding my heart*

RUDIE

She was becoming a mother tonight, six months ahead of schedule. January instead of June. Under a dirty dawn sky, Rudie thumped the bundle buggy against the salted, icy steps as she descended to the sidewalk. She could use the car, but her legs needed to move. No skateboarders rolled past today. A white Scottie dog studied her from a bay window. Rudie headed toward the lake – north, not south like when she lived in Toronto. It seemed unreasonable that the world around her hadn't changed.

A pigeon cooed as she turned onto James Street. In a couple of days, she'd walk Roselore here, pointing out the café's mirrored windows and the barbershop's ceramic clowns. They would pass neon stickers plastered on street signs that read Sex Workers are Members of Our Community. *Look at the tomato and meat mincers!* Rudie would say. *What pretty white communion dresses and shiny gold crosses! Look at the bright yellow safety*

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vests! Cigarette butts and pats of gum littered the snow-dusted sidewalk. Farther down, buildings wearing cupolas and intricate brickwork screamed potential – she thought of Toronto’s Queen Street, what it had been and what it was now, wondering if Hamilton’s James Street could be the same. She was practised at visually altering what stood in front of her, at seeing restored versions of decrepit structures. A rat ran along the wall, but Rudie’s glimpse of the naked street didn’t last. Potential could become real. She had proof. And it could happen without any pushing or cajoling. The rat turned a corner. He would run to the lake, swim to the railway yard, some place away from people. He’d do fine. Rudie could distract her daughter when that happened, teach Roselore to see the pleasures that drew her mommy and daddy to this place. Mommy and Daddy! Rudie lingered in the sweet custard scent outside Delicioso, the Portuguese bakery – she’d buy Roselore a tart and they’d sit at the round table in the window – and held her breath past a cluster of smokers outside the Men’s Club, packed although it wasn’t yet 8:00 a.m. It was too late to cancel Dylan. Her daughter was coming home. She didn’t plan to tell him about the adoption, but she didn’t want to miss the chance to see him, either. More men stood outside a crowded billiards room. Taran Yang Gallery was showing sculpted cupcakes decorated with beads and satin ribbons. Each hid one flaw, like a worm or mould spot. The fish market smell, with its note of sewage, hit her. Two RCAF corporals in blue serge forage caps and parkas passed as the wind rose, and her eyes teared up. This evening, she’d board a plane bound for Ottawa. The first chance she got, she’d scoop Roselore into her arms and ask her forgiveness for this unrealized street.

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Rudie had been adding chipotle to a chili almost two weeks ago when the radio reported an earthquake in Haiti. The burner flame crackled with spilled pepper as she fumbled for her phone.

A month earlier, Ann Hepner from Forever Families Agency had called with a match for Leo and Rudie: a daughter, Roselore, who had spent twenty-two of her twenty-eight months in the Angels' Wings Crèche in Port-au-Prince. Ann explained it would take time to push through the Haitian and Canadian paperwork. Leo could finish shooting the season of *Down East Gran* in Nova Scotia, and Rudie could edit her film about abstract painter Agnes Martin. "Plan for June," Ann had said. They'd been planning for June.

Rudie opened up Twitter, heart thudding as she scrolled through reports of the Presidential Palace collapsing, people flooding the streets in distress.

The phone vibrated. Leo.

"Ann left a message," he said. "She's doing everything she can to get through."

"How is Roselore? I can hardly breathe."

"All the power's out. I'll keep phoning."

"What if it happened right where . . ."

"Don't. What about Makenly?"

"Oh God! I wonder how he is?" She hung up and flipped off the gas. She, Leo and Makenly Saintil had all met years ago at an artists' residency. When they decided to adopt from Haiti, she'd contacted Makenly in New York and again before Christmas when the agency matched them with Roselore. He taught in Haiti now, in Pétion-Ville, near Port-au-Prince.

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She checked his Facebook page. He'd grown a goatee, trimmed his hair, his smile rakish, his glasses dark-framed. His background photo showed a sunlit, turquoise lagoon fronting a low, treed mountain and storm-rocked sky. He hadn't posted since the weekend.

The next day, Rudie had read all the newspapers, kept the TV on CP24, the kitchen radio tuned to CBC. Images of rubble and reports of devastation rolled over her, often with the same wording repeated. Was Roselore with someone safe, who knew her? Where was Makenly in all the chaos? That evening, Makenly posted a fifty-second video on a global charity's YouTube channel. The camera scanned what appeared to be a collapsed bridge, people in sagging T-shirts and shorts walking in circles, perching on the ruined concrete – children, men, women. Up-ended trees. Holes. Rubble. Rebar.

Ann had phoned the following morning. Less than forty-eight hours had passed since the quake.

“Sorry I was out of touch,” she said. “I lost your number.” Did Ann not have call display? “Everyone at Angels' Wings made it, though the building's cracked. The children are sleeping in tents in the driveway but are unharmed. We're planning to go down there, bring aid.”

“How is Roselore?” Rudie cleared her throat. “Who's taking care of her?”

Ann's voice softened, slowed. “Reports are good, Rudie. The nannies are with the children. I'll tell you as soon as I know.”

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Ann flew down on the Saturday, four days after the quake. Rudie studied images of the Presidential Palace crumbled in on itself, its dome askew. She read about dust from collapsed buildings and hoped her daughter and her friend could breathe. When Ann called again last Monday, Rudie's throat tingled and tightened. "Roselore is safe," Ann had said then. "Very safe, you'll be happy to know." Rudie's chest filled with a rush of energy so intense she forgot to ask for more details, instead repeating, "Thank you," over and over.

"I meant to bring down pictures," Ann added. "But I forgot. We can try mailing when things get sorted." She hung up before Rudie could respond.

Makenly posted again: *Helping my buddy Clifford at Muncheez, getting the manje to the people.*

Rudie emailed him: *Do you remember me from Taos? My daughter is at Angels' Wings Crèche. Can you find her for me? Her name is Roselore.* Rudie paused. Ann had never told them Roselore's surname.

From the first night of the earthquake, Leo and Rudie spent hours on the phone when he wasn't shooting. Should they charter a plane? Fly down themselves?

Rudie studied the papers, watched the news. Nine days after the earthquake, the US military airlifted fifty-three Haitian children to Pittsburgh, then offered humanitarian parole to orphans already placed with parents prior to the earthquake. She read that authorities had caught Baptists from Idaho smuggling Haitian children to the Dominican Republic with plans to adopt them out. Many of those children were not orphans.

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The missionaries had kidnapped the children. “Roselore isn’t an orphan either,” Leo pointed out when Rudie told him her worries about losing track of their daughter. He was right. The agency had matched her with Rudie and Leo before the earthquake struck. Still, she worried.

This morning, Makenly had written back:

I do remember you, Rudie.

I am spending my days helping my zanmi, who set up his restaurant as a soup kitchen. My house is intact, most of my street. My parents flew to Fort Myers last week, but I’m sticking it out. Our pantry is stocked with tomato sauce and pasta!

I need more information to find your daughter. All sorts of people down here are coming forward, saying children belong to them, claiming to do God’s work. Be wary of this. The offer is still open for you and Leo to stay here when you come.

*Fondly,
Makenly*

Rudie trembled, but assured herself that Ann would watch out for Roselore. She remembered Makenly’s honesty when she’d told him their plan to adopt from Haiti. He’d said he supported them but confessed to wishing all children could stay safe in Haiti with their families. He did agree with them, however, that children thrived in families rather than orphanages.

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Rudie replied to his email, telling Makenly that she admired him for staying.

She'd been asleep for only a few hours when Terry Sommerville from Canadian Immigration called. It was five fifteen.

"We've arranged a temporary resident permit and waived the processing fees," he said. "Your child . . ." papers shuffled ". . . *Roselore* is arriving in Ottawa at six o'clock tonight on Air Canada Flight 1252."

Rudie held her breath. She turned on a lamp and sat up against the headboard. The Haitian government was strict about parents coming to Haiti to spend time with their children before adopting them. Yet now they were evacuating matched children and releasing them to Canadians, too. Rudie got out of bed and called Ann, flipping on lights as she walked through the house.

"This is impossible."

"I know! It's a miracle for the children," Ann said. "The Palace of Justice in Port-au-Prince was demolished. You know this. The judge who oversaw adoptions, Judge Cadet, was killed. Now the government is fast-forwarding your case."

"Have you seen her?" Rudie paced the hall, kicking at boots and shoes in her path.

"They were outside playing when the earthquake struck. Luckily, only a few minor scrapes. The nannies are fine, too – Mireille, Lovely, Josette. Yves, the owner. They have tents up now, tarps. We are so blessed."

"Roselore –?"

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“She’s fine, honey. Don’t worry. You will hold her tonight. The military is helping and Air Canada staff. I am pulling together the paperwork. My stuff is everywhere, of course!”

Ann rushed her words. Maybe she feared that Rudie might reject Roselore if the child arrived sooner than planned. As if a birth mother would reject a premature infant! Did others in Rudie’s position say, *I won’t take the child early, it’s June or nothing?* Tears striped her cheeks. She braced herself on the newel post. No, of course Ann didn’t think that. She must have other calls to make, was likely highly caffeinated, underslept. It was exciting. Rudie’s knees weakened.

Tonight.

“In Ottawa,” Ann was saying. “We’ve booked your flights and reserved two floors at the Sheraton to accommodate the families. Let me just see if I have your flight number.” Her keyboard clicked.

“How many families?”

“Twenty-four. Mainly from Quebec and Alberta. And there are military doctors on board the plane from Haiti, with medical supplies to check them out before they land. You can meet her tonight at the hotel. Why don’t I email your tickets. You’re so lucky your daughter’s coming with the first group to Canada.”

“Wait,” Rudie said.

“Yes?”

“My husband’s not here. He’s in Antigonish.”

Little Roselore. Once they were matched, the agency had sent a picture of a round-eyed toddler sucking her thumb as one hand gripped a crib, her long-lashed eyes the same shiny chestnut

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brown as Rudie's. Braids tied with red ribbons, a puffy pink dress with a wide, white collar. A heart magnet held the photo fast to the fridge.

She ached to think of Roselore suffering since the earthquake, how confused and scared she must have been feeling. How thirsty.

Rudie's throat opened and pulsed as she remembered the dust in the hills north of Port-au-Prince. Over the March break of grade twelve, her class had travelled to Haiti to help build a school. She doubted she'd contributed much during that short week of hauling cinder blocks. What stayed with her was a day trip to Mirebalais and the waterfall on Saut D'Eau, where the black Madonna was said to have appeared in a palm tree. A boy guided her by the hand so she wouldn't slip while crossing the rocks.

Leo and Rudie had been in the car, driving home from Toronto, when they first decided to adopt. She'd blurted out, "Haiti."

"Why not a child from Hamilton?" Leo had said. "There's such a risk of fraud with international adoption."

"I get that. And it's expensive," she'd said. "But I can't shake it. I think it's a calling."

"Are you sure? Because you haven't mentioned it before and taking on a child from another culture might be harder than anything else." He held her hand and squeezed. She squeezed back, absorbing his misgivings. She searched herself.

"There is every reason not to do it," she said, letting go. "But I still want to."

He rubbed her thigh. "Right. Let's get started."

Rudie loved so much about Leo – how, despite his doubts, he took the risk and committed everything. She took the photo

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off the fridge, stroked the image of the plump cheek. *I can't believe I get to meet you tonight.*

She had mixed feelings about Roselore's dress in the photo. So unlike the cotton pyjamas and T-shirts children wore on websites promoting international adoption. Surely someone donated it out of kindness or concern, even duty. Roselore must love it. Yet Rudie wouldn't have chosen it. She yearned to dress her girl in the funky chartreuse, fuchsia and turquoise prints she favoured. She slipped Roselore's photo into her wallet. Today she wanted her daughter close.

Rudie leaned lightly on the bundle buggy as she peered into the Armoury's open archway. She went over her list for the day, written in her Moleskine even though she had it memorized:

Meet Dylan for breakfast
Shop for supplies
Check in w. Dad about reno
Meet H.A.S.P. folks at café
Get to airport for 5:30 p.m.

Before she left the house, she'd packed her bag and placed it near the front door. No matter what else happened, she was ready to get on that plane.

She marvelled at the men and women in fatigues and uniforms. What prompted people to choose service, knowing they could, likely would, get sent to Afghanistan? Despite having a successful painting career in New York City, the subject of Rudie's documentary, Agnes Martin, had withdrawn from

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everything but the self. Military personnel did the opposite – withdrew from the self and put the body and mind into service of the group. Some people believed adoptive parents were selfless, too. Rudie didn't feel altruistic. Her mother called her selfish. Friends in the know said she was a saint. Rudie just wanted a child, *this* child.

In a few days, she'd push the stroller she had yet to buy along this street. How would people react? Usually people walked past her, like this couple, whose pupils were pinpoints, their eyes glassy even at this early hour. They laughed when they got to the Armoury, making loose gestures. Two men in fatigues and flak jackets loaded stuffed duffel bags onto a truck. Their arms swung with the precision of machines. The couple loped off down the street.

She unzipped her coat and scratched under her collar. Her neck was sticky with perspiration. She raced over the list, hoping the bundle buggy would hold it all. Just the basics, she and Leo had agreed. Bedding, sleepers, bottles, dishes, clothes – who knew what to get for a two-year-old? Did Roselore use a cup? Could she hold a fork? Rudie had forgotten to ask Ann. Haitian children experienced delays in crawling and walking because their mothers kept them off the dirt floors. Did they have eating delays, too? Who decided they were delayed? she wondered. Probably some Ivy League child psychologist comparing them to American children in daycares. Would Roselore fit in a sling? Rudie could only find lists for setting up a newborn. Parents of two-year-olds were supposed to have these details worked out.

She'd have coffee with Dylan first, his idea. She hadn't seen him in five years. They'd had a brief email exchange and

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were meeting at Swick's on King Street so she could have a fast breakfast before the stores opened.

After Dylan, she'd load up the bundle buggy at Rexall, then go home and get the car for the big items. She wanted Leo here, not in Antigonish. The agency should have given them more notice. Someone must have known before today that the children were coming. What had they told Roselore? Ann said the children had received photographs of their new parents as soon as the agency had matched them. So Roselore would have been looking at Rudie and Leo for over a month if the photo had survived the earthquake. But what would the picture of the pale woman and the grinning man with the wavy red hair mean to a two-year-old? Where was Roselore right now? What was she feeling?

Rudie shivered and clenched her biceps, waiting at the traffic light as cars sped along Cannon Street's four lanes. Snowflakes swirled like blown dandelion spores. She detoured over to John Street so she could pass Stewart Memorial Church, the nearest church with a black congregation. The adoption training course had advised Leo and Rudie to keep Roselore in touch with her culture. Rudie followed black hair care blogs, scouted out black dolls and picture books about black children, and kept a list of Caribbean associations in the city. Leo had suggested church. Since they weren't Catholic like Roselore, Stewart seemed like a safe compromise. As she passed the red brick church with its windows set into lancet arches, Rudie pictured the three of them walking up the steps on a Sunday morning.

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A haven for those who'd escaped slavery through the Underground Railway, Stewart Memorial made Rudie's shoulders tense with yearning and fear. The people who worshipped here might provide a beautiful community for Roselore. They also might reject Leo and Rudie. It would take a lot of nerve to bring Roselore to Stewart or to events put on by the Afro Canadian Caribbean Association. She scrunched up and then widened her eyes, feeling awkward and visible, though the streets were empty.

She walked back to James Street, faster now, vowing to wear more colour for Roselore's sake. She crossed Wilson's wind tunnel, then continued south. The buildings here were taller, the sidewalk cast in shadow from Jackson Square's bulk. Rudie paused at the window of the Trundle Bundle Gallery to stare at a blow-up doll sporting a work sock monkey hat and fairy wings. Any community college dropout who threw together kitschy objects with some loose thematic connection could mount an art show on this street. Yet there were exceptions like Taran Yang's cupcakes. Taran made each cupcake more elaborate than the next, bringing beauty and its concurrent destruction into the world, as art could, and should.

Last night, Rudie had edited footage of Agnes Martin sitting in front of her poster of Georgia O'Keeffe's *Black Iris*. *Look at art the way you look at the ocean, just look*, Agnes had said. *Look and look and look*. Now, Rudie did. The work sock monkey hat covered the blow-up doll's face. Knapsack straps fixed the knitted wings to her back. The artist had looped fishing line around the doll's ankles and neck, raising her feet higher than her head so she seemed to plummet. Rudie stuffed her

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hands in her pockets. The artist wasn't defacing beauty. Blow-up dolls weren't beautiful. What was the point of this piece of "art"? Was it glorifying toys? The work sock monkey wore a manic grin. The doll's teacup breasts puckered at the seams. There were far more sophisticated Real Dolls available now. The blow-up variety was as outmoded as pubic hair and flesh breasts. Was the artist saying something about nostalgia?

She folded back her glove to check the time. Almost eight o'clock. Swick's was a five-minute walk. She wanted to arrive early. Dylan used to make cracks about her weaknesses. As if Dylan knew her now.

Loud chatter reached her, yelling, some screeching, energetic not fearful. A pack – there must be a more effective collective noun: a snarl? an outbreak? a whiff – of teenagers rounded the corner. A boy in a buffalo plaid shirt and jean jacket jumped on the tree planter and swung his body around, one hand cupping the thin tree trunk. Two boys shook the trees in the other planters. Three girls in short, puffy jackets, hoodies and skinny jeans, shrieked, "Stop!" through veils of cigarette smoke.

The boys clustered in front of the blow-up fairy, knees bent, necks craned.

"Sad titties," said one through teeth gripping a cigarette.

"I'd fuck 'em," said another.

Two of the girls walked away. A third lingered, a girl stuffed into a thick hoodie and blotchy, pink vest, standing in the middle of the group, her jokes as filthy as the boys'. Her gaze darted over their faces as she avoided looking directly at the doll. Rudie remembered her from the Rocket Theatre Co-op program where, as a favour, Rudie had stage-managed *Into the*

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Woods last winter. Her name was Hannah Merriweather and she'd played the witch.

The others Rudie recognized from the gang who lounged outside Shawn's Place, the youth drop-in centre around the corner, kids who put up with Shawn's praying and goal-setting in exchange for fried eggs and a cold shower.

Rudie caught the eye of the new one, a beanpole with a greasy bang, drainpipe jeans held just above his crotch and a skeleton-patterned hoodie. The beanpole stood beside Hannah, jumping away each time she slapped his shoulder then returning to her side.

"Bomb scare," the boy told Rudie. "Shawn wants a lockdown, but there's no locks. He can't make us stay."

"We're supposed to sit on the floor with our heads on our knees," said Hannah, her glossy hair at odds with her stained clothes and spotty face, her dark, sunken eyes opaque. Rudie caught a trace of patchouli. After the show's run, Hannah's witch cape had reeked of the aromatic oil. Not even dry cleaning could remove the sweet, funky smell.

"So we split," Hannah said.

Hannah talked like a spokesperson. The other boys were now spitting on their hands and smearing the glass. Rudie resisted the urge to say, *Shouldn't you be in school?* Hannah had been in grade ten last year and delivered a passionate, if scene-chewing, performance. Her smoky alto voice had infused the witch with a vital, menacing power.

"They evacuated Jackson Square last month," Rudie said. "La Senza had a bomb threat."

"Who'd want to blow up Hamilton?"

"Blow-up doll. Blow up city. Blow blow blow," the boy said.

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“Rude.” Hannah indicated Rudie with her thumb. Her smile revealed a shiny set of fuschia braces. She winked, acknowledging Rudie.

“Rudie.”

Rudie checked her watch. Ten minutes. Dylan might already be at Swick’s. He was driving into town for an appointment. They’d meet as friends. Rudie would update him on her Agnes Martin film. Rudie stepped backward, about to walk away. Hannah pointed at a newspaper box. The headline read PRAY FOR HAITI.

“Look! It’s got the same letters as Hamilton. First there’s the HA and the I. Letters are powerful. They make words. And words, well, forget about it.”

Rudie swallowed. “Imagine what they’re going through right now.” Her eyes watered, the first time since the earthquake that she’d almost cried. She made herself focus on Hannah, trying to picture her parents but drawing a blank.

The other boys had drifted toward Jackson Square. Beanpole stayed, stared.

“It’s about levels, yo.” He leaned on the gallery window, wearily, one foot braced on the wall. Rudie shivered, fascinated. “Top level with money. Poor level, like us.” He gestured at Hannah.

“*Not* like us.” She began to fold the bundle buggy – if she held it under her arm and jogged, she’d make Swick’s with a minute to spare.

“Lady, you think we chose this life?”

“It’s Rudie.” He had a point. Kids who used Shawn’s Place for breakfast had good reasons not to live at home.

“Barth,” the boy said. “Bart with an H.” He faltered, his eyes on Rudie, his face as open and engaged as hers. Roselore’s

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image shimmered in Rudie's mind. Rudie patted her purse, eager to pull out the picture but unwilling to share it. Hannah sneered but said nothing.

Remembering Dylan, Rudie said goodbye, embraced the bundle buggy and left them.

After a few running steps, she slowed. Dylan might drive past and say something charming and unkind from his car window, making her laugh despite herself. Her body thrummed. Her film about a dying abstract painter wasn't turning out the way she'd hoped. She'd shelved it when having a family with Leo turned into her career. Since the match with Roselore a month ago, at Leo's suggestion, Rudie had gone back to tinkering with the footage of Agnes while they waited to meet their daughter.

She practised what she'd tell Dylan, how she wanted to make a film showing Martin talking about simplicity and solitude and the sacred. *Where's the story?* Dylan would ask. Or if he didn't, he'd be thinking it. He'd tease out more than she'd thought to say even to herself. He'd make it sound bigger than it was, fan her enthusiasm, convince her she could pull it off. Underneath his questions would lurk a grinding sense of what the work lacked, what she couldn't do, and what he could, or would, if it were his project. He wouldn't choose a project like hers, though. He made more *significant* films about smog and deforestation. She stopped at the King William light, inhaling the mouldy smell of the rotting Lister Block. Having Roselore would change how Rudie worked. Would Rudie work? She imagined that holding Roselore might feel like falling onto the softest mattress over and over and over, forward and backward.

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She doubted she'd finish the film by June. Relief at becoming a mother early brought a new wash of tears. She read posters for events long out of date. Someone had spray-painted red horns and a curved devil's tail on a photograph of Michael Jackson. *Blas-Femme*, someone else had scrawled. The street was dark here and the sidewalk damp, though it hadn't snowed enough to provide a melt. Her feet stuck, throwing her off balance. She speed-walked, hugging the bundle buggy, and made the next two lights, slowing only when she spotted the restaurant.

Meeting anyone made her anxious; it wasn't just Dylan. She admired Agnes Martin. Agnes had shut out the world in New Mexico so she could paint what inspired her without concern for the market. Though the remoteness of her ranch had eventually prompted Agnes to move to Taos, she'd lived all those years alone on the mesa. Before that, she'd travelled all over North America in a pickup truck pulling an Airstream camper. With Leo away, Rudie walked around her James Street North neighbourhood every day, hoping to bump into someone she knew. Agnes-on-film kept Rudie company. The old woman's eyes met the lens, then slid away. Her gestures invited Rudie to lean in and connect. Agnes's pale canvases were more honest and less lonely than Rudie's films, not promising a connection that the artist herself couldn't make. Six years later, Agnes was gone, the words didn't change, and Rudie spent her days mining an old woman's final moments for meaning. Rudie coveted solitude and admired it but felt relief when Leo came home from a television shoot. Tonight, what she had hoped for would come true. Roselore would join their lives. Tonight, she would hold her daughter.

A red awning with curly gold lettering announced Swick's

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All-Day Breakfast. Cardboard pictures of faded sunny-side-up eggs and pink crinkled bacon leaned against the windows. Behind them, checkered curtains hung on a rod twisted round with fairy lights. Rudie caught her reflection in the window of the Frugal Loon next door. She ran her fingers through her hair, swiped a line of Crème In Your Coffee over each lip and redistributed her scarf. She opened the door.

The room had a dimness more fitting of a bar. Rudie shrugged out of her coat, arranged it over her arm and squinted into the restaurant. She didn't see Dylan hulking in the corner until she was closing in on him. He stood gingerly, left shoulder hunched as if pulling a punch or protecting a tender fight wound, and eased his way along the low table. He stumbled over and hugged her. Still gripping the bundle buggy, she held up her coat to absorb whatever current might still run between them, especially now that she was so on fire to hold her little girl. She parked the bundle buggy, and they sat.

His grey Gore-Tex hoodie was expensive and fitted, good for cold shooting days, though a far cry from the natty silk shirts of five years ago. He'd cropped his dark hair and gelled it in a few different directions at the front. He looked less conservative, more studied. His blue eyes, saltier than ever, probed her as before, some of their guard replaced by a weariness, almost resignation. The old wariness was there, along with a new emotion that Rudie couldn't quite read.

"Pussycat," he said. She couldn't lie – it felt nice to hear him say it.

He flipped the laminated menu, then flipped it back. A dark-haired girl in a glittery white tank top and black leggings came over.

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“Coffee, black. Rye toast, no butter,” Dylan said without looking at her.

Embarrassed by her hunger, Rudie ordered the full breakfast. Today, she needed her strength.

“How’s the work?”

“My film sucks. The usual.”

“That’s not up to you to decide,” Dylan said. “So? Tell me about it.”

Rudie did. She told him about the octagonal room at the Harwood Museum in Taos. She told him that when she was driving through on a solo trip from Boulder to Flagstaff, she met a German filmmaker named Bernadette and spent six weeks on a crew chasing Hispanic death iconography around New Mexico. Yes, the light, the sky and the space had opened her up, but this room of muted paintings and finding out the woman who painted them was in her nineties and lived in Taos in a retirement home had inspired Rudie the most. In a town ripe with fuzzy spirituality lived a woman whose canvases, mouthing truths in pale tongues, had rendered Rudie helpless with the desire to know more.

“I shot Agnes Martin talking about what it took to make those paintings.”

Rudie hadn’t spoken this much about her film in years.

“When did you interview her?” Dylan asked.

“After our thing – yours and mine – I went on that trip and didn’t want to pass up on the opportunity. It sounds shameful to call it that – of course, she was dying – and I met other filmmakers, not just the Germans. And it all worked. Agnes died before we finished.”

“She decided when you were finished. Did Leo shoot it?”

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Her husband's name clanged on Dylan's tongue.

She widened her eyes, mischievous, proud. "I shot it."

Dylan moved his head into a slightly forward tilt, as if he'd caught her in a lie. "I'd use him if I didn't have somebody," Dylan said. "Word is he's expensive and he won't travel."

"He's in Nova Scotia."

Dylan started as the waitress reached over his shoulder to set down their plates. Rudie unrolled the napkin containing her fork and knife, squirted her eggs with ketchup and took a bite.

With a sideways eye-roll, halfway to a flirt, Dylan peered up at her. "That's only two days' drive. I meant internationally. My films take me all over the world. My man has to be willing to go there, too. We just got back from Pakistan. I'm thinking about Haiti, but getting in after the quake won't be easy. It hasn't been easy for years, but now? I have to consider the angles."

"Not to mention the light," Rudie said. What was it with Haiti? Rudie refused to think of his interest as synchronistic, though her life might be lining up, catching the old feeling that Dylan would make his way back into her world in some way, that they might end up together. Agnes Martin and her visionary revelations about Zen Buddhism and art felt garbled inside Rudie.

"The angles of the story," Dylan said. He removed a jar from his rubber courier bag and spread a chunk of dark nut butter on his rye toast, folding the triangle like a handkerchief and downing it in two bites.

"The story of the earthquake?" Rudie dipped bacon in a puddle of yolk. "Aren't you worried about capitalizing on the disaster? You're turning into a storm chaser."

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Dylan crossed his legs and leaned back. The bench seat wobbled. “Are you kidding me? You think I live off victims of climate change? You’re better than that, Rudie.” He smiled with his lips pressed tight, offended.

Surprised that she’d cracked his guard, Rudie shifted subjects. “I was planning to have a cut by June.”

He raised his eyebrows, let out a long breath. “You’re close then. You’ve got five months. What are you doing here?” He dabbed a nugget of almond butter off his chin.

“Do you want to know more about Leo?”

Dylan narrowed his eyes. “The film’s a wonderful idea, Rudie. Agnes Martin’s a Canadian. You know that. But the Americans have claimed her. It could do well in both countries if you market it right.”

“From Saskatchewan, grew up in Vancouver. Since Leo and I shot footage of her right up to her death, this film is about dying, too. That was when we first got together.” She wanted to tell Dylan all about Leo. She wanted to hurt Dylan and get his approval, so he’d be more connected to her life now. She needed a reaction from him beyond anger. He hadn’t said a word about his wife.

“I bet you got excellent footage. It must be beautiful.”

“It will be. I thought of adding other artists, but no one I could find had Agnes Martin’s spiritual *cojones*. Not that I do.”

Rudie didn’t have the energy to explain Dylan’s attraction to disaster to him, his desire to help. Compassion on a grand scale. He’d been mean with her when they were seeing each other, withholding his life and, at times, his body. Yet, his films wove together intimate stories in troubled parts of the world. They revealed the corruption driving the regions both forward

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and into the ground. Dylan's films inspired charity, and he was well funded. He could turn his films into a franchise, a suggestion he'd find insulting. Dylan was made the way his films were. He and Rudie were one story among many, but the whole was unknown, even to him.

"I was supposed to go to Haiti in June," she said. The nerves on her head crackled. Her breath came faster and streams of energy raced around her shoulders. She held her eyes closed for a second and called up Roselore's image. "Leo and I were."

"Yes?" Dylan said, his eyes cautious and greedy. Did he think they'd steal his idea?

"We're adopting a little girl –"

"That's wonderful," Dylan said.

The kitchen door swung open, bringing with it the smell of fried potatoes and onions. Rudie rested her cheeks on her hands, looked down at her plate and smiled, her eyes wet with happiness. A radio played a DJ saying words like *basket weave* and *T-boned*. Then the opening beat of "I Love Rock 'n' Roll." The waitress refreshed their coffees then set their bill on the table.

"But why Haiti?" Dylan said. Rudie snapped her head up. His cheeks had a ragged flush. A forgotten, familiar red dot popped out near his nose.

"It's a calling, I guess. I went there in grade twelve and couldn't shake the idea that I'm meant to do something involving Haiti. Kind of like how we get ideas for films."

"So, there's a story here for you?"

"I'm not explaining it right. It's deeper than that, obviously."

"People have accused me of exploiting people," he said.

"Hell, you just laid down that gauntlet. It's a side effect of doing

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the work we do. But you're taking the exploitation to a new level. It's wrong to do this now, Rudie, wrong for the children and their families. People are jumping to adopt because they want to help, but some of these so-called orphans have parents or grandparents from whom they've become separated. She's not a pet."

Rudie couldn't remember any of the zippy answers she was supposed to give to people's thoughtless comments about her adoption. Nobody had said anything about *pet*.

"We're not exploiting anyone. All avenues have been exhausted. There's no way we'd get a child this fast." Rudie pushed at the table with the heels of her hands.

"Why don't we go to your car," Dylan said. He took out a five, enough for his toast, coffee and a tip. Rudie waited a beat. She used to assume he let her pay for herself so she wouldn't get big ideas about where their relationship was going. Seeing him straighten the edges of his five-dollar bill now made her wonder if he wasn't just cheap.

Rudie stood and put on her coat. The waitress came back. Rudie handed her a twenty and took Dylan's five. He kept his wallet out, one finger inside the fold as if he wanted to ask for the change.

"So you're suggesting that we're using our white privilege to take advantage of a tragic situation? You don't know anything about this."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't say that," Dylan said.

"That's mature," she said. She lifted the bundle buggy and headed for the door. "I'm walking."

"My car then. We can go for a ride. Or back to your house."

"I can't."

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Rudie had told only a few people about Roselore: her parents; the friends who'd acted as references; and the people in H.A.S.P., the adoption support group. She didn't want Dylan to know they were meeting Roselore tonight. Claiming she had to work wouldn't fly. They both made their own hours when not shooting. Leo was out of town. She should say goodbye to Dylan now, before she slipped up and gave him the whole story.

Small snowflakes whipped their faces as they crossed King Street. The teenage pack from earlier huddled outside a wig store that was two doors down from the grass café. "There's your Third World," Dylan said. "You could make a movie here, but who'd want to do the work?"

Not much work, Rudie thought, bristling at the term *Third World*. It was about trust and treating kids straight. And looking, really looking, at what they knew you didn't want to see.

"Their hangout had a bomb scare today," Rudie said. Barth and Hannah were watching her. Rudie raised her hand, fingers curved, and Barth walked over. She waited.

Dylan stiffened. "She's not buying, and she sure isn't selling," he said when Barth caught up to where they stood beside a three-foot-tall red cowboy boot outside Leathers.

"Morning, sir," Barth said with a two-finger salute. Dylan scowled.

The measure of a man, thought Rudie, *shows in how he acts around other men*. Dylan took a tight boys' club with him on film shoots. When he was drinking, he dominated, rolling out story after story of set antics, tales of obstacles he'd surmounted last minute. A popular companion, he let others confide in him

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but said little about his personal life. He was a man who confessed just enough to women he kept unseen.

Rudie revised. Perhaps the measure of a man had to do with how he treated young people. Dylan acted afraid of Barth. Maybe fear got harder to hide.

“I didn’t hear anything. Did it blow?” Rudie asked.

“Hardly,” said Barth. “But nobody’s going back. Shawn’ll just make us clean up and share during Circle.”

“Do you need spare change?” Rudie asked.

Barth rocked his shoulders side to side. He glanced at Hannah, who rolled her hand to say move it along, cowpoke. “Hannah and me want a room.”

“Where do you stay now? I can’t –” Rudie said.

“Not at your house. John Wayne here would shit a watermelon.”

“He’s not my husband,” Rudie said. Dylan had walked over to Leathers’ doorway where he now huddled, checking his BlackBerry, his face walled up. Rudie’s husband would have his wallet out and open, bills displayed, before this boy had even screwed up his courage to ask. *Take what you need, son*, Leo would say, steering Barth to an ATM. In fifteen years, their daughter – her daughter! – could be standing in this very spot asking a stranger for money too. How would Rudie want the stranger to respond? Barth had light brown roots, the rest of his hair dyed black. Dylan must be thinking if he could afford hair dye he could afford a room. It didn’t work that way when you were young. Maybe it did for jocks like Dylan.

“Motel room,” Barth said. “Not your Holiday Inn – fleas, bedbugs, roaches. But a lock on a door and a bed. Me and Hannah alone. I can take care of her.”

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Rudie waved at Hannah, who lowered her chin. Dylan was walking west, throwing pointed, baleful glances over his shoulder. Rudie turned her back. She had money set aside for her child, but she didn't need it the way other people did. Melted snow inside her boots had left her tights wet and uncomfortable. This boy's hoodie and jeans had no dirt on them. His face was a pale pink wad. His hair was lank, not matted. She opened her wallet inside her purse and took out a twenty.

"Wish you'd use it for a coat," she said.

"I'll keep that in mind," said Barth.

"Soft touch," Dylan said when she caught up to him. "He'd have robbed you if I hadn't stood there."

"Stood where?"

"I should get going."

Rudie had tried unsuccessfully for years to pinpoint their last goodbye, but now it came to her. On the bed in her apartment. The creak as he turned the corner at the landing. The front door's *huff*. She had booked her flight to Boulder, arranged the car rental and the hotel room. She'd had money in the bank from shooting the reality show *Rock Chick Camp*. Physically, she was the one running. But he was the one holding himself away, refusing to let her come close to him. A tired goodbye.

"Don't go," she said, what she wished he had said then. "Help me shop for Roselore. I didn't tell you before, but she's arriving tonight. I wouldn't mind talking some more."

She walked ahead of him before he could answer, shaking out the bundle buggy and tugging it behind her. She turned to face him, then slowed down so she matched his easy stride.

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He smiled, rubbed her back for a moment as they walked. She glimpsed herself in the window of a thrift store. Her face was lit up from beneath the skin as if it were magic hour. Yet it was mid-morning, the sky was pigeon grey, the clouds low, and the buildings cast grim shadows. The only lights were fluorescents, beaming from wig and T-shirt stores. The glow was hers. It must come from the child.

She stopped at the head of Rexall's baby aisle. Back when she hoped to get pregnant, she'd hated the smiling, doughy faces, the hot pink and blue plastic. Dylan gripped her elbow and steered her forward. Her throat grew thick. For a moment at the restaurant, she'd wanted Dylan. Now, she wanted Leo.

"I don't know her size," she said. "I'll go tomorrow." She made a half turn, but he blocked her, his chin tilted and his pupils expanding.

"It won't take long. We're here already," he said.

She sniffed and blotted her nose with her coat sleeve. Who cared if he saw?

"Hey, I could've brought Barth."

"He'll have his own soon enough."

She eased a Super Pack of Pampers off the shelf, then sat on the floor with it between her legs. "I don't even know if she wears diapers. I should know that. And this? What's the difference between a Pull-Up and a diaper? What's a onesie? Are they based on age? Does she need a twosie then? The parenting class should have brought us here on a field trip."

Dylan dropped the diapers into their shopping cart and squatted beside her. "Get whatever you can. Get them all. Send

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hubby out in the middle of the night if you forget something. Make him feel useful. He'll love it. Do you have a list? I asked you that, didn't I? I'm the least helpful person you know, yet here I am." He stood and helped her to her feet.

Together they filled a cart and her bundle buggy with bibs, bottles, Q-tips, wipes and Toddler Mum-Mums.

"Where are the Man Mum-Mums?" Dylan asked.

"Different store. Someone tried to blow it up, too," Rudie said.

"I'm done," Dylan said. He draped his coat over the shopping cart. Sitting, he wrapped the black vinyl pad of the blood pressure test machine around his bicep.

"I get it. Not your child. Not into kids." She wondered, as she had over the years, how he would have taken news of a pregnancy.

"That, too. My body's falling apart. Stefania and I are too."

Rudie leaned against a shelf of protein bars, replaying the words slowly. "Your wife?" she asked then regretted it. He had avoided referring to Stefania when he and Rudie were together. Rudie thought she'd heard him say Stefania's name only two or three times. Now Dylan's lips stayed pushed out, thoughtful, not sneering as they might have in the past. Near the end of their relationship Rudie would chant *wife wife wife wife* in the streetcar on the way to meeting him.

Dylan pushed the button. The machine puffed.

"Yes, my wife. We're over now. It's as hard as I thought it would be, yet I'm still here! Funny. Blood pressure's low. Must be hibernating."

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“Welcome to the wilderness. Do you talk to her?”

“We each have our own place now, but we do still talk.”

Dylan caught Rudie’s hand. He moved his head from side to side, up, down, trying to catch her gaze, until she looked down at him and they locked eyes. She gripped his hand then released, but he wouldn’t let go, so she relaxed and smiled and he smiled back. She moved closer then, and covering his hand with her other hand, she shook herself free and stepped away.

Roselore Roselore Roselore. If she could smell her child, hear her voice, clasp the little body, the plump cheek against her breasts, her thoughts would come clear. She twisted the top of a baby powder container. A puff of white. She coughed. The powder reminded her of nothing. Did any residual feeling she had for Dylan take away from what she felt for Leo? *Ours is a confident, settled love, she thought, not requiring obsession and doubt.* She could be right.

“I’m about to open up wider than I ever have,” she said.

“That’s just cruel.”

“I mean my heart. You don’t like that kind of talk. I’m expanding myself to bring this child into my life. I have to give her everything.”

Dylan flinched as a woman walked by on his left side. He shook his head, an action he’d repeated several times that morning: with the waitress at Swick’s, beside the leather store boot while Barth was talking to her.

“Isn’t your appointment soon?”

“You’re right. I should get going.” He stood and put on his coat. They steered down the card aisle.

“Is it something medical?” she asked.

He knocked against a mirrored pillar reflecting red cherubs,

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roses and hearts. In the lineup, he moved as close to her as he could without touching.

“I’ve lost peripheral vision in my left eye,” he said, “my dominant eye. A mini-stroke to the optic nerve. Some colour blindness, too. Today I have a visual field test with the ophthalmologist to see what I’ve regained. I can still work with a missing side. The brain adapts.”

Rudie waited a beat to respond, sensing a twist to the story, was about to say *I’m sorry* and *I didn’t know* when Dylan’s arm caught her close and his mouth opened on hers, halting her words, insisting she kiss back, and she did.