

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *SCARBOROUGH*

catherine  
hernandez  
crosshairs

**"Crosshairs made me shiver.  
It troubled my dreams. Still, I  
could not put down this dystopia.  
It was utterly compelling."**

—LAWRENCE HILL,  
bestselling author of  
*The Illegal* and *The Book  
of Negroes*

A NOVEL



# CROSSHAIRS

*A Novel*

CATHERINE HERNANDEZ



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## **Author's Note**

*Trigger warning:* There are terms used by the fascist regime in this book that are meant to illustrate the oppressive power of words.

For clarity, characters who use the singular “they/them” pronouns are referred to with an asterisk when they are first introduced.

## Dedication

*Pulse nightclub, Orlando.*

Here is what I dreamed:

They were there.

Forty-nine of them.

Crowding the light of a bathroom.

Playfully fighting for space along a smudged mirror.

Fingerprints of those who came before us.

To place upon lips a shine.

To dull a shine upon the nose.

Ready to dance.

Let me tell you: they were beautiful.

Dressed to impress.

All name brand.

All bought on sale.

Skin Black and Brown.

It was twilight and we could hear the music,

loud and thumping,

somewhere beyond.

The ones that came before

Our ancestors

were ready for us

in that nightclub high above the clouds.

“Let’s go!” one of the forty-nine said.

There were cheers.

The forty-nine worked as a team, building a spiral staircase

made of magical dominoes

suspended in midair.

Despite heels

despite tight pants  
they built it together.

I looked up and saw we were approaching a hole in the sky.

They used the domino staircase to enter the hole

Then they all looked down at me through the circle

Gesturing to me to come up and join them.

“Not now,” I said sadly. “I’m not ready yet.”

They waved goodbye.

I will never forget the image of them waving from that hole in the sky.

These people I never knew, who could easily have been any one of us.

They waved.

## Epigraph

*To the people of privilege:  
You will survive your discomfort while reading this book  
But many like me,  
who sit dangerously at various intersections of identity,  
will not survive long enough for you to complete the last page.  
What will you do?*

# Contents

*Cover*

*Title Page*

*Author's Note*

*Dedication*

*Epigraph*

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

*Acknowledgements*

*About the Author*

*Also by Catherine Hernandez*

*Copyright*

*About the Publisher*

# 1

**Evan. My beautiful Evan.** Here in the darkness of this hiding place, I write you these words. Without paper, without pen, I trace these words in my head, along the perimeter of your outline. Watch this sentence travel along the meat of your cheekbone. See my teeth dig into your flesh playfully. Watch these words ball into your hand along with a fistful of bedsheet, which you pull over us to create a tent. I imagine you now, lying across from me, improvising a silly song about the smallness of my ears. Ironically, you sing it half in tune, half out of tune.

“Maybe you’re the one with the small ears,” I suggest, and you scrunch your face in embarrassment. You’re talented at many things, but music isn’t one of them. Sometimes the image of you is clear, right down to the curl of your eyelashes. Sometimes, especially when I’m hungry, I recall the shape of your smile and nothing more. Watch these phrases ink across an imaginary page, a Whisper Letter, folded twice, placed in an envelope and mailed to wherever you may be. I will never forget your name, Evan. And I pray you will never forget mine.

If by some miracle my whispered words reach you, I want you to know that I’m safe on Homewood Street, where Liv has hidden me in her basement.

No room in Toronto is ever used in the way it was originally intended. That’s what happens in a city always trying to reinvent itself. Like it has an itch it can’t scratch. Like it has a commitment problem. This room was meant to be a cold cellar. A place where, before the invention of refrigeration, the woman of the house would have stored things like butter

or eggs. That's why even in the heat of the summer, the heat of this hellish summer, I feel like I'm swimming in the cold breath of ghosts. I'm wearing all the clothes I ran away in. Five layers, which you told me to wear. There is no finding me. At least I hope so.

To ensure that I am hidden, I have set up my bed beside Liv's furnace. My bed consists of two layers of cardboard boxes cut to fit in the corner of space behind the furnace and a pile of Liv's old winter coats, which I use as blankets and a pillow. The idea is, if I need to leave again and in a hurry, what remains behind won't resemble a hideout for me: a Queer, femme Jamaican-Filipino man. Anne Frank, minus the diary.

It is here where I await news, where I hope for your arrival, where I wait for Liv to feed me or to tell me it's time to run again. I am unsure exactly how long I have been here, as counting days is its own form of torture. Instead, I understand the passing of time by watching the moon's cycle from the basement window. Maybe you are doing the same. Lunar crescents have grown fat, then thin across the night sky almost six times. And at the swelling of every moon, Liv has replenished my supplies. It is through this same basement window that I have watched a raccoon give birth, pushing those kits out, one at a time, in the space between the spiderweb-stained glass and the corrugated metal framing. I have been here long enough to watch them grow too large for the cubbyhole. Long enough to watch the mama bite the collars of each of her whimpering kits and carry them to the surface of the world, high above me.

In the dead of winter, under the light of a waxing fingernail moon, I jogged in place to keep my limbs from feeling wooden and numb. In the spring, when the flooding began once again, I would stand in ankle-deep filthy water. Under a new moon, with flashes of lightning as my only guide in the darkness, I filled buckets with flood water and passed them to Liv through the hatch to pour down the kitchen drain. Since summer has returned, and the moon is pregnant-round, I am thankful the musty smell of mould has dissipated a bit.

I can see the sky peeking through the opening of the basement window like a half-circle picture-perfect blue. I'm not sure what is better: to look outside the window and long for sunlight or to lie on my dark makeshift bed, close my eyes and dream of bicycling with you through the city, fast and free.

When I first arrived, I kept to my cardboard bed and wept, seeing the basement as my prison, my tomb while the Renovation unfolded at ground level. Then, as time passed, as the moon scratched a wound across the sky, I began to inch my way around the concrete to witness the untold history of the home with my curious hands and squinting eyes. At the opposite end of the basement, where a broken stove sits, just beyond the reach of its power cord's coil, is a washroom rough-in. Three unfinished pipes poke through the solid concrete like necks without heads. I picture a couple in the early 2000s renovating the basement to create a separate apartment, then halting their construction as the stock market crashes. In the adjacent corner stands a dusty wooden bar and dysfunctional sink. I imagine a husband in the 1970s, wearing his paisley shirt, picking through the shelves in search of his favourite brand of whiskey. A mysterious series of headboards from several different time periods, from several different occupants, leans against the cold walls.

Every corner of this basement tells a tale and so too does every inch of my body. The landscape of every curve is a map of my traumatic experiences. Evan. Take your first two fingers and make a compass. Walk your compass between the mounds of my kneecaps to find bodies of water, deep with your touch, remembered. The distance between my belly button and my throat is measured in increments of kilometres run in my escape and the sequence of events that led me here, to this nightmare lived. The canyon of my palm is where I feel everything and everyone I have lost in the last several months. And constantly echoing through these vast mountain ranges of bones and sifted garbage heaps is the sound of first screams and final goodbyes. The cartography of memory. The navigation through valleys of scars.

Tonight, the light comes. I hear the kitchen table slide roughly across the floor and then the hatch is lifted.

“Kay!” Liv says to me.

The light is painful-beautiful. The light is ugly perfect. I squint my eyes and open them as wide as I can all at the same time. I want that light inside of me. It feels so good. As usual, when Liv opens the hatch, I stack the milk crates to raise myself high enough to reach her hand. Our hands touch and she hoists me out onto the ground floor. We land on our bums on the linoleum tiles with a soft thud and she begins crying. I usually hate seeing white folks cry because it means I have to assure them that I, as a Black

person, do not think less of them. But Liv is different. I know she wouldn't cry unless she had reason to do so.

"What's wrong?" I ask gently. My voice is hoarse, speaking for the first time in ages.

She doesn't answer me. She pulls her shirt up to wipe her wet face. I look around to see if there are tissues, but I don't see any in the kitchen, so I let her continue with this sad wet-shirt business. Her breathing calms enough for her to let her shoulders relax finally. By then her shirt is wetter than her face. Whatever it was has passed, it seems. I am too scared to ask.

"Are you hungry? Can I make you something?" she asks while standing herself up. A few sniffles escape her mouth like hiccups.

"Yes, please." My stomach growls. "Do you want help?" I say, knowing I have few calories to spare.

"No, no. Just chill."

I sit at the kitchen table and chew my cheek. Once I taste the threat of blood in my mouth, I will myself to ease off, for food is on its way. The sound of a podcast transmits from Liv's phone. A recording of ambient sound of an industrial kitchen, with the occasional calling out of orders, slowly cross-fades with a raspy voice. "My name is Khalil. I'm twenty-eight years old. I have been in charge of the kitchen here at the Don Valley workhouse for three months now . . ."

With one hand, Liv wipes her chafed nose with a tissue, while the other begins opening and closing cupboard doors and the fridge; she shakes her head at the lack of choice. She settles on grilling strips of bacon and making it a stir-fry with leftover rice and frozen veggies. I swallow hard, watching the bacon fold in on itself with the heat and sizzle. I feel like passing out from anticipation, so I focus on amplifying the podcast by placing the phone in a clean coffee cup on the table. The voice of a journalist can be heard over Liv's cooking.

"It is a crisp Wednesday morning. Khalil blows warm air on his hands as his silhouette spirits across a fiery dawn towards the mess hall," the journalist narrates. The sound of cutlery clinking. Plates being piled. Barely coherent words of thanks from a lineup of people. "After mass environmental displacement, homelessness and hunger once plagued the lives of these workers. But not today. Despite his lofty task of feeding hundreds of people at this factory, Khalil still finds the time to check in with those enjoying the meals his team has made and to shake the hands of

everyone sitting at each table. This includes the children of the workers, who, despite the rumours of separated families, are schooled and housed on the compound alongside their parents. With his apron still stained from today's prep, Khalil makes his way to a little girl holding her teddy bear."

The microphone shifts and catches the audio of a small girl's sweet voice. "Can Bear-Bear get a muffin too?" she pleads.

"You betcha!" Khalil replies.

The sound of the mess hall cross-fades with the clunk of cans being stacked on a shelf. "There isn't a moment to spare today. Once the breakfast plates are cleared, Khalil is busy with planning lunch and tracking inventory. I ask him the question that's been on minds around the world in the wake of reports smearing the Canadian government with charges like 'genocide' and 'fascism.'

Ambient noise of Khalil counting cans. Finally, "So what do you say when people call the workhouses 'concentration camps'?"

He scoffs. "Absolutely not. They're not concentration camps. I'm in charge of cooking three meals a day for these workers, seven days a week. We're all housed. No one's getting hurt. No one is starving. Even with the food shortages and floods, the compound helps people get access to free meals and clean water. You wouldn't call *that* a 'concentration camp.' That's called 'teamwork.'"

I wrap my hands around the cup to feel the vibrations of the podcast reverberate through my palm. I feel the power of connection through the device, of the ability to connect with others and be seen online. I resist the urge to scroll through Liv's social media. No one, including you, is reachable anyway.

Khalil continues, "If it weren't for the workhouses, many of us would be homeless, useless. As the Renovation creed says, '*Through our work, our nation prospers. Through our unity, we end conflict. Through our leader, we find peace. Through order, we find tranquility.*'"

"And what does that mean to you, Khalil?" asks the interviewer.

Khalil's voice is determined. "It means all this was for the best. We need to pull together and stop fighting each other. Know your place and do the work that's needed. The Renovation taught us that. Mother Nature taught us that. When she stepped in and showed us who's boss, we had no choice. We all had to pitch in. Others like me have to put our talents to good use, instead of fighting each other and arguing over who has what."

At the sound of this, Liv lets out a heavy sigh and reaches for the phone. “I’m so sorry,” she says. One tap of her thumb and the podcast is paused. “I download and listen to it for appearances, in case my phone is seized.” Two plates are collected from the cupboard and the stir-fry is served. “As if Khalil isn’t white and Christian. As if Khalil is his name. As if he even exists. We can’t even see him. It’s a fucking podcast. And yet, people still believe it.”

We sit quietly as I devour the meal, making sure to leave the fatty ends of the bacon for last. Every onion, every pea, every piece of shredded carrot has that delicious bacon grease on it, so I eat until all that is left are smears across the plate. An oil painting. I drink heartily.

“It feels so damn good to resurface every now and then to drink running water and eat perishable food.” I chuckle to myself even though Liv’s mind is far away. “Jesus be a juicy burger. Jesus be a glass of cold milk. Jesus be a plate of freshly fried potatoes.”

Now that I have finished eating, I will fill containers with my rations. Anything that can stay in my hideout for extended periods of time and not rot. When I first started hiding here, Liv’s instructions were clear: if I had to run, I was to stack the containers without any crumbs on the canned-goods shelf, lean my makeshift bed against the wall and toss the coats into a pile so that it wouldn’t look like anyone was staying there. It would just look like a messy basement. Before I go back to my dank hidey-hole, I begin restocking all the things I once loved and now abhor after eating them again and again. Wasabi chickpeas. Purple tortilla chips. Dried snap peas.

“You don’t have to do that now. We can wait. You need to stretch your legs a bit.”

Do I ever. The ceiling downstairs is low enough to graze the top of my unkempt hair.

“Our usual?” she asks me. I nod. I am so happy she asked. Liv takes my hand and we go upstairs. She is quiet again. I stay quiet with her.

Liv draws me a bath. I sit silent on the toilet as she attempts to get the remaining bubble bath soap out of its bottle by filling it with water, swishing it around and dumping it out. My skin is so hungry for that heat that I get goosebumps.

After one last swirl of her hand in the bath, she dries her hands. She searches the cabinet and places a pink razor and a toothbrush on the counter.

“Remember to just hide the razor and toothbrush in the garbage after you’re done.” She leaves the bathroom to give me privacy. I want to tell her that I don’t want privacy. That being above ground means light. It means speaking. It means seeing people’s faces. It means hearing things clearly rather than muffled through the floorboards. But she is gone before I am brave enough to ask. I see her feet walk away through the slit under the door.

I undress. It feels incredible to peel off these sorry clothes. I scratch my skin heartily and watch tiny parts of me fall like snow onto the bathroom tiles. It feels so good to be naked. As usual, I open the bathroom door a bit to leave my clothes outside for Liv to launder. She always refuses to let me do it.

I test the water with my toes and it is delightfully hot. My hair stands on end, and I remember to grab the razor and place it on the ledge of the tub. I sink into the hug of this bath. This bath that reminds me of who I am.

Who I am. Who am I? Oh, yes. I am Kay. And I marched.

During the Pride festival, the LGBTQ2S community would emerge from their closets or lack thereof to march and be proud of their identities. I marched with them to the horizon of asphalt, heat mirages snaking into the air. I applied makeup in alleyways, a compact mirror sitting in a void of missing brick to ready my face and parade down the path of cheering crowds. We marched in the name of screaming nights; us queens circling lampposts like stripper poles, circling stripper poles like lampposts. We marched in the name of sparkles and leather, mesh and feathers. We marched for those who could not march. We marched south on Yonge Street, the main artery of the city, turned the corner at Carlton, then dispersed amid the crowd along Church Street towards the centre of the gay village. To the tune of bull dykes drumming, we danced through streets, baring all; our sweaty shoulders shiny against the sun like apples waiting for a hungry bite. And we ate. We ate at the bounty of us, this buffet of body, at the bathhouse or club. We ate. We ate well. Some of us grew families. Some of us grew gardens. Some of us were lucky enough to grow older. Some of us did not survive.

Evan, do you remember watching me perform at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre? On the dance floor, I would give you a kiss before heading downstairs to the dressing room, to peel off my sweaty pantyhose. Once

inside that postered and bright room, I would shake off my damp wig and count out my tips. Drag was a humble living but enough to get us a post-show burger and groceries for the next day.

I still remember that day, one of the last days. There were three of us queens removing our faces, making a pile of dirty wipes on the counter. It was one of the many gigs I shared with my roommates, Fanny and Nolan. Fanny, still in costume, went to the adjacent washroom to piss. Her chihuahua, Sedgewick, was celebrating our return to the dressing room with his sharp yelps. Nolan remained at the counter, meticulously wiping perspiration from his armpits with an old shirt.

“Who’s up for brunch tomorrow?” I said, flashing my tips.

“Oh look, Fanny,” said Nolan while rolling his eyes and scrolling his phone.

From the washroom Fanny flushed the toilet and then re-entered the room. “What?”

“Kay is buying us brunch.”

“I’m not buying anything for you thankless bitches!” I threw my pantyhose at Nolan’s face. I had the worst aim, so it drifted to the floor instead. Nolan flashed me a belittling smile. I tucked the cash into my jacket pocket and averted my eyes to save my dignity. “I’m just lucky that there happened to be a stagette party in the audience for my ‘Going to the Chapel’ number tonight. That ugly-ass bride was like a cash cow with a dollar-store veil on her head. And did you see the bills she had on her? All twenties, no fives, no tens.” I removed my false eyelashes in two dramatic movements for emphasis.

“You can have them, Kay. To hell with all those drunken bridesmaids with their feather boas and dick drinking straws. I couldn’t stand the sound of them butchering ‘Single Ladies’ during my Beyoncé set. They all ruined it with their . . .” Fanny flipped her hand back and forth to demonstrate the bridal party’s sad imitation of Beyoncé’s choreography, and I burst out laughing.

With his show dress still undone and bunched at his waist, Nolan rose from the counter, trying to catch the WiFi signal from the theatre upstairs. It was always weak down below in the dressing room. With his phone in hand, he tried various positions near the door, cursing in between each one. When a healthy signal was achieved, he gleefully gestured us over. “Who

wants to see my latest *Party Crashers* episode? My editor just sent me the link.”

One of Nolan’s regular gigs was to host a popular web series where he crashed political events and interviewed attendees in full drag. Bare-chested and sweaty, we rushed to his side as the video buffered. It faded in to the tune of Vivaldi’s *Spring*. Establishing shots of a convention centre filled the screen. Catering staff prepared trays of hors d’oeuvres. Cascading floral arrangements were placed on tables. Fancy people in fancy suits shook hands. The video cut to a shot of the Ontario premier, Walt Ogilvy, shaking hands with said fancy people while cameras flashed. To the right of the screen, Nolan entered in Connie Chung drag, complete with larger-than-life blown-out wig and tailored pantsuit. One manicured hand held a glittery microphone, while the other arm bent upwards like a teapot to hook an oversized handbag. The music changed to a hard, rhythmic guitar as Nolan’s gait was emphasized by dramatic slow-motion video.

“Damn!” I said. “Was the wind blowing when you were shooting this? Did you plan it that way?”

“What can I say?” Nolan shrugged. “I try to change the world one slow-motion shot at a time.”

The video continued with a shot of Ogilvy walking with his colleagues down a hallway. Cameras flashed. Nolan approached Ogilvy with his microphone arm outstretched.

The premier’s ruddy and round face snickered at the sight of Nolan. I could see in his eyes that he thought this was a prank, or the entertainment portion of the event. “What do we have here?” More laughs. His compadres joined in, laughing at the man in a dress. Security guards stepped forward to protect him, but Ogilvy waved them off with a hearty guffaw.

Nolan’s face remained pursed with Connie Chung–like discernment and journalistic downward inflections. “Good evening, Premier. Are you confirming that you can actually see me?” Nolan pointed the microphone in the politician’s face and waited for an answer.

Ogilvy looked around the room, balking at Nolan’s strange question. “Of course I can see you and all this that you’re wearing. Whatever it is. Whatever you are. How can anyone not see you?”

“Then if you can see me, Premier, is there a reason why your party denies the presence of Trans and gender-nonconforming folks in the current

sex-ed curriculum?” At the end of this sentence, Ogilvy’s face shifted and he began walking away.

“I think you are a very confused individual,” he said over his shoulder, dismissively. Two security guards intercepted Nolan as the premier made his way down the hall. The media scrum suddenly divided between covering Ogilvy’s arrival into the event space and recording the drag queen in hysterics.

“I’m not confused, Premier! I’m clearly channelling *Connie Chung meets Vera Wang meets Armani!*” Nolan cried. “And even if I was confused, at least you acknowledged that I indeed exist. Just like—” In front of the puzzled media scrum, Nolan reached into his handbag and pulled out a stack of papers loaded with images. One showed a doctored photo of the premier’s face on a porn star’s body, jacking off. “—masturbation exists!” He shuffled to another print, this time a photo of Ogilvy at a press conference denying allegations of sexual assault. “Consent exists!”

The video ended with Nolan exiting the convention centre, his arms playfully around the security guards as they escorted him out. Fanny and I gazed at Nolan, our mouths agape.

“I am . . . I am . . .” Fanny could barely find the words. “I am so damn jealous of you. I wish all of us homos could give that closeted asshole a piece of our minds. Drag him.”

“Wow, Nolan.” I shook my head in wonder. By the looks of the view counter, the video was already well on its way to going viral. “You are brave.”

“Why, thank you, Kay.” Nolan curtsied and put his phone in his show bag. “Okay, bitches. When we get home can we finally catch up on *Zombie Country?*” The skin where his eyebrows once were rose in a plea. I found it hard to read his emotions without his full drag makeup. He was one of those queens who had no lips or eyebrows unless they were drawn on. I had to rely on dramatic pauses or comedic timing to understand his expressions.

Sedgewick yapped at the sight of Fanny struggling to remove her pantyhose and foam bum. Nolan groaned at the sound.

“Yes, Sedgewick, Mama has to pack her ass into a plastic bag.” Fanny sighed with relief when her control panties were finally inched off her fat belly, giving her generous rolls breathing room. “I’m game for watching

*Zombie Country*, but you need to promise to sit right next to me. That show is scary as fuck. I don't know why we watch that. It's like torture."

"We watch it to prepare ourselves," said Nolan, slipping on his boy underwear and adjusting his penis under the fabric.

"For what?" Fanny began combing out her bobbed wig. "You think we'll have a zombie apocalypse?"

"No. This is metaphorical. The zombies are like a real and present evil within all of us, taking over."

"That's bullshit."

"How is that bullshit?"

"You think the creators of *Zombie Country* are thinking metaphors and symbols? I think they're thinking about what kind of show makes money. That's all."

"Sure, Fanny. There's that, too." Nolan combed his hair into a tight ponytail. "But my parents came from Cambodia after surviving the Killing Fields. The way my dad describes the events that led to the Khmer Rouge taking over and forcing everyone into labour camps . . . it sounds just like a zombie apocalypse to me!"

"Bitch, how did this conversation turn so sour all of a sudden?" Fanny chuckled. We all laughed nervously.

"No, for reals. I think there is evil in all of us. All it takes are the right circumstances and we're in the same situation as Nazi Germany." Nolan tossed his dirty makeup wipes into the trash and applied lip balm.

"Okay, Nolan," Fanny slipped into an off-the-shoulder sweatshirt she'd purchased at a second-hand shop the week before. "So you tell me: how is this show, this internationally popular television show, preparing you for impending disaster?"

Nolan rubbed the stubble coming in on his eyebrows. I could see him partly thinking about his response and partly taking a mental note to pluck before his next gig. "It reminds me to look for hiding places. It reminds me to consider who I can count on in case of emergency."

"What emergency is that?" I asked, my heart skipping a beat. I realized I was behind in undressing. I still had my head wrapped in tape and pins. I had forgotten you were upstairs waiting for all of us to undress. I quickened my pace.

"In case . . . the small things we experience every day become so big we have to run. I mean . . . look at what I just did to our premier. We can't even

exist in textbooks. Where else are they going to erase us?”

We were silent for a moment. Nolan lovingly touched Fanny’s forearm. It was badly bruised after her last run-in with a cop. The cop had catcalled Fanny just after she finished a gig at Sirens Nightclub. She did not respond and chose to jaywalk to avoid contact with him. He then issued her a ticket for jaywalking. When Fanny protested, the cop strong-armed her, calling her a she-male.

Fanny pursed her lips and looked away.

Nolan broke the silence. “Could you imagine drag queens fighting an apocalypse?” Nolan pretended to sword-fight with me. “We’d be, like, ‘Fuck, the enemy is coming! Hurry, get your heels! We need to stiletto these bitches to death!’”

“Or you know how in the movies, just before a revolution starts, the leader does that inspirational speech? We’d do that, but one of us would be lip-synching the speech from a playback track of a speech. That’s how drag it would be,” Fanny said, joining in with a smile.

I watched quietly as Nolan and Fanny took turns lip-synching in dramatic drag queen fashion (including quivering lips for vibrato) while the other recited William Wallace’s *Braveheart* speech in a Scottish brogue: “They may take our lives, but they’ll never take our freedom!” Even Sedgewick joined the two humans above him with his high-pitched barking. I smiled but had nothing to add to the joke. Instead, I wondered what could possibly happen in my lifetime that would have me running. What would mean enough to me to fight for it?

I remember us all meeting you upstairs and heading home that night together, me on your right arm, Fanny on your left. Nolan up ahead smoking a cigarette.

“See? Look at Evan. This one’s a keeper, Kay,” Fanny said to me, while hitting your chest playfully with her purse. “He knows to walk slowly after an entire show wearing stilettos.”

I scoffed. “Oh, enough! You’ve already changed into those ugly-ass nurse shoes.”

“I will have you know, these are called high-tops, and kids nowadays are all about them.”

We laughed. Maybe a bit too loudly. You tightened the grip on our arms and whispered, “Keep walking. Keep quiet.”

Nolan looked back, confused. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Turn around. Keep walking,” you said.

Under the light of the bug-stained street lamps, we did not question you. Being followed at night (or in the morning or afternoon, really) was a familiar sensation. It was becoming more familiar as the days wore on. Making our way towards Church Street, our casual stroll became a speed walk, as did the pace of the person (or people?) behind us. I could not hear their footsteps but could hear their breathing. I did not dare look back. Just as Fanny began to cough with exertion, an open plastic cola bottle was thrown in our path. It spun in flat circles along the concrete, and the smell of piss rose into the air. We stopped before our toes could touch the filthy puddle.

“TRANNNY N\_ \_ \_RS!” a voice yelled before disappearing into the night.

We sidestepped the mess and continued walking towards our apartment, where we went inside and shared a spliff. I remember your hands shaking while rolling the buds into an imperfect cylinder. I remember you pulling the drag longer than usual and pretending everything was all right. We all pretended that night.

But that was then. Before Nolan left us. Before we all had to disappear ourselves. Before we begged Fanny to run.

I wonder sometimes where Fanny is and if she is safe. We aren't white boys who can take off the gay like a coat, hang it up in a closet, then lock ourselves in that closet. People like Fanny and me don't have a choice. You can't take off the skin. You can't take off the femme. So that's why I ended up here in Liv's house, sitting in her tub, writing this Whisper Letter to you.

Filth runs off me. I scrub the overgrown hair on my head angrily. I shave my legs, my sad legs, then pull the plug in the tub. I rinse off my body, this body that is mine, under the shower as the last of my filth and hair goes down the drain.

When I walk into Liv's room, she already has her closet open for me.

“Kay, sometimes—well, no—*every* time we do this, I think to myself, you must hate my wardrobe.” I do. Her formal wear is boring. All capped sleeves and knee-length skirts fit for corporate arm candy. Her casual apparel is hideous. It's like what those ladies used to dress up in at Lilith Fair in the 1990s. All paisley skirts and slouchy sleeves. But it will do for now. For this one moment.

“I don’t hate your wardrobe.” I roll my eyes and make my way to the closet. She knows I’m lying. I slip Liv’s fake kimono off the hanger and onto my true skin. The bottom edges of the fabric brush against my newly shaven legs and it feels like a kiss. Wrapping the belt around my waist, I admire my reflection in Liv’s standing mirror. I’m thinner, but you will be happy to know that the shelf of my bum can still be seen through the fabric. Liv smiles at my towering slender reflection, and I smile back.

“Shoes?”

“Ummm . . . yes!” I know her feet are too small, but I manage to squeeze myself into a pair of white peekaboo-toed heels. I look again into the mirror and flex my calves. I walk and pivot back and forth from the mirror to make Liv giggle.

When her laughter dies down, she says, “Do you want to have some time alone in here?”

“Hell, no. If you have a moment, I’d love to talk to somebody. I just want to say things and hear things. Anything.”

I sprawl myself across the width of her soft bed. I raise my legs up with the high heels still on. Damn, I look good. Damn, I feel good. Damn this entire life.

Liv’s side table contains both her sex toys and her nail polish collection, so it smells like a strange combination of rubber, bubble gum and acetone. I choose the reddest-of-red colour. I choose it because it’s a similar shade to the first red lipstick I stole, from Shoppers Drug Mart on my thirteenth birthday. It is red like newly bloomed poppies and red like blood from a fresh wound.

“I’m glad you chose this colour. It was my wife’s favourite . . . It is my wife’s favourite.” Liv has a problem with tenses too, which are dependent on how hopeful we are of reuniting with those we have lost. I slip the heels off and prop my feet atop Liv’s lap as she weaves a rolled-up tissue between my toes. She gathers her bleach-blond hair into a messy bun, exposing the dark brown at her roots, then begins painting. I love listening to stories about Erin, so I keep quiet, hoping she will tell me more. “When Erin got pregnant, she still wanted me to paint her toenails, even though she could barely see her own feet by the end of her third trimester. I loved doing it, though. She’d fall asleep every time.”

Each nail looks like a race car when she is done, shiny and perfect. We both admire her work for a moment. Liv looks at the blood red of my nails

and she begins to shake. When she kneels next to the bed, I can tell her head is heavy with thinking, so I reach my hand out to hers and hold it tight. That's when she speaks truth. "It's time to run again."

My heart sinks. My skin is suddenly cold against this silk robe. This fake silk kimono. There is a sour smell to the sweat of my armpits against this fabric. Every pore on my body touches the kimono in pins and needles. It's time to run.

Arranging for Liv to not only cross paths with Charles Greene, but also to engage with him meaningfully took a substantial amount of planning and patience. The Resistance strategically placed Liv as a server at Legal Tender, a bar located in the heart of Toronto's financial district, where Charles was a regular.

After two months of Liv being on the job, the two finally met. It was Cinco de Mayo. Despite the incessant rainstorms, the bar was packed with executives who embellished their tailored suits with tourist sombreros on their heads and handlebar moustaches on their faces. There wasn't a Mexican in sight.

Charles sat at a booth with two men who clinked their Coronas. One had a reddened face and bloodshot eyes. The other had smart spectacles and a loosened tie. Charles, on the other hand, appeared soft and disarming in his blue golf shirt and khaki slacks, casual Friday to their power suits.

Over the sound of faux mariachi music and dudes screaming "*Ándale!*" at random, Liv approached his booth to take food orders.

"Are you hombres ready to order some tapas?" With a listless face, Liv turned the page of her notebook and clicked the nib of her pen into position. Charles removed his sombrero and finger-combed his boyish haircut.

"Uh-oh! Someone's trying to fill us up on some food because we're gettin' too rowdy," Bloodshot Eyes said, half speaking, half spitting.

"Speak for yourself," Loose Tie said through even looser lips. "Charles and I are being perfect gentlemen."

Liv looped her bleach-blond hair behind her ear and recited the specials. "Well, the chef has two amazing platters tonight and—"

"What about you? Do we get you on a platter?" Bloodshot Eyes said.

Loose Tie put his hand around Liv's waist. "Don't scare her away! Look. She's scared. She's scared."

“Two of the platters. Just bring one of each,” Charles intervened. He looked at Liv apologetically as she retreated to the kitchen.

When their table was just about finished for the night, another Drunken Suit approached Liv.

“I need to settle my bill, beautiful,” he said sloppily, pretending he didn’t know Liv, pretending they had not trained together for months for this very moment. Liv began processing his receipt. In Charles’s plain view, Drunken Suit began stroking Liv’s triceps with the surface of his knuckles. Liv swatted him away like a fly, and like a fly his hand returned.

“Can I help you, sir?” Charles said to Drunken Suit, aggressively putting his arm around him, like they were pals.

“I’m paying my bill.”

“How about this: you can go back to your table and put down two crisp fifties and call it a night.”

“I don’t think so. I just had four beers.”

Charles stepped towards the man until they were practically nose to nose. “Put down the money at the table and leave the lady alone.” The man wavered and did as he said.

Liv made a face. “Yikes. Thanks. I’m sorry you had to do that.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m sorry you’ve had to deal with fools like that all night, including my friends over there.” His pale blue eyes flashed towards his booth. Bloodshot Eyes and Loose Tie were struggling to get their jackets on.

Liv waved off his concern. “It’s part of working here. The bankers are the worst. Lawyers a close second.”

Charles rubbed his boxed beard with a sly grin. “And the businessmen like me?”

“They’re okay, I guess.” Liv pretended to fight back a grin and made eye contact, long enough for him to remember her face.

The next morning, at his office on King Street, Charles looked up and saw Liv distributing the paperwork among his colleagues. Their eyes met and she made a face, the same face she’d made in the bar, before quietly exiting the meeting.

Later that day, Charles leaned on the door frame of the staff lunchroom while Liv waited for her food to microwave. “Hi, intern.”

Liv held up her hands defensively. “I swear I didn’t know who you were when I met you last night.”

“Moonlighting?”

“That’s my part-time job so I can afford the life of an intern.”

“I hope you know who I am *now*.”

“Of course I do. You’re Charles Greene, CEO of CAN Create.” Liv looked to the side, blushing. “And you’re a great fighter of drunken men who manhandle waitresses. Thanks again, by the way.” Charles smiled a slow smile, interest alive on his face.

They both threw protocol aside and shared dinner at Flax, Toronto’s latest organic farm-to-table restaurant. By the end of their dinner, the two were sharing dessert.

“Okay . . . I have to ask. What’s it like? Being a CEO of this multinational corporation? God, I hope I don’t sound like a hick saying that.”

“You sound like you think I’m a superman or something.”

“Well, you kind of are, aren’t you? I mean, your company occupies the top seven floors of a skyscraper that has the best views in the city. You have thousands of employees. These people have houses because of you. They can feed their families and send their kids to school.”

A waiter approached politely. A Black man, hands behind his back, smiling gently. “How are we enjoying the dessert?”

Charles paused with his spoon in the air and snarled, “How about you let me eat without you asking me questions that interrupt our conversation?”

The waiter’s smile faded slightly before he attempted to reinvigorate it at its edges. He failed. He bowed and receded to the kitchen. Charles threw Liv a look and she snickered.

Wiping the edges of his beard with his napkin he continued. “I dunno, Liv. It’s a little more complicated than that. There are thousands of employees here in Canada and thousands more elsewhere. Take this dessert we’re enjoying right now. This ridiculous toasted-pumpkin-seed, beetroot-reduction, cane-sugar crisp, whatever dessert. I want you to consider the hands that processed the pumpkin seeds, harvested the beetroots and extracted the sugar cane juice. In order for us to even afford organic food, we have to ensure those very hands are not paid well. And in order for those people to be willing to be underpaid . . .”

“They have to be desperate.” Liv scooped another spoonful into her mouth, careful not to smudge her lipstick.

“Exactly. Just last month, in one of our facilities in China, those desperate people we employed were ravaged by a third typhoon in two years. The Chinese are hard-working. They know how to take orders. They do things quick and they do things cheap. It saddens me to think of how many of them were lost. Truth is a bunch may die and they have millions more willing to take their place.” Charles tossed his napkin onto the table.

“I’m sorry. That’s a lot to handle.”

“Meanwhile, here in Canada, we aren’t desperate enough. There are people here, especially after the floods on the east coast and the droughts on the west coast, who should be begging to keep their hands busy with repairing what we have left. But instead they’re asking for handouts. You have these Others wandering around aimlessly, when they should be proving themselves and being useful.”

Liv chimed in, playing along. “There’s this one waitress over at Legal Tender who drives me up the wall with her hipster discourse about fair trade. We’re all folding napkins and wiping wine glasses; meanwhile, she’s preaching to us about how important it is for us to buy vintage clothing to ‘divest’ from sweatshop operations.” Her fingers made rabbit ears in the air at the word “divest” and Charles pressed his palm to his forehead, closed his eyes. “But no one thinks of how, even if this little Bengali girl is making five cents a day making my sweater, it’s a hell of a lot better than her selling her body in some brothel. ‘Divesting’ without giving actual options to these Others is talk I don’t have patience for.”

Charles waved his hand in agreement. “Here’s the thing. Your co-worker feels bad about these little Brown children making shoes because, unlike China or Bangladesh or the Philippines, people here in Canada, no matter how poor, are not willing to do this kind of work. It frustrates me to no end seeing these Others who would rather ride a gravy train than put their skills to good use. And when people like this . . .” He pointed his fork towards the waiter, “accept handouts they become dangers to our society. But I want to change that. That’s why we’ll be ending our overseas manufacturing within a year and have everything Canadian-made.”

“You can afford that?”

“There are ways.”

They left Flax and strolled east along King Street’s theatre district, with its marquee bulbs blinking rhythmically over the faces of restaurant hostesses hoping to lure passersby to their overpriced menus. Everything

was overpriced due to the shortages. The more expensive the food, the bigger the hostess's smile. At each intersection, partygoers sat on lines of sandbags to enjoy their cigarettes, the swollen lake lapping at the other side. Some were inebriated enough to stand knee-deep in water that had yet to recede back into the lake, with high heels hooked in one hand and splashing people with the other. Some sat on the roofs of halted streetcars, unable to move in the deluge, and playfully shot plastic pistols at passersby.

In a dry clearing stood a hot dog cart with the promise of street meat sizzling on its grill. Liv turned to Charles.

"Be honest with me. Are you still hungry after that organic meal?"

"Starving. But I'm sure these hot dogs are organic free-range something or other."

Charles sat on the edge of a concrete tree planter to eat, and she perched on his lap and leaned in close to grab a bite.

"Great. Now I've got ketchup down my bra."

They laughed. They held hands. They kissed.

They kept strolling until the crowds from the clubs and bass-heavy music dissipated amidst the quiet of the skyscrapers in the business district, stopping to kiss heatedly in the shadows of buildings. At the sight of his Adelaide Street East condo building Charles said, "Come upstairs."

Just as Liv was about to play the nice girl and shrug her shoulders coyly, Charles pinched her chin between his thumb and forefinger. It was rough enough to throw her off balance. He held her steady and gazed directly into her eyes. His breath was heavy and laboured. Liv hardly breathed at all. "That wasn't a question." He let go to retrieve his keys from his pocket. She straightened her blouse and went through the door.

From elevator to hallway to Charles's penthouse, the pair vacillated from licking to choking to sucking to pushing to fucking. By the end of the ordeal, after he finally orgasmed, Liv sat at the edge of Charles's bed, an ice pack placed on her swollen cheek. The twinkling lights of the sprawling city, and south across the lake, could be seen from his expansive window. In the foreground of St. James Park below, clusters of tents glowed with the goings-on of the newly homeless, thankful for a dry place to rest their heads. Yet another tent city.

"Here." He surprised her with a lollipop. Liv was able to resist the urge to flinch. He unwrapped the lollipop and handed it to her. She didn't move. "Take it," he said firmly. She placed the candy in her mouth. Strawberry.

Softly he said, “Good girl.” He kissed her temple, then headed into the shower.

Sucking the lollipop, Liv tried to look around the bedroom, considering what information she could gather from its numerous drawers and cabinets. But she could only think of Erin and their baby.

Time passed. Just as quickly as the relationship had bloomed, she resigned from her internship at CAN Create and her waitressing job at Legal Tender. Over the course of a year, Liv traded in photocopiers and pencil sharpening for executive luncheons, company soirees and more-casual catered barbecues at lavish estates. She shook hands with numerous bigwigs the Resistance had been watching closely over the last several years. Footwear tycoons. Firearms distributors. CEOs of social media networks. Government officials. For Liv, feigning ignorance was easy when she pretended to be more fixated on backsplashes and light fixtures in people’s homes than the hushed conversations happening between businessmen and politicians in corners.

“Who was the father of the bride, again?” Liv asked in bed while Charles massaged her sore feet after an epic wedding. “His speech tonight was hilarious.”

“Quincy Rutger of Q Tobacco. He’s one of our affiliates.”

Liv pretended to luxuriate in Charles’s touch and adjusted her body so he could massage the other foot. “Whoa. Isn’t Q Tobacco under investigation because of that murder on that plantation? Is that the one?”

Without warning, Charles pulled Liv’s leg until she slid down and was pinned underneath him.

“You ask a lot of questions.”

Liv smiled. “Just trying to make conversation. I really don’t care.”

“You don’t? Because you should.” An aggressive kiss was pressed on Liv’s mouth before he grabbed a fistful of her hair. “Do you know how difficult it is to manage thousands of workers, only to find out one of those Jamaicans has been syphoning goods? Do you know how difficult it is to make an example of that person so that others don’t do the same?” His weight was unbearable.

“You’re right. That is difficult.”

“It won’t be difficult for long. Things are going to change for the better, Liv.”

At a fundraising gala for the Elita Norwich Foundation for Breast Cancer Research, Elita's daughter, Maureen, approached the podium. She positioned her reading glasses and unfolded the pages of her speech.

"I am thrilled to bring up to the stage a man who inspires us all: CEO of CAN Create, Charles Greene. CAN Create's pilot project, the Renovation, is making bold and necessary changes to this city. Facilitated by the help of the skilled—and, may I say, *handsome*—new special forces, the Boots . . ." Maureen paused for comedic effect. Giggles tickled the audience as their heads nodded in the direction of a lineup of Boots standing at attention in the stage's right wing. Collectively, the Boots remained still. They did not smile back. "His dream of unity and peace in the face of disaster will put marginalized and vulnerable populations to work while housing and feeding them and their families. And this evening, we are celebrating Charles's generous donation of two and a half million dollars towards the construction of the Elita Norwich Wing of St. Cecilia's Hospital, dedicated to the care of breast cancer patients. I truly believe this tremendous individual can add the words 'philanthropist' and 'visionary' to his title."

Liv applauded along with the adoring crowd, her new solitaire-cut engagement ring twinkling with each clap. Hundreds of chairs shuffled wide from banquet tables to allow for a standing ovation.

Wearing the newly designed Boots black leather regalia, Charles, with mock modesty, took to the stage where Maureen waited with an oversized cheque. While he posed in various handshakes and embraces, shouting was heard at the back of the hall. Everyone turned to look, curious about the commotion.

"Charles Greene!" screamed a Black man who was making his way past the line of sandbags at the entrance of the reception hall towards the stage. Trails of flood water followed in his wake. He tilted his chin up towards each corner of the room, ensuring his voice carried to the bewildered crowd. "You have blood on your hands, profiting from forced labour and —"

Two security guards hurriedly made their way to the man. He shifted left and right in an attempt to escape.

"CAN Create and its affiliates profit from forced labour!" he managed to say before the guards dragged him past the sweets table, past the line of sandbags, then finally off the premises, kicking and screaming. Venue staff

discreetly mopped up the trail of water left behind from the unexpected kerfuffle.

Maintaining a smile, Charles waved and the audience applauded again.

“Can you believe someone would do that? He’s so generous,” a woman at the same table whispered into Liv’s ear while clapping her white evening gloves in rhythm. Others chimed in.

“And then you wonder why Charles is doing all this in the first place.”

“Ungrateful.”

“He’ll be thanking Charles once he gets a job.”

“Doesn’t he look handsome in his Boots uniform?”

“Love a man in uniform.”

Liv nodded in pretend agreement. “What can you do? Can’t please everyone.”

During the taxi ride home, Liv caressed Charles’s cheek. “That was awful. I’m sorry.” Charles grabbed Liv by the wrist.

“The only person who’ll be sorry is him.” He let go of her wrist and looked back at the taxi driver’s concerned face in the rear-view mirror. “What are you looking at, Paki? Drive.”

One week later, that Black man, Leo Ebil Amodo, prison-reform activist, father of two, was found dead, supposedly from suicide.

Liv removed her panties, stuffed them into her purse, hopped onto the examination table and placed her feet in the stirrups. A knock at the door.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Dr. McKay entered with a file folder under his arm and closed the door. “Let’s take a look,” he said, crisp and professional, his sunburned baldness reflecting the office lighting. He wheeled his chair to Liv’s face and squeezed his hands into the squeak and snap of latex gloves. After switching on a directional floor lamp just beyond Liv’s legs, he shifted to a tender tone. “How you doing, Liv?”

“I’m okay.”

“We’re all thinking about you.”

There were no words. Dr. McKay put a gloved hand on Liv’s forearm and the two shared a knowing look and a forced exhale.

“Shall we get started?” At Liv’s nod, Dr. McKay opened the file. “As you can see here, our boy Charles has been busy.” Liv adjusted herself

sideways for a better view, her feet still in the stirrups. Photos of Charles travelling through the city. Charles shaking hands with tough guys. Tough guys who had served prison sentences for what were called hate crimes long before hate crimes became the norm. Tough guys who were done cooking meth and would rather burn the Others alive. Tough guys humiliated by Black women who had put them into the friend zone. Tough guys traumatized after being carjacked by Asian gangs. Tough guys who hated Indigenous boys for getting their teen daughters pregnant.

“Yup. Got it.”

Dr. McKay shuffled through the photos until a series of drone shots of industrial warehouses made it to the top of the pile.

“And here are the workhouses. So far, we’ve counted seven of them in the Greater Toronto Area. According to our sources, some of them are outfitted for garments. Some are outfitted for food production. Some for electronics. Each one is different, depending on their stakeholders. And we’re talking multiple international corporations having some skin in the game.”

Dr. McKay pushed back his wheeled chair to sort through the photos until he arrived at the one he was looking for. “Aha. Here we go.” He dug his heels into the floor to close the gap between him and Liv. “See here?” He adjusted the neck of the lamp to shine on a drone photo. His gloved hand pointed to what looked like a gaping scar opposite a warehouse. From above, what appeared to be several dots of people encircled the scar.

“What is that?” Liv strained her eyes at the pixelated image.

“We asked the same thing. Our drones recorded them digging this ditch over the course of a few days. Other warehouses had them too, of varying sizes, but all located within walking distance of the compounds. Then we got these images from one of our Boots on the inside of the Junction workhouse.”

Dr. McKay filed the drone shot to the back of the pile and looked at the next photo for a brief moment before revealing it to Liv. The lower left corner of the photo was obscured by fabric, perhaps the pocket of the undercover Boot, and the curve of a fingertip.

In the photo, three Brown men sat at the edge of a ditch with their hands interlaced behind their heads, their eyes fixed forward. They were naked, and their clothes were piled beside them. About ten feet from them, in the lower right quadrant of the photo, was their future: a tangle of lifeless legs

and arms. How many? It was unclear. What was clear was the outline of a Boot in the upper left quadrant of the photo, aiming a rifle at the head of the first of the three men.

Liv took the photo from Dr. McKay's hands and looked closely at the men's eyes, searching for the solace that their souls had already left their bodies, like a sheep that goes still and blank in the face before the kill. But the closer she looked, the more the pixels obscured their legacy cut too short. She stopped herself from bending the edges of the photo with her hands, now shaking and wet with perspiration.

Dr. McKay placed another photo in front of the one Liv was holding. The image was of a large room in a warehouse with a concrete floor. Around the perimeter of the room was a chain-link fence. People were lying on mats, blanketed by foil sheets. "This one has better image quality, and here's why." He pointed at one Boot in the photo, gesturing towards the people, as if waking them up.

"So, we've got one Boot who guards them. We've got their surveillance camera right here." Dr. McKay pointed to a device affixed to the fencing in the right-hand corner of the photo. "But this workhouse, my friend, is a converted All-mart store. And our guy managed to give us a live feed from the All-mart's surveillance system."

Dr. McKay positioned the photograph in front of him like a show and tell, pointing at the blanketed figures. "So we know these are not just people. These are children. And we can confirm they have been separated from their parents. Between the execution images and these jailed children, we're not talking workhouses, Liv."

"They're concentration camps."

"Exactly."

Liv took a deep breath and leaned back, looking at the ceiling tiles, searching for order in their lines and cracks. She shifted her bum and the paper crunched over the examination table.

"The bad news is, we don't have a lot of time. Others are being rounded up quickly, and we certainly aren't able to hide everyone, even though we're all going to try. There are only so many allies willing to shelter people, inside and outside the city. Good news is, because the Renovation is unfolding so quickly, each compound has its security flaws, which means —"

"We may be able to get some people out?" said Liv.

“More than that. There’s a plan, especially given the number of Boots we’re recruiting to the Resistance from the inside.” Dr. McKay removed his latex gloves and threw them into the trash bin under his desk.

“Which means we’re moving ahead with an uprising,” Liv said to the ceiling tiles. “When? The way things are going, we need to move quickly.”

“I know, Liv. It’s a lot. Know that Erin sends her love and the baby is doing okay.”

Liv sat up, quickly. “She sent you pictures?”

“Sorry, bud. But she wanted me to tell you the baby isn’t a baby anymore. He’s officially a toddler.”

Dr. McKay wheeled his chair to his workstation and pushed the photos through a paper shredder. Liv dressed herself to the sound of the machine’s blades transforming the horrific images into slivers of indiscernible smudges. For many Others, these would be the last photos taken of them.

Liv touched Dr. McKay’s shoulder one last time before exiting the clinic, pretending she had seen nothing.

The return of flooding in the preceding summer had led to water contamination at shorelines across the country, which led to endless lineups of people begging for food, water and shelter. The relentless currents made river rocks of everyone. Wading hip-deep through the rainbow streaks of gasoline, people found shelter on rooftops and bridges, no longer mighty. Arms poked out of office buildings, waving at passing helicopters, pleading for rescue.

“I have been standing here since seven this morning,” said an Indigenous woman on a news segment. A large warehouse stood at the top of a rolling hill, the surrounding trees wavering in the wind and rain. A front-facing carrier held her sleeping baby, while another young child burrowed his face into her side. The woman firmly held the stem of the microphone alongside the uneasy reporter. “Our Tyendinaga Mohawk territory is just east of Belleville, Ontario, and I was told this depot in Peterborough, 125 kilometres northwest of us, was the closest place I could get water and food for my two children.”

The news reporter nodded, feigning concern, while trying to pry the mother’s hands off her beloved microphone. “The rule is, according to that warehouse sign over there, a maximum of one five-gallon water container and one box of dried goods per family. But I’ve been watching these white

families backing up their big SUVs to the warehouse, practically mowing all of us down, and carrying out boxes and boxes of goods to their trunks! Who is allowing this to happen? What gives those people the right to take more than any of us?!”

On the Confederation Bridge, hordes of people fled the northeast province of Prince Edward Island for the higher elevation of neighbouring New Brunswick. Motor vehicles braved the bridge’s twelve-kilometre span over tumultuous waves. The piers were stunted by rising sea levels. But members of the island’s Muslim community were forced to go by foot.

“Everyone on our street was forced to leave their cars behind. They couldn’t move through the water,” said a teenage Muslim girl to a news camera as she shouldered the weight of her grandmother. High winds and the numbness of her lips obscured the audio, then finally, “The people who could drive to New Brunswick took extra people. But they turned us away. So, we just have to walk.”

“What made the motorists turn you away?” the reporter asked, struggling to keep the windsock on the microphone. He turned the device back to the girl, the sleeve of his trench coat catching the gusts like a khaki-coloured kite.

At the sound of this question, the girl and her grandmother were already moving on. Still, the microphone managed to catch the girl’s voice: “Look at everyone on foot, sir. What do we all have in common?” The camera zoomed out on a line of Brown folks bracing themselves against the tempest of water and air, salwar kameezes and hijabs damp against their bodies.

In southern Ontario, the concrete jungle of Toronto was transformed into a shallow bayou. Park benches sat in water like rafts in muck. Beneath the surface of floating detritus, curbstones and fire hydrants grew fluffy with green algae. Metal posts wavered in the tide with submerged bicycles still chained to their stems.

Some citizens continued to commute to work, as if denying within themselves the truth of the environmental crisis, as if putting on their pantsuits and packing their lunches would somehow make the city run again. Business as usual. But when the flooded subways had to halt operations, and when people began posting live videos on social media of being stranded in the streets atop recycling bins, holding on for dear life to a lamppost, the calamity finally became palpable.

One live video was of a Black man with his toddler daughter. He held up his phone to show his child sitting in her white, plastic baby bathtub, like a makeshift boat in the rising water, waving at the camera. He turned the camera towards his face and explained: “This is the way my girl and I are making our way through the city. Right now, we’re trying to find any dry land where we can sleep tonight because our basement apartment is swamped.” He kept the camera on himself as he waded through the hip-deep water, holding the edge of the floating bathtub, his daughter cross-legged and wearing a small rain jacket. “We ask that if you have a home that’s elevated, that has any dry land, please, please, please, let people in. Help people. Feed them. Let them stay there for as long as possible. Share supplies. We all have to help each other. I don’t even know who can see this video. But please share this.”

The video went viral. People did share the video, not to answer his plea for help but as a warning of things to come.

Lower-income areas of the city sat in the stench of overflowing sewage, leaving their occupants to flee north towards elevated areas like Forest Hill, Sunnybrook and the Bridle Path. These affluent communities, spared from the floods, closed access to outsiders begging for shelter. Members of the media requesting interviews with households that refused to assist the displaced were briskly turned away. People around the world watched footage of the once-quiet streets of the rich being swarmed with land refugees, their Brown and Black faces trying to push through newly erected barriers, their tight fists wrapped around the fencing, their voices begging for justice.

Candlelight vigils were held.

“This is day seven,” said a Latina woman on her live video. “Me and my kids live in a high-rise on the twelfth floor. No electricity. No elevator. Water flooded the ground floor and below. We hoped these people in their big houses would have opened their doors to us by now, but we’ll have to settle for dry ground to sleep on. We’re just gonna take this day by day.”

The Others sang throughout the night, hoping to turn the tide. Instead, the police were called and they were forced to disperse.

A reporter shot a walk-and-talk segment, with her videographer steadily shuffling backwards to follow her movements along a muddy city street. “According to the Toronto Police Service, early this morning, two men have been charged with aggravated assault against a police officer,” she said

before gesturing to a series of broken windows. “And instances of looting at grocery stores continue to be rampant. The special task force, the Boots, has joined first responders by handing out much-needed supplies and rebuilding our devastated city.” She timed the end of her phrase with her arrival at a Boot who was handing out blankets to a lineup of citizens. “The police chief urges those displaced to honour the laws and allow city services to respond.”

By the fall, the floods subsided; the Others returned to mildewed, rotting homes and high-rises with dysfunctional elevators. The privileged were finally left alone. The city tried to operate as a soggy version of itself, but the exhaustion from the crisis soon turned to rage.

Over the course of three days, climate activists donned cheap yellow rain boots and began marching in a large circle at Toronto City Hall, spanning all of Nathan Phillips Square. News outlets captured drone footage of hundreds of Others stomping around the expansive urban plaza in the demonstration’s signature yellow boots.

“Toronto the Good, I see you for who you are!” a climate activist said over a megaphone. “If there was any sign of racism, if there was any sign of religious, gender and class bias in this city, the flood showed it ALL!” The crowd responded with “Shame! Shame! Shame!”

The yellow boots appeared in Ottawa, the nation’s capital. This time clustered in front of the Parliament building. “Shame! Shame! Shame!” From Vancouver on the west coast to Halifax in the east, the Others in their yellow boots shut down transit stations, blocked roadways and staged sit-ins. “Shame! Shame! Shame!”

To offset media coverage of climate activists calling for governmental accountability, Prime Minister Marshall Pollack launched a two-pronged campaign. One side of his jowly mouth urged Canadians to band together in the face of environmental disaster, while the other spoke about issues of national security in the presence of groups he classified as extremists, bogus refugee claimants, illegal immigrants and sexual deviants.

“It is the nature of these instigators that they target us when we are the most vulnerable, when this nation is treading water, while claiming to stand for equality. This is not the time for people to ‘Other’ themselves by declaring the importance of their so-called identity. This is a national emergency! We cannot waste our valuable time and energy on protecting Others. Covering women as if they are in ancient times is a choice that True

Canadians have a right to dispute. Jumping the line into our beautiful nation instead of going through the proper protocol is a choice that True Canadians have a right to dispute. Presenting yourself in a way that is deceitful to those around you is a choice that True Canadians have a right to dispute. These Others think they can distract us by demanding their rights. We are not fooled by their rhetoric. We know better than to believe that the needs of Others override the needs of True Canadians,” Pollack said at a press conference celebrating the erection of a new landmark in Ottawa. “Today is a celebration of all that this country holds dear: teamwork, positive thinking and a vision for the future. Through our work, our nation prospers. Through our unity, we end conflict. Through my leadership, we find peace. Through order, we find tranquility.” He gestured dramatically behind him and two stagehands pulled ropes to reveal a statue. The cast iron sculpture was of a dinghy, with waves licking its underbelly. Inside the boat were hopeful passengers: a father, a son, a mother holding a baby. All of them were frozen with their arms reaching up and smiling at an angel in mid-air. The cameras clicked. The audience applauded.

In Toronto, once the colder months hit, the white “True Canadians,” from laid-off pencil-pushers to small-business owners whose shops had been vandalized by the hungry, considered their options. Instead of lining up for limited supplies, they joined the Boots, who offered free room and board.

*“Through our work, our nation prospers. Through our unity, we end conflict,”* they recited before demanding IDs from citizens on the street, their eyes scanning all points of suspicion: clothing, skin colour, mobility, gender expression. *“Through our leader, we find peace. Through order, we find tranquility,”* they recited before dividing up supplies found in the homes of Others. It was easy to believe the creed when they were fed and warm.

White folks whose attachment to their upper-class comfort outweighed their desire to speak out against injustice watched the Renovation unfold and did nothing. They were the ones who chose to draw their curtains and turn up the volume on their televisions while Others were patted down outside their windows.

White folks whose sensitivity to injustice outweighed their attachment to their own comfort covertly joined the Resistance. They were the ones who considered how to leverage their access to supplies and information.

Those who straddled the line between being Others and being wealthy tried their best to steer away from conflict but soon realized that they were not immune to the demoralizing effects of a Boots checkpoint. Whether they drove a Lexus or rode a bicycle, Others were stopped and questioned. Whether they carried an Hermès purse or a plastic bag, Others' belongings were searched and often confiscated. With what little dignity they had left, they quietly coordinated passage out of the country.

By December, the Renovation was in full swing, and the international community, dealing with environmental crises of their own, from hailstorms to droughts, watched and did nothing. In the months that followed, Liv spent her days leading Others into hiding and her evenings toasting Charles's success.

Tonight, things were different. He wanted to meet at her house on Homewood Street. Liv was touching up her makeup in the washroom, her stomach clenched as she thought of me in her basement. Under the harsh vanity light she delicately placed concealer on the bruise near her cheekbone using staccato dabs with her ring finger.

"Gary told me it's probably best to put my house up for sale in the fall," she called out to Charles in the bedroom. "That gives me enough time to focus on the wedding, then stage the house and do some minor renovations. It may mean we'll have two homes for a bit. But he says it's worth the return on investment." There was a long pause.

Finally he said, "Hey, where were you this afternoon? It took you forever to text me back."

Liv gulped before answering calmly. "Wedding planning. Oh, and another appointment with my gynecologist. You know . . . woman problems."

"Ugh. Say no more."

She didn't want him to question her whereabouts any longer. It had been a busy day of relocating Others, disseminating information.

"Hey, you wanna see something?" Charles persisted.

"See what?" Liv wiped away the smears of mascara from under her eyes. She tried to remain casual, but the knot in her stomach continued to coil at the sound of his voice.

"When you're done in there, we can go for a walk."

“Sure!” Liv said, relieved to leave the house where I was hiding. “Are you treating me to dessert?”

He did not answer. They headed outside into the darkness of the night. Carlton Street was unusually quiet. Liv wished she had put on a pair of pants and boots instead of a skirt and sandals. It was the first night in a while without rain, and it was colder than one would expect in Toronto in May, so she folded her arms around her shivering torso, following Charles to god knows where. They walked north on Church Street, where the Others all used to party and march. Now many of the buildings were abandoned and mildewed at the base. The rainbow-coloured crosswalk had since been replaced with an ad for chewing gum: a blonde model breathing out mint leaves and snowflakes. “Icy fresh, minty cool!” the ad read.

They passed the spiderweb of a broken window. Liv peeked inside at what was once Glad Day Bookshop, which she remembered from the few times she had visited the LGBTQ2S store. The place had been ransacked. Books lay burned and torn along the floor. The bar and some tables remained. A pigeon walked aimlessly back and forth over a toppled bookshelf, which was covered in bird poop and fuzzy grey down.

“Liv. Come on.” Charles beckoned her to hurry. Liv stepped away, first seeing her own refracted reflection, then refocusing on the spray-painted words “DIE FAGGOTS!” on the broken glass.

They continued past what had been the 519 community centre to the park at its rear. The strings of rainbow lights had been removed, leaving the joists that once held them to resemble four barren crosses. The AIDS Memorial plaques were also dislodged, leaving a border of plain concrete slabs like unmarked graves. In the middle of this darkened void of erased history, a towering beech tree stood, daring to grow in an island of patio stones. They stopped.

Charles pivoted around and stood with his hands clasped behind his back, as if in a choreographed arrival, like the beginning of a dance.

Liv was confused. She looked around. “What? Why did you bring me here?” She twisted her arms tighter to stave off the cold wind. From the adjacent trees, four white men emerged, also with their hands clasped behind their backs. They looked rough in comparison to Charles’s upscale demeanour. In the dim light of distant streetlamps, Liv could barely see their faces but could make out fragments of their persons. One had a studded earlobe. Another had a blond ponytail pulled into a neat braid. A

tattooed scalp. A wrist with a leather cuff. Liv smiled calmly, taking slow, deep breaths, the way she was trained to do. “Hello.” The men offered a silent nod.

“Look up.” Charles pointed towards the tree canopy. She saw a foot dangling above her. Her eyes followed the foot up, barely registering what she was seeing. Spit began to gather in her mouth. A human being was hanging in the tree. A human being was hanged. A human being was lynched. Her knees felt weak. Her hands were in fists. With all of her power she upturned her lips into a smile and laughed like it was a pleasant surprise.

“Wow!” she said, laughing like a jackal. Laughing like her life depended on it. “When did that happen?”

“I got the call about it just before I saw you tonight.”

“You’ve all been busy today,” Liv said to the men.

“They’ve been busy for a while, Liv.”

“How did this happen?” She smiled in simulated wonder at this amazing feat.

Charles looked at the man with the blond ponytail. “Care to tell Liv how this happened?”

The man stepped forward, voice raspy and dutiful. “The boys and I saw this one walking down the alley. He had propped up a bunch of skids so he could reach into a garbage bin. Probably looking for some free food like a rat. We tried to get him to safety, bring him to the workhouse for a meal, but he wouldn’t have it. He ran and we had to catch him. Teach him a lesson.” The man nonchalantly tapped the bare skin of the person’s heel. The tap made the body swing from side to side slightly.

Charles’s eyes caught the light of the streetlamp and Liv could see him assessing her. She laughed. She laughed. She laughed. She wiped snot off her nose. She laughed. She kept the tears in the corners of her eyes. She did not let them fall. She laughed. The men collectively took a step closer to her, watching her.

Scattered on the grass she saw two navy-blue leather flats that once belonged to this human being. This human who once had a name. Liv’s belly button felt like it was on fire. But she smiled.

The man continued, “I could tell from a mile away it wasn’t a girl. I could tell he was pretending. Like he was trying to fool us. You see them all over Church Street. They’re still around, even after the Renovation. We’re

gonna leave this one out for a while. Make sure anyone who sees it knows whose neighbourhood this is.”

Liv breathed shallowly enough to stop the bile from rising in her throat. Charles took her by the waist, and suddenly they were slow dancing under this hanging person, this person who once had dreams. They were dancing to what song? She hadn't a clue. She could hear only her heart beating frantically.

She looked up at this human being, this human being who once had a favourite movie, a favourite food. This person's hair had been cut. Their\* brown hands were once graceful. On their wrist was a thin gold bangle.

Charles whispered something into Liv's ear, and she couldn't understand what he was saying. She couldn't understand this moment. She wanted to scream. Instead she whispered back. “I can't . . . What did you say? I can't hear you.”

“Tonight is a celebration, Liv.”

She smiled back as if her life depended on the quality of her smile. “What for?”

“The Boots' budget has been quadrupled.”

“But you've already done the Renovation. What else is there to do?” Charles grabbed her by the arm and she started. The men around her stepped forward.

“That was just a pilot project. Our investors wanted to test things out in Toronto first, see how the general public would respond to the changes. Now that we've proven the success of the workhouses and the benefits to all of us, it's officially going to become a national initiative. I'm leading the deployment. The Boots are going to clean house across the country. Thousands of jobs for the Others. Millions of dollars back in the nation's purse. It's exactly what this country needs, Liv.” Charles looked around at the other men, knowingly. A pause. “But first, we need to clean house here.”

“You already did that.”

“No, Liv. A Summit of Nations is scheduled in Toronto. The entire world—dozens of delegates and international media—will be watching to see the glory of the Renovation's national expansion. We need to lock it down. And if we're to do that, we need to know everyone we're associated with is ready and willing. Do you understand?”

“Are they ready and willing?” Liv pointed at the other men. They did not react.

“We’ve done our homework on each member of our team. And when things don’t add up, there are ways we can correct things. A process of elimination.” Charles looked at her expectantly.

Swallowing the bile at the back of her throat, Liv approached the person hanging. She took off her own sandals, slipped on the blue leather flats that once belonged to this person and twirled in the circle of men to show off her acquisition. “My size. How lucky.” She smiled at Charles. He approached and gave her a soft, gentle kiss. A confirmation.

After receiving a nod from Charles, the men silently retreated into the darkness.

With her nose still touching Charles’s cheek, being careful not to seem too inquisitive, Liv asked, “When’s this gonna happen?”

“The summit is happening July 1. Canada Day.”

“That’s quick.”

“We have to be quick before the rest of them go into hiding.”

“I guess you just have to round them up again?”

“One by one.”

“I’d like to see one of these workhouses.”

Charles laughed. “The Renovation needs you, Liv. You can be such an inspiration to the many women who want to join the Boots because of what we stand for.”

Liv smiled. She grabbed the lapels of his jacket and kissed him. In her mind, she imagined tightening her grip until she strangled him with his own jacket. But she knew she had to spread the word and tell the Others. She kissed him instead.

Liv pauses and awaits my reaction.

I rub my chin and feel the stubble already emerging from my pores. “When do I have to leave?” I ask her.

“Tonight.” Liv has her cheek sitting on her knee, now wet with tears.

I don’t understand. I feel like screaming.

Liv takes a breath before explaining. “After hearing the plans for the Renovation, our first plan of action was to get everyone we could into hiding. That’s what got you here. That’s why you’re safe.”

“And now?” I ask, my jaw tight.

“Now . . . we can’t waste any time. We have to do more than keep you safe. Over the last few weeks we’ve arranged to get as many people as possible relocated to somewhere else.”

“But why? How will Evan find me?!”

“If Evan is alive and in hiding, he will most likely be relocated as well. And if everything goes as planned, neither of you will have to hide at all.” I hold my breath at the thought of this, the possibility of trading in memories of you for your touch.

“Kay. I’m going to miss you. I’m going to worry about you every day until I see you again.”

“You think you’ll see me again?”

“If everything goes as planned.” She closes her eyes saying this phrase again, like a mantra. “I will see you again.”

She takes the acetone from her nightstand and moistens a cotton ball with it. The cotton ball erases my femininity, cleaning the edges of red from the cuticles of my toenails. I remove the kimono as if in a ceremony, like a shell, like a shadow and place it in her arms. I stand there, naked, unsure of myself in my in-between place.

“You will need to leave once your clothes have been cleaned.” She goes to her night table and retrieves an indelible marker. She begins writing on my forearm. “This is an address.”

I swallow hard. “Okay.” She is looking at me, speaking like every word has to land, like every word is a newborn deer that has to learn to walk.

“I need you to get there before dawn breaks three days from now. A black Grand Caravan will park just north of the stop sign. When the door slides open I need you to get into that van.” She sees in my face my attempt at committing it all to memory.

“Do you understand? I need you to get into that van.”

“Yes.”

“You get in that van and someone will bring you somewhere safe. Please, promise me you will do that.”

“What’s going to happen?”

“If you choose to, you’re going to learn to fight. You’re going to fight back.”

Before I beg for more details, we hear the buzz from Liv’s clothes dryer go off, and then silence. She leaves the bedroom and returns with a pile of

my clothes, clean and warm. I get dressed back into this shadow of a person. I dress myself into the corners. I dress myself into the darkness.

When Liv opens the back door of her home, the wind is loud and I can see the sun drawing a crimson line along the horizon of Toronto. She hands me a sealed manila envelope and instructs me to tuck it into the back of my pants.

“I need you to give this to the person driving the van.”

She does not hug me goodbye.

I regret looking back. I see Liv, opening the curtains of her house, preparing breakfast in her kitchen as if nothing has happened. I know this is an act. I know this is to protect me. But my heart hurts with her pretending.

## 2

**My mother** was not like your mother, Evan. My ma never greeted me hello. Ma would breeze into our apartment in St. James Town, arms full of groceries, mouth full of complaints after a full day caring for the Wright-family children in the Forest Hill area. She would kick her mule sandals off her chapped feet and begin her rant about the horrible state of transit between the wealthy northwest of Toronto and the poverty-stricken southeast high-rise we lived in. Being a Filipina working for the wealthy was not a walk in the park. In fact, working for the Wright family was more like strolling barefoot over hot coals, with their three entitled children wearing their private school uniforms and spitting their peach pits into Ma's face after snack time.

The plastic grocery bags' handles were stretched and worn over Ma's fists, and she placed them by the front door with a thud. A six-pack of rough, thin toilet paper. A sticky bottle of mushroom soy sauce. Cans of Spam with keys missing. A tin of potted liver pâté wheeled down the parquet, and I caught it with the edge of my sandal.

"Not with your feet, *anak!*" she said. "Keith. Wash that please. I don't want your feet on our food." I hated the sound of my name.

While Ma began sautéing the onions and garlic for corned beef, I continued working on my *Lord of the Flies* book report. Or rather, I continued to pretend that I was working on my *Lord of the Flies* book report. I opened up the pages of the paperback to where my bookmark—a wallet-sized print of Randell Sampson's school picture—was placed. I'm embarrassed to tell you, my first love had a face that was both goofy and

astute thanks to his prominent jaw and wide smile. One could tell by his large hands and his slender wrists that he still had some growing to do. Soon he would be even broader across the shoulders, with more girth in his thighs. I calmed my erection by biting my lip. For the millionth time, I turned the picture over to see his writing. Blocky, aggressive, staccato handwriting in the bluest of blue ink. "See you after school." Nadine, his girlfriend and my classmate, had dropped it while clumsily trying to slip it into her Avery binder during chemistry class. I had managed to steal it off the floor tiles, pretending to tie my shoelaces.

"What is this?" I shut the book quickly. My mother's hands ran through my hair, the knotted twists, like it was a tangle she could never undo. A problem she could never solve. And I was a big problem. Compared to her five-foot, ninety-pound frame, I was practically a monster. Her wispy eyebrows furrowed in worry at the sight of me.

"Nadine knotted my hair for me. It's the style right now, Ma."

"Who's Nadine?"

"Remember? From school?"

Hair knots were the closest I could get to looking like the guys from De La Soul. I told Nadine I didn't want to look like this half-breed something or other. I detested the wideness of my nose as much as I detested the soft angle of my eyes. Between my dark skin and my plump lips, I looked like a mutt with a capital M. More than anything, I wanted my hair to decide which side it was on. I wanted to be Black. My mother, on the other hand, didn't want me at all.

"You look dirty."

"That's my hair."

"Did you try the thing I got you?"

"What thing?"

"The . . . *ano* . . . the thing. The hair thing."

"The conditioner you got from Mrs. Robles?" I laughed. Mrs. Robles had a granddaughter who, like me, was living evidence of her son's bed-jumping.

"What?"

My voice cracked from puberty and indignation. "It's conditioner. It's not some magic potion that will change my hair straight like yours, Ma. This is just my hair."

Every night from then on, she tried. I sat on a stool in front of the bathroom mirror, a shivering sixteen-year-old skinny Black boy with my right hand holding a towel draped around my shoulders as she applied layer after layer of this supposed magical conditioner that was to transform me into the son she always wanted. Lock after lock, she slathered on the jaundice-yellow cream, then attempted to run her rat-tail comb through the tangles of curls. Thick curls forced to pass through such thin slots of unkind plastic. She would stop only after seeing blood on my scalp. The sound of her Christian radio channel, full of static and praise, would fill the void between us, this Brown woman at odds with her mistake of a child. This child at odds with his body. Shame kept my arms still. Duty to my mother kept my voice from screaming. I never fought back.

After washing my hair of cream and blood, I cried myself to sleep, praying myself into another body, another life. Sure enough, I would wake up the next day, still as Black as I was the night before, my mother tsk-tsking at the sight of me. Perhaps she didn't apply enough. Perhaps she didn't wait long enough before rinsing. Perhaps she should have never.

These ten fingers, these ten toes, this head of hair were the product of Ma's one-night stand with a man she met at Aristocrats Bar and Lounge. Back then, Ma was working as a live-in caregiver for the Edelson family at Bathurst and Eglinton, another upscale enclave. Twin infant girls with red hair. Both were lactose intolerant and had explosive poops. "Live-in caregiver" was another name for night-and-day-when-ever-I-need-her nanny. This meant being on call throughout the night to change, feed and soothe the twins into sleep and getting up at the crack of dawn to care for the twins at various playgroups. "Live-in caregiver" was another name for all-the-time mom to cover for the twins' absent wealthy mom who loves her sleep.

On her only day off, Ma wrestled her winter coat on in the Edelsons' mud room while the twins, now toddlers, embraced her legs, begging her not to go. If she hadn't been working towards her Canadian immigration papers, Ma would have kicked those two brats to the wall like misbehaving humping dogs. But alas, she had no choice but to gently remind them that the maid, a Guatemalteca woman by the name of Luz, would arrive just in time to cook them dinner.

Ma headed out the door, not looking back at the twins, whose noses were pressed against the glass window, crying out Ma's name.

“*Ah-tay Gabby! Ah-tay Gabby!*” The twins butchered the Filipino term for “big sister.”

Ma swore under her breath, looked behind her briefly to give a weak wave goodbye to those thankless kids, then trampled through the snow towards freedom. She loved how fast she could walk without those horrid girls wandering about, sucking on broken glass they found in the sand or crying over rocks in their shoes.

At that time in the late seventies, a new phenomenon had broken out called karaoke. Straight from Japan, it was the biggest craze among the Filipino community that gathered every Friday night at Aristocrats Bar and Lounge. Ma wanted to have her song choices prepared before entering. She had managed to steal a couple of the request chits for future visits and filled them out with her favourite ditties. Before taking off her winter coat, she made a beeline for the karaoke host, Lex, and handed him her chits.

“You got it, Gabby.” Lex wiped his bald white head with his sleeve and placed Ma’s requests at the top of the pile.

“Put your hands together for Gabby, who is going to sing ‘Summertime.’” Everyone in the bar cheered. They knew Ma could sing, and for the next three minutes and forty seconds, at least, they could enjoy a nice voice instead of a drunken off-tune one. But to one person, my father, this was news. He had never been to this bar before and just happened to tag along with his Filipino friend, Benny, from the automobile demolition centre. My father watched as this diminutive Filipina removed her winter coat while the intro music began. She didn’t even need the screen; she knew the lyrics. She tried to suppress her accent, but the over-pronunciation of consonants and overuse of diphthongs revealed that she was new to Canada. And that was okay. So was my father. Keith Watson Smith, Jamaican born, had teeth so white that Ma remembered his smile widening in the dark of that bar many years ago.

The song that Ma sang that night on the karaoke stage was the same song she sang into Keith’s ear after they both made me on his springy mattress. The length of his body tented over the smallness of Ma. She attempted to kiss him on the lips as he did his business, but he was so tall he could only manage to kiss her forehead. Ma remembers watching Keith, capped by the globe of his Afro, smoke a cigarette afterwards, staring down at the bleakness of Eglinton West on a winter morning. His second-storey apartment sat above an Orthodox Jewish wig boutique.

“You should stay. It looks like there’s a blizzard coming.”

“All snow looks like blizzards to us,” Ma said, laughing about their tropical origins. “I have to go back to the twins.”

Ma never saw Keith again. Benny, his friend from work, informed her that he had been arrested. His work permit was false despite his contributions at work being true. Benny had no other information about Keith other than a mailing address clumsily scribbled onto a chit of paper. When Ma wrote to the address to inform my father of my impending birth, she received no word back. She grew in belly and worry. She gave birth at Women’s College Hospital on November 2, 1977, in the presence of strangers.

Another Filipino family shared her hospital room. The woman had given birth by C-section to a baby girl. The father, dressed in a tan leisure suit and matching wide tie, had rushed from his job as an engineer at McDonnell Douglas Corporation to hold his new child while the mother slept painfully in recline, nursing her stitches. Once the mother stirred and the medication wore off, Ma watched as the father took the baby girl, still swaddled and swollen in the face, towards the pleading mouth of the mother, who kissed the baby and whispered sweetly into her ear.

I, on the other hand, with my dark-brown body and slick curls, lay in my bassinet screaming and flailing for attention because I was hungry and wet. My mother refused to look at me, as she did not have answers or the heart to carry on.

From hungry and wet I grew to be lonely and confused. When I was in grade four at St. Joseph’s Catholic Junior School, our teacher, Mrs. Rossi, set us up into pairs. Nadine rolled her eyes at the sight of me, cursing her luck for being stuck with the most awkward boy in class.

“Well?” Nadine’s come-hither gesture was vigorous enough to shake the cherry-shaped bobble hair ties that anchored her perfectly braided pigtails. “Come on, Keith. We gotta get started.” Mrs. Rossi gave each pair of us a lamp, which we pointed to a large piece of paper taped on the wall. Our job was to take turns sitting in front of the lamp while the other traced our silhouette. I let Nadine sit first. I traced her profile, marvelling at how her chin stood erect and confident. Her nose was pointy. Her eyelashes were curly and long. There wasn’t a single stray hair in her silhouette. Just as I got to her lips, Nadine told me to hurry the heck up.

“Your turn,” she said and pointed to the plastic stool. I had hoped the bell would ring before we would change places. Nadine removed her tracing and replaced it with a fresh sheet. I sat and looked at the paper with my shadow cast upon it. My hair was unkempt. My blue turtleneck was fuzzy and ill-fitting.

“You gotta look to the side, Keith. I can’t draw you if you’re looking right at the paper!” She sighed and cocked her hip to the side, as she usually did when she was exasperated. I took a deep breath and nervously obliged. Nadine got to work.

“Isn’t your mom the nanny?”

“Huh?”

“Look to the side, Keith. Don’t move.” Nadine adjusted my chin to match the outline she had already made. “You know. The Chinese lady. Isn’t that your mom?”

“She’s Filipina.”

“Yeah. The Filipina.”

“Yeah. So?”

“Then why do you have hair like this?”

“I dunno.”

“You must look like your dad, then.”

I realized I had never seen a picture of my father. The Keith Watson Smith of my mind was nothing more than the bright smile and dark skin my mother had described, but without a face. Mrs. Rossi made us stand in a circle and show each other our tracings.

“Hold it up, Keith.” I raised my paper half an inch higher. My classmates laughed at the outline of my head.

“Hey! Shut up!” Nadine screamed.

“No, thank you, Nadine. Watch your language. She is right, though. It’s wrong to laugh at other people.”

My classmates stifled their snickers until one of them exclaimed, “It looks like he has a wig on!” Then the class erupted into full guffaws.

“Stop it! That’s not nice!” Nadine screamed again.

“Enough!” Mrs. Rossi paced the room, preparing us for another one of her inspirational speeches. She placed her hands on the waist of her polyester slacks and looked each one of us in the eye. “Everyone is perfect just the way we are. We have to tolerate each other’s differences. Do you know what diversity is? This class is diverse. And you know what? That’s

the way it should be. Whether you have curly hair like Nadine . . .” Mrs. Rossi caressed one of Nadine’s braids, and Nadine’s eyes widened incredulously, her hands closed into fists. “. . . Or matted hair like Keith’s . . .” Mrs. Rossi’s fingers stroked the surface of my head as if I was a llama at a petting zoo. “. . . We are all God’s beautiful creatures.” With each word in this last sentence, she patted my head for emphasis.

I thought the torture was over, but Mrs. Rossi then made us sit at our desks and embellish the outline with our facial features. I stared at the edges of me, unable to manifest an understanding of my own face without a clear image of the man who contributed in making my features. Did my father’s nose slope at this angle? Was my father’s neck slight like mine, with barely a sign of an Adam’s apple? When I sucked my bottom lip out of nervousness, was this his habit as well?

As I grew into a teen, the act of piecing together the shadow of my father overwhelmed me, so that all I could do was lie on my bed each night, stare into the darkness and hold the photo of Randell Sampson, a buoy in the sea of my confusion. “See you after school,” I imagined he would write on the back of the photo, this photo meant for me to keep.

“It’s for you to keep,” said my mother the day she presented me a tricycle. My tiny fingers ran along the edges of the stickers of illustrated pistons, which made the plastic frame appear to be a high-end motorcycle rather than a beat-up, plastic hand-me-down toy. I sat on the low-lying seat and twisted the throttle back and forth like I’d seen in an episode of *Miami Vice*. Sand trickled onto our parquet floor. When I pushed down on the pedals, the wheel was so worn it spun in place. I giggled with glee. Maybe I was too fast.

“That came from Pastor Michael. But he says you can call him Tito Michael.”

“Who’s that?” I pressed the stickers illustrating multicoloured buttons along the console.

“He’s from Winchester Eternal Life Church. That’s our church now.”

Winchester was not a Gothic building like the Catholic church we’d left. It looked more like a friendly community centre with a friendly wheelchair ramp and a friendly, larger-than-life poster of friendly, running children. “Spreading the word at lightning speed,” the poster said just under the children’s clasped hands.

Pastor Michael, the provider of plastic tricycles, was also the deliverer of arduously long sermons. He gripped his congregation with his pious dissertation on surrendering to Jesus the way he gripped the wood veneer pulpit: tightly with white knuckles and pink face from effort. He conducted the orchestra of each singsong sentence, waving the sleeves of his oversized taupe suit jacket, which bookended the width of his red paisley tie. He frequently shared stories of emigrating from Dublin in an attempt to connect with the immigrant and refugee population of the parishioners, even though he came from an upper-working-class, English-speaking family who came to Toronto by choice and not under duress. On our first visit, a hymn's lyrics were projected onto a large screen, and the four-piece band began its number with a steady rock rhythm. Our fellow worshippers raised their arms into the air in praise and swayed side to side in time with the drum kit. Ma looked around and copied, albeit with some self-consciousness. An usher, an elderly Black man in suspenders and khaki pants, approached Ma quietly, interrupting her manufactured awe.

"Did you want to bring your son to the daycare?" Ma couldn't believe her ears. She smiled and grabbed my wrist.

I was brought downstairs, feet dragging. "And what's your name?" a young South Asian woman asked with a charismatic smile. I had never seen a grown-up crouch down to my eye level, and the change in size and scale perturbed me, so I looked away. From the side of my eye I could see that her voluminous head of curls was tamed into a thick braid. Her slender hand gently capped her knee for balance as she patiently waited for an answer.

"His name is Keith." Ma pushed me gently so I would join the rest of the children in the daycare area. I whipped around and buried my nose in Ma's crotch. I felt a tap on my shoulder. Another first. No one had ever asked permission to have my attention before. I turned towards the woman but kept my eyes closed in protest.

"Did you know we have a water table? I can teach you how to blow bubbles the size of your head!" I opened my eyes in shock.

"My head?!"

The woman nodded yes. Her teeth were bright tiles of white against her dark skin. I took her hand and joined the masses. I looked back to serve my mother an obedient smile, but she had already gone. About thirty of us, ranging from babies to toddlers, ran about while our parents worshipped

upstairs and rejoiced in the free daycare. From our playroom, we could hear a combination of muffled singing and testimony. At the sound of the congregation erupting in thunderous applause, the toddlers would clap too, then return to throwing sand on the floor.

I never left the water table. I marvelled at the rainbow cast across the surface of each giant bubble before it popped into oblivion. *Where did the soul of that bubble go?* I wondered.

“Pop! Another bubble gone to heaven,” said Youth Pastor Vandna, the South Asian woman who had greeted me. I looked at her, wondering if she was reading my mind, wondering if she was magic. “Have you ever thought about heaven?” I shrugged. “That’s what they’re doing upstairs. Making sure we all learn ways to let God into our heart.” She grabbed a fistful of soapy water and looked at me the way magicians ready their audiences for a special trick. She blew into the hole of her fist, and out the other end a giant bubble emerged. I was enthralled. Another round of applause from the congregation upstairs. I clapped too. All service long, Pastor Vandna and I played with the water. Hours passed and I was wet from my sleeve cuffs to my collar.

“Service is almost over, Keith. We’d better get you dried up.” She took me to the daycare washroom, where cubbyholes were filled with toilet-training seats, diapers and spare clothes. “Go ahead and get your clothes off.”

Ma had put me into those darned overalls again. I fumbled with the buckles. “I need help.”

“Here. Stay still.” Pastor Vandna undid the buckles with two swift pulls, then slowly lowered the overalls to my ankles. I wavered slightly with my ankles bound by wet denim. “Whoa!” She managed to hold me up by my armpits, and I jerked away from her tickling. She placed me back in my equilibrium and suddenly things became very quiet. “Uh-oh. What’s that?” She pointed to my small erection. I had no idea what it was, so I stretched the elastic of my underwear to take a look. “You have to push it down to tell it to go away,” she said as she pushed the tiny bulge. It did not make it go away. It made it larger. But she kept pushing a few more times until my cheeks were hot.

“Stay still,” she said again, firmly enough that I obeyed, soft enough that I felt loved. I did as I was told and kept my body limp. Eventually, she

reached for some spare clothes and dressed me in clothes that were surprisingly well-fitting and easy to put on, unlike those darned overalls.

I began to look forward to worship days. It meant I got to be with Pastor Vandna and play with the bubbles. These daycare times would always end with me getting undressed out of wet clothes, her pushing away my erection, me staying still so she could finish. Soon, the pushing times were the main feature of my visits. Ma did not notice. She was happy that we got to keep all of these free clothes that happened to fit me so well. When Ma began bringing home cardboard boxes of donated food, her devotions became our daily routine.

“What’s that for?” I asked, pointing to the envelope Ma was stuffing with a cheque. I was still small enough that my chin rested on the surface of the kitchen table while Ma licked the envelope closed.

“It’s my tithing.”

“What’s that?”

She did not answer. She never did, no matter how many times I asked her. I was a child then, though. And children can piece together truth whether it is told to them or not. The envelopes were issued during service just after my mother was paid by the Edelson family. These clothes, the boxes of food and daycare weren’t free after all.

One Saturday afternoon when Pastor Vandna was pushing into me, the congregation upstairs applauded at the same time I experienced my first ejaculation. A rim of sweat had developed just above Pastor’s lip.

“You peed,” is what she said before a custodian wheeled his bucket and mop into the change room and gasped. There was a brief silence I did not understand. Then Pastor Vandna quickly dressed me in clean clothes. She didn’t look at me. She just dressed me. I knew to stay quiet as she ushered me past the custodian.

“Where is Pastor Vandna?” I asked the new caregiver the following day, this time an elderly Black woman.

“She won’t be here anymore,” she said with the widest smile I had ever seen on an adult. I went to the water table and began splashing any child who dared come near me.

The first time I saw an intervention was when I was ten years old. By that time, I was old enough to not go to the daycare, and I was expected to attend various youth fellowships, such as Bible study, Friendship Camp and Next Generation choir. On my way to choir practice, I passed the daycare

and saw a circle of women. On the floor beneath them was Andrew, a five-year-old boy whose mother was a cashier at the nearby No Frills and a former addict seeking salvation.

Andrew was wearing one of the princess costumes from the dress-up centre. This was wrong. He was supposed to choose the fireman hat or the policeman uniform. He was not supposed to be a princess. And his mother, pledging allegiance to her new way of living, her new church, straddled her own son and beat this belief into him. “Do not be deceived!” She broke down the Corinthians verse with every strike. “Neither the sexually immoral! Nor idolaters! Nor adulterers! Nor men who have sex with men! Nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God!”

I wanted to stop them, but I froze. I knew that if I spoke up, the women would have to turn on me, for surely they could smell Andrew’s disease on me too. Surely, they could see the bounce of my hips. Hear the lilt and delicate tone of my voice. See the movements of my slender hands. In my head, I heard the voice of Pastor Vandna: “Stay still, Keith. Stay still.”

Andrew’s mother did not stop until the circle of women were satisfied with her performance and held her back. She did not stop until Andrew lay motionless on the ground, his pleas too weak to continue. When she was done they held each other tightly, as if he was thankful for the teaching and she, thankful for this test.

“Freeze!” Andrew said to me the next day in the hallway as I was heading to Bible study. He was wearing the policeman uniform and he pointed a LEGO gun at me. I raised my hands up, surrendering to the understanding that princesses like us could never be who we are. There are consequences. I understood that, even later in life as a teenager in love. Even as I fantasized about Randell.

One night, I went to my *Lord of the Flies* book and couldn’t find the photo. I thought perhaps it had fallen from the pages into my backpack and went to retrieve it from the hallway closet. But when I opened my bedroom door, I could see a group of six people I recognized from Winchester crowding our kitchen table. Pastor Michael sat in the bulk of his oversized suit, only this time it was powder blue with a yellow paisley tie. He gripped the edge of our table like he gripped the pulpit. I knew I was going to be spoken to, taught a few things. Ma held the photo and looked at me. She wiped her

nose with a tissue and placed it in her sleeve alongside the evidence of my wrongdoings.

I'm ashamed to say it, Evan. I shudder wondering what you will think of me, reading my Whisper Letter. If you will think of me as a coward. I wish I could tell you I was brave. But I wasn't. Instead, I crossed my arms around my chest. It felt too feminine. I put one hand on my waist. It felt too feminine. I settled on my arms at my side, unsure, uneven, in the presence of these people.

Pastor Michael swept his overgrown salt-and-pepper mop to the side and gestured for me to stand before him. I did not.

"Good evening, Keith." I hated the sound of my name. I hated the sound of this man saying my name. I hated the singsong quality of his voice. "Please. Come here." I did not. He exhaled. He had suspected I was far gone. "Your mother tells us that she has some suspicions that you are walking away from God."

Ma coughed out a sob, and her church folk rubbed her back in compassion. She buried her face in her hands and screamed, "Keith! Answer Pastor Michael!" I hated my name.

"What was the question?!"

"The question is, are you walking away from God?"

"How would I be walking away from God? Is this about my hair? Is this about school? What did I do?"

"Are you walking away from God?"

"What do you mean? I'm not walking away from anything." I put on a confused face. "I went to all of my fellowships this past week, didn't I?" I did attend, staring out the window of the community centre, wondering about where Randell was, the corners he loitered on or the company he kept.

"Lying with a man as with a woman is an abomination." Pastor Michael referenced Leviticus to me as he struggled to stand up and round the kitchen table, slowly making his way to me. Ma stood up, unsure of the pastor's next move. "Hold your mother's hands." He gestured for Ma to come closer. She held my hands.

"Keith. You are not like other boys. I can see that," she said. My hands were molten and moist. My jaw was locked. My eyes wide and preparing for the worst. "You tell Mommy. Tell me. What are you doing? Who are you seeing? Who is this Randell?"

“That photo isn’t mine.”

“Then why do you have it?” Ma fished the photo from her sleeve. The tissue came out with it and fell to the floor. She held the photo up to my face, almost touching my forehead. “Why is he seeing you after school?”

“I stole the photo. I mean . . . I found the photo! It fell on the floor at school! It belongs to his girlfriend, Nadine! It’s not mine! I meant to return it!”

“Why are you looking at this photo? Is Randell influencing you?” said Pastor Michael as he hiked up his pants.

“No! Randell doesn’t even know me that well. We just have gym and social sciences together. His girlfriend dropped the photo and—”

“You’re a liar.” Ma’s thumbs stroked the tops of my hands, gently, but her words were sharp. She cried as she would cry over a dying animal she was about to put out of its misery. “I can see you’re lying to me, Keith.” The rest of her church friends rose from the kitchen table and approached me in the hallway slowly, like I was an animal on the loose. What do I remember of them? One was a burly man in a white shirt with a red bank logo on it. One was a stocky woman with feathered brown hair pinned behind one ear. Another was a teenage boy, slightly older than me, whose determination carved two deep lines in his young forehead. Another was a tall woman who wrung her hands in worry. Ma backed into the kitchen as they proceeded to corner me. She cried over the sink.

“Ma? Maaaaaa!” I tried to move swiftly to the side and fool them, but just as Coach Smythe had said during gym class, I was “too much of a gaylord to be an athlete.” They surrounded me, and despite my most sincere protestations, I was dragged towards a chair in the kitchen. No. No, Evan. That did not happen. What happened? Wait. I remember now. There were no protestations. No. My body froze, Evan. My body was still. In my mind I was dragged, but I was not. My body froze. It floated, compliant and limp, towards the chair in the kitchen. Slight pressure on my shoulders coaxed me to sit on it. My limbs were numb. A ringing in my ear. A swelling of my tongue. I stared at my hands, willing them to move. They never did. Red bank logo. Feathered hair with pin. Two deep lines in a young forehead. Wringing hands.

My mother, my own mother, filled a glass with water from the tap. My own mother did not look at me as they zip-tied my hands behind the chair, poked and prodded me. My own mother shut her face off, shut her body off

and spirited herself towards the apartment balcony. *Look at me. Look at me.* I prayed as they threw holy water on me. *Look at me. Look at me. Ma. Look at me.* I prayed as they shaved my hair and clipped my nails down to the nubs. Red bank logo. Feathered hair with pin. Two deep lines in a young forehead. Wringing hands. They screamed at me to repent, to change. Not until the sun rose in the morning did I finally, with my voice scratchy and weak from screaming, say the magic words. “I admit it. I have been walking away from God. I am a homosexual. I ask God for forgiveness. I am sorry. I will change.” My body was limp. My lips numbly gave them what they wanted. I had soiled my pyjamas. The exorcism, as they saw it, was complete. The burly man cut the zip-tie, and my newly repentant body was free to leave. I walked out into the chill of the early morning. I walked and walked past curious neighbours, through forests, under bridges, until I reached an old cemetery. I sat there among the dead until something deep inside reminded me it was time to join the living. I made my way to school.

“Hey! What happened to the knots I put in your hair?!” Nadine passed by me in the school hallway and laughed. I was sitting on the floor near my locker hugging my knees. I began to cry so hard that I drooled on my lap, unable to contain the water within. “Jesus! Are you okay?! Where’s your uniform? What are you wearing?” She helped me to my feet and looked at the sad state of me in my pyjamas from the night before. I explained what had happened. This was my coming-out moment. She was the first person I came out to. In my pyjamas, in the hallway of our high school. Me crying into the hollow of Nadine’s collarbone. Nadine tied her curly hair back, gathered up the sleeves of her Catholic school uniform and wrote a note on a lined piece of paper: PLEASE NOTE THAT MY SON, KEITH NOPUENTE, WILL BE ABSENT AFTER LUNCH PERIOD. SINCERELY, GABBY NOPUENTE.

She signed and dated it like an expert. Like a person who had done this many times before. I handed it in to the school office. I never returned home.

Nadine lived on the twenty-second floor of a high-rise in Crescent Town near the Victoria Park subway station. Since her parents were in the middle of a divorce involving extra-marital affairs with younger people in international locations, Nadine revelled in perfectly quiet nights where she could invite over her boyfriend, Randell, or me, her newly outed homosexual friend Keith. On my first night living with her, still tender from

the day's events, we sat on two plastic stools on her balcony watching the subway trains head east and west.

"You can stay for as long as you want." My eyebrows rose. "No, really. My parents will do anything to please me right now. Each one wants me to love them more than the other. Plus, they're always away on business. They feel guilty, but not guilty enough to stay home or work things out with each other. So I get what I want. It makes me sick to my stomach." Nadine was half Black like me, but her dad was some dude from Australia whose work had him travelling often. I looked at the length of her legs pointing out from her cut-off jeans. The length of her curly hair, perfectly blond at the tips. Her breasts. Her makeup. She had grown in length and confidence since I drew her outline so many years ago. I ached looking at her, wondering what it would be like to be that confident in my body.

"Where did you get your name?" Nadine changed the subject suddenly.

"My dad. I never met him, though. Why?"

"You don't even look like a Keith."

"You don't look like a Nadine."

"What do you want your name to be?"

"Huh?"

"If you could change your name, what would it be?"

No one had ever asked me that before. My name was just the wish that was never granted, named after my father who disappeared.

"What about 'Kay'? So, like 'Keith,' but just the first letter, and the first letter but like a girl?"

Kay. I liked that. Nadine made a crown of twigs left over from an abandoned pigeon's nest on the balcony. In the last light of that night, she raised the crown above her head, above the subway tracks, above the rustle of the forest and townhomes below, and said, "I now crown you Queen Kay!" She placed the crown on my head. I became me. Me. The me-est me I have ever been. Me times a thousand. Me on full volume. The me you fell in love with.

## 3

**It is mid-morning** three days after I last saw Liv. Dawn has passed. And still no Grand Caravan. Toronto has traded in rainstorms for sweltering heat, and it smells like mould everywhere. I travelled from Liv's house on Homewood Street westward towards Queen Street and Gladstone Avenue. The map of the city for me is different now that I have disappeared myself like the Others.

I remember once, well before the Renovation, I saw a meme on Facebook showing what the city of Toronto's transit system would look like if all the inaccessible spaces were deleted from it. Only thirty-four of the sixty-nine subway stops would exist, the map explained. As an able-bodied person, I remember being disappointed, clicking the "angry" button, and then, like a lot of able-bodied people, I did nothing about it. I probably watched a cat video right after. Maybe I posted a selfie. Something split-screen, before and after my drag makeup. I would have gotten tons of "likes."

Now that I have been Othered, I too have a limited map. And there is no one, alive or in hiding, that can "angry" button me out of this. No one has seen an image of me online in more than half a year. I can't post a selfie asking others to bear witness to this invisibility.

Because of Boots checkpoints at major intersections, where Others have been collected and sent to workhouses, we have traded in the main roads for parking lots and back alleys. As per Liv's instructions, I follow coded green spray-painted shapes on brick walls. A simple drawing of a stick figure kicking a ball left or right acts as a flash, telling me which direction to go

along the alleyway paths. The tail end of a swirl shows me where I can find hidden food. Concentric triangles show me there are back doors to abandoned businesses where I can hide and rest for the night. We traverse the streets at late hours and early light, unaware of the time, since most of us have had our phones destroyed or confiscated by the Boots. In the three-day journey to this address, I have travelled by foot, dodging passing streetcars, sneaking into garages during rainstorms and raiding garden-grown raspberry bushes. I have stood perfectly still, with my grey hoodie on, in an alleyway while white folks, walking their dogs, greeted each other, unaware of my presence.

My sweet Evan. If you are reading my Whisper Letter while still in hiding, I must warn you. Things have changed in horrifying ways since the last time you and I walked the streets together.

Do you remember how we got used to being stopped for random ID checks, sometimes at gunpoint? Do you remember how our bodies developed a muscle memory until the cadence of starting and stopping became a dance, a wedding march towards our own erasure? In the six moons since I went into hiding, the Renovation has made animals of us, Evan, with saddles on our backs and bits forced between our teeth.

On my journey through the city these last few days, I have seen, through windows streaked with condensation, lines of Brown men wearing hairnets and connected by chains at the neck. In front of them, on a conveyor belt, travelled a never-ending supply of tiny dessert cakes, which the men wrapped in cellophane packs tied with small yellow ribbons. I salivated at the sight of the cakes and wept at the sight of the men but didn't dare risk being seen by the Boot on duty behind them.

I hid behind a fuse box near a converted school. Through a caged window, I could see a gym below. White toddlers played and laughed while their Brown nannies observed their charges, silent and fearful. Despite two Boots pacing the perimeter of the gym, the nannies wore receiver collars that were triggered by a wireless fence. A child ran out of a designated play area, and when the nanny tried to retrieve him, an ear-piercing alarm erupted over the gym's speakers. It was loud enough that I too had to cover my ears. The nannies took their tearful children into the centre, with eyes downcast and arms shaking.

One night, one fraction of the endless nights of hiding, I ran into six Others who were dodging a Boots checkpoint at Beverley and Dundas

Streets, in what was once Chinatown before the Renovation. Cylinders of light from the Boots' desperately seeking torches managed to chase us down a darkened laneway. A father and his child were apprehended, but the rest of us dispersed like the cockroaches they believed we were into every crevice of every rundown row house. I managed to find a spot in the construction zone of an old playground. Within the perimeter of the yellow caution tape, a dented metal slide lay sideways, detached from the graffiti-covered, pyramid-shaped climbing walls. It was tempting to consider the climbing walls as shelter for the night, but that place seemed too obvious to me, like slipping into a closet during a game of hide-and-go-seek. Also, judging by the whispers within, Others were already setting up camp inside. Blue tarps weighed down by bricks draped over a large pile of playground mulch. I decided to take cover there instead, burrowing into the moist, soft fibres of the mulch. I punched the surface of the tarp up slightly to create a crude window, large enough that I could see around me and small enough to remain unseen.

About twenty minutes later, the four remaining Others—a mother and a toddler and two young men—ran to the playground, straight towards the climbing wall. Without hesitation or remorse, they forced out two small children, who looked to be about three and five, from the coveted spot. The older child was a scrapper and attempted to re-enter the shelter by punching with her wee fists and biting with her baby teeth. The mother, with her toddler still on her hip, emerged from the pyramid and towered over the child. The woman grabbed the child's face with one hand and pushed with brute force, as though the child were a basketball, until she was flung onto my tarp. The woman re-entered the climbing wall without a sound. This hiding and fighting for space to hide was always done in silence, with barely a whisper or grunt shared among us in fear of being found.

The two evicted children wasted no time in finding another spot. Adjacent to the playground was a blue metal dumpster full of blooms of black plastic garbage bags. At its base sat discarded furniture. The children appeared to be sisters, with a similar swell to their cheeks and gait to their walk. The brown skin on their faces was covered in cuts and scrapes. Their long black hair hung to their waists, their wisps of bangs encrusted with filth. With an identical short-clipped scurry, they made their way to the furniture. They wordlessly assessed the potential of an overturned futon sofa by walking around it in their tiny running shoes. The wooden base of

the sofa formed an A-frame, and the mattress created a soggy two-foot-high tunnel above the cold pavement. The younger sister took a wooden chair, unscrewed one of its legs and poked the centre of the futon. Sure enough, a rat ran from the interior, its tail pink and its fur a slick brown. She nodded to her older sister. The older sister helped the younger one reach into the dumpster to grab several tin cans. I watched in wonder as they carefully placed the tin cans around the perimeter of the futon. I assumed it was a makeshift alarm system to alert them of Boots or rats. They slipped into the depths of the mattress, folding themselves like origami out of existence.

In fear for the children's safety, I attempted to keep my eyes open, lying to myself that I could ever protect them, but the delicious warmth of the soft mulch lulled me into slumber. I slept until I could hear rain tapping on the surface of the tarp. I emerged into the cool of the darkness, passed the A-frame of the futon with a wordless prayer, and then continued my nighttime journey west along Dundas.

At first I was confused by this address—32 Alma Lane. I wasn't sure what day it was, but I was concerned that if it was the weekend, I would be found by those frequenting the Gladstone Hotel, which was nearby. I knew that since the Renovation the hotel had become a popular hangout for the Boots, a place to have a beer after the hard work of relocating the Others. The white hipsters who had once made the hotel their headquarters, for anything from poetry readings to dance parties, ended up fading into the background, despite years of cultivating a reputation for "progressive thinking." Some joined the Boots. Some calmly witnessed what the Boots were doing and did nothing. But when the side window of the corner townhome unit slid open and a sandwich was placed on the ledge, I understood why I was told to come here.

My dirty hand reached out for the food with caution, and I caught the eye of a white woman pretending to do her dishes. This red-headed woman with baby bangs and black horn-rimmed glasses flashed me the fastest of smiles. Barely a smile. Her lips turned up for a fraction of a second. Then she was back to doing her pretend task, banging about cutlery in the sink, splashing water, when in fact she was feeding me. She filled a small watering can and placed it on the sill after I had taken the sandwich. When I reached out for the watering can, her hand briefly touched mine. It was

purposeful, intentional. A moment of kindness. She never made eye contact again.

I hid behind this home's recycling bin and devoured my gifted sandwich. I downed the water from the watering can in one long stream into my mouth. Then I peed, dark yellow and hot, behind the lilac bushes.

That was yesterday, and the thought of that sandwich has my stomach aching for another meal. The kitchen window of this white woman's house has since gone dim and the curtains are shut tight. This makes me wonder if the woman's absence and caution are connected to why the van has not shown up. Around the perimeter of 32 Alma Lane is an uneven fence, protecting a small corner garden of tomatoes and zucchini. I press my face against the worn planks of wood to see a factory across Dufferin Street. Three cars are parked: a red Kia Rondo, a white Toyota Corolla, a blue Volkswagen Golf. No black Grand Caravan. I move my nose to another break in the fence planks. At the stop sign by 32 Alma Lane, a young white man in a suit clips on his helmet, unlocks his bicycle and rides away.

"Hello!" A ball rolls towards the fence, and as the child comes to collect it, she peeks into the space between the wood. "I see you!" The little girl has just grown out of toddlerhood, with baby fat still present in her ankles and wrists.

"Molly. No, thank you. I saw you, young lady. Crossing the road without Mama is not nice." Molly giggles. "That's not funny, Molly. I'm serious. Please hold my hand." Molly looks at me again through the fence. I shift just enough that she can't see me.

"Mama, look!"

"What is it?" Her mama reluctantly looks through the slit in the fence and sees nothing, since I hide from her glance, but I can tell by her silence that she senses me there. We are both quiet on either side of the fence. Me not breathing, the woman listening for my breath.

"Okay. We're going to go now," the mother says, like an announcement, like she knows I am there. "Molly, take my hand please." They leave. I exhale. I peer through the slit again and see child and mother crossing the street, Molly with ball in hand.

I lean my head on the fence, looking through the opening, praying and praying for the van to come. My exhaustion and hunger make my eyes heavy, and I nod off. I turn my left cheek onto the warm wooden surface of the fence post, and I can easily imagine it as a soft pillow. I shake my head,

forcing myself to pay attention. I cannot miss the van. *Don't miss the van*, I tell myself. But my eyes are so heavy, and the sound of my grumbling tummy is muted in my slumber.

In my dreams, I am six years old again. Ma comes home with a new Sony stereo system. The Wright family has upgraded their sound system and donated the old one to her. I watch as she places an album—also a donation from the Wright family—on the platter of the turntable.

“You watch, ha? See this?” Ma points to the fine hair at the end of the tone arm. “This is the needle.” When she lifts the tone arm, the platter automatically begins to turn. She carefully and ceremoniously places the stylus onto the record’s first track. “Clair de Lune” fills the speakers. Fills our apartment. Fills my heart.

“Don’t touch this, ha?” Ma says before heading to the kitchen to begin prepping dinner. I hold the album cover in my hands. *Liberace Piano Gems* it reads on the cardboard sleeve. On it is a picture of a man beaming from ear to ear and wearing a silver cape. On the side is a superimposed image of his graceful hands, covered in jewels and rings, on the piano keys. I have never seen a man look like that before: smiling so genuinely and wearing such lavish clothes. Still holding the album cover, I begin dancing around the room. I can feel the swoosh of air past my ears with every flourish of my hands, every waltz step through the house. The music sounds like birds just about to take flight. It sounds like eyes slowly opening in the morning. It sounds like fog dissipating in the warmth of the sun. I dance and dance through the house, bracing myself on chairs to lift my legs up, rolling along the floor on my knees, reaching up to the sky at these sensations in my body.

“What is this?” My mother stands there, a plate of rice and beefsteak in each hand, staring at her child.

I awake to the sound of a black Grand Caravan rolling up to the stop sign at the corner of Dufferin and Alma. At first I am unsure. Is this the one? I see a white man inside unfold a map over the steering wheel. Maybe not. But when I see him briefly, ever so briefly, let his eyes stray from the map to look around, I know this is it.

I bolt from the fence to the van. The van’s automatic door slowly slides open, and once I am inside it slowly slides shut.

“Get down,” the white man says as he begins driving. He drives over a couple of potholes and I bump my head on the ceiling of the van. “Head to the back. Get under a blanket. We should be there in five hours.”

“Did anyone follow you?”

“I didn’t see anyone.”

“Good. Watch your head.”

I crawl past two bucket seats laden with boxes to the back of the van, where the seats have been stowed down and there are several heavy grey blankets. I grab a blanket, and when I lift it up I see someone else lying there. They\* look Queer too but younger. Head unevenly shaven. I can see from the barrel shape of their sweatshirt that their hefty chest is bound.

“The *other* one. Not this one,” they say. I grab another blanket and cover myself. I feel the van move through stop-and-go traffic until I am asleep again, my face moist from my own breath.

When I wake, the road sounds smooth like one continuous hum. I lift up my blanket. From my position down below I can see blue skies from each of the van’s windows. I catch the eyes of the white man in the rear-view mirror.

“I’m not going to look back at you. I’m going to keep looking forward. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“How are you doing? You all right?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Beck. Did Liv give you something for me?”

I feel for the manila envelope under my shirt. “Yes.”

“Good. I will need you to hand that to me at our next pit stop. As much as I want to tell you when we will stop, the truth is, we’re never a hundred percent sure when it will be safe to do so. I might have to just fill up with gas and keep going, you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Good.”

After the sunlight shifts from the driver’s side of the car to the other, we finally stop. The white man opens the door. We are unsure if we should still hide.

“Okay. We’re in a safe zone, but I need you to run to the washrooms and run back. The gas station attendant is in with us. But we don’t know

who's watching. I will need you to be back inside this van by the time I am done."

The other person and I lift ourselves up from the back of the van and crawl forward. Our bodies are achy and sore. I hand the white man the manila envelope and he points us in the direction of the washrooms.

"What's your name?" I ask in the cramped stall.

"Bahadur," they tell me as they lift up their sweatshirt to clean themselves. There is no time for privacy between us. The binding around their chest smells musty and old. I imagine I mustn't smell any better.

"I'm Kay."

"Holy shit. This feels good." Bahadur splashes water on their face, neck and arms. The sound of it all reminds me to pee. I face away from them and do my business.

"Wow. Sounds like you actually had access to water."

"I did. Some white lady gave me her watering can to drink."

"Jealous."

"No, I'm jealous. Looks like you had access to an electric clipper."

Bahadur's jaw drops in both laughter and shock. "Let me guess. You did drag."

"You bet."

"I can always tell when people were paid to throw shade." They wet their hair and armpits, what my ma would call a "cowboy shower," where everything gets splashed with water but no soap.

As we run back to the van, its automatic door slides open and we resume our positions. We see the white man in the driver's seat briefly leaf through the manila envelope's contents, then reseal it. He rolls down the window of the van and slides the envelope in between two jugs of windshield washer fluid. We drive away. The continuous hum.

"Pssst." Bahadur's hand taps my blanket. We join blankets as if we are at a slumber party. Only we are not wearing pyjamas. We are two smelly Queers wearing our runaway clothes, acting like teenagers whispering gossip with glee. It has been a long time since I have had a decent conversation. I pray that the odour between us will become bearable sometime soon.

"So? How did you get here?" I tell them my story. I tell them about you. I tell them about Fanny and her dog. I tell them about Liv's basement and

the lynching. I tell them about sandwiches on windowsills and children through fences.

They tell me their story.

One of the first signs that Bahadur was in trouble was during the processing of their refugee claim. They had a very clear case as a claimant, having survived a gang rape involving two of their cousins who found out about their Queer identity. They endured repeated threats. They were ambushed in broad daylight.

“You should kill yourself!”

“You whore!”

“You disgusting piece of filth!”

With the help of the Transgender Assistance Centre of Toronto, they filed the paperwork for a refugee claim.

“Now it’s just a waiting game,” said Bahadur’s caseworker, Firuzeh. “Be prepared. It may take some time. Especially with all of the recent budget cuts to the centre.”

“Is your job in danger?” Bahadur asked.

“When is it not?” Firuzeh said, sarcastically. “The centre itself is owned by the city, and the programs are provincially funded. Between our asshole provincial premier and asshole mayor, not to mention our newly elected asshole prime minister, we’re pretty much screwed. That’s why I’ve stopped putting things up in my office.” She gestured towards her desk calendar with pictures of Hawaii. “It’s just this flip calendar and my laptop. That’s all. But for now, we wait and hope for the best.”

She smiled and winked at the same time, which made Bahadur’s cheeks flush. Firuzeh presented them a gift bag. “I wanted to surprise you.” Bahadur’s face was practically crimson. “This week, we’re expecting the first snowfall. It’s coming early this year. I wanted you to be prepared.” She took out a striped Blue Jays toque, a chunky winter coat and a pair of boots that were two sizes too large.

“I look like a marshmallow.”

Firuzeh stifled a laugh. “No! No. You don’t look—”

“Yes I do.”

“Okay. Maybe a little.” Firuzeh’s laugh subsided into an affectionate smile. She held her face with her slender hands, then intertwined her fingers

over her lap. She said with a sigh, “I’m proud of you, Bahadur. You’ve made it this far. Now you just have to make it through this winter.”

Bahadur considered stepping forward and perhaps kissing her on the cheek but thought better of it. Bahadur adored watching Firuzeh as she struggled to put her mess of curls into a ponytail. No elastic band was strong enough to keep it in place, and Bahadur would count down the minutes during their appointments until the elastic would inevitably loosen and let Firuzeh’s golden-brown locks fall to her slight shoulders.

“Let’s schedule you in next week, okay? We have to finalize the paperwork for your work permit, and I want to get that done sooner than later.”

That Wednesday, according to plan, Bahadur made their way from their shelter at Jarvis and Shuter Streets to the centre at Carlton and Sherbourne streets. The winter gear Firuzeh had given them was perfectly timed. Hail followed by freezing sleet came down in unforgiving sheets of painful granules. Unlike the sparkles that fell gracefully within a snow globe, real hail fell sideways, accumulating in the cuffs and collar of Bahadur’s gifted coat. Perhaps this was why the streets felt empty and quiet. With their scarf covering their face, Bahadur marvelled at the tracks they created while travelling north on Sherbourne. The street was wider than Shuter, and the wind picked up speed. Bahadur learned to lean into the gusts in order to move forward.

They finally made it to the doors of the centre only to find it locked. Bahadur cupped their hands on the surface of the window, hoping for a glare-free view of the people inside. Normally, a security guard could open the door. Usually, a few people would be strolling about the front lobby, drinking coffee or perusing pamphlets by the community bulletin board. Bahadur walked to the other end of the centre, where the walk-in clinic was usually full to the brim. These doors were also locked and the waiting room was empty.

A familiar feeling of dread percolated in their stomach, but they shook it off. Perhaps Bahadur had come on the wrong day. Perhaps the weather had shut the centre down.

The next day, Bahadur tried again. This time, the Transgender Assistance Centre sign on the corner of Carlton and Sherbourne had been taken down. The week following that, Bahadur could see from a block away that the centre had become lousy with soldiers in boots and leather

jackets. Their armoured trucks. Their unmarked boxes in and out of the centre. Burly white men shaking hands, then heading inside.

With a scarf still shielding their face from the early winter flurries, Bahadur stood kitty-corner from the centre watching this unfold. They could have asked someone what was happening, but they already knew. This place, this city, this country, was no longer safe. Maybe it never had been.

Bahadur tried their luck at a recycling factory located on the industrial outskirts of town.

“Social Insurance Number, please?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Work permit?”

“No.”

The middle-aged Black woman scratched her head through her beige industrial hair cap. Putting down her clipboard, she leaned in to Bahadur.

“Come with me.” She led Bahadur down a long hallway with threadbare carpeting. She opened a fire door into a stairwell, then paused. “What’s your name again?”

“Bahadur.”

“Okay. So here’s the thing. We’re going to the lower-level factory where the majority of the recycling takes place.”

“Recycling? I thought this was for loading. I’m very good at lifting and packing.”

“I can see that. But that’s the problem. People can see you. We don’t want anyone to see you.”

Bahadur looked at their winter boots from Firuzeh, now soaked from another snowstorm.

“I’ve been where you are. I know. I came here from Eritrea to this exact factory five years ago, before my permit came in. These are jobs regular Canadians don’t want. But new people, refugees, illegals, we all need them. We have families. We can’t wait for paperwork. And I’m guessing you can’t either.”

Bahadur shook their head.

“I have to warn you, this job is dirty business. But trust me,” the woman leaned in conspiratorially, “the way things are changing, these dirty jobs are the safest for folks like you and me. The less they want these jobs, the less

likely they'll take them away anytime soon. Nice to fly under their radar, you know what I mean?"

Bahadur nodded.

"Good. Let's get you some steel-toe boots."

The people in the factory resembled ants. Dust-covered with goggles, Bahadur took their place among the masses.

"Stand here and watch." Isaac, Bahadur's training supervisor, began selecting certain items from the endless line of garbage. "I want you to just concentrate on electronics. Nothing else. Once you find something, you are to throw it into this bin here." Isaac tilted the bin to show various VHS tapes, remote controls, batteries.

Using thin rubberized work gloves that did not protect from moisture or filth, Bahadur picked electrical wires from piles of unfurled diapers, TV antennas from half-wrapped burgers teeming with maggots. Countless times, a rat would jump from the detritus and attempt to hitch a ride on the shoulders of one of the workers. It was typical to watch co-workers scream and dance about, striking their own bodies to rid their gear of vermin. No one could stop and assist. They all had to keep going. The only time they could stop was when the thirty-minute alarm went off to allow the workers to sit for a whopping two minutes. So all they did was watch and sort at the same time.

"If you see any of these, I want them." Ricky, the only white man in the factory, stood opposite Bahadur leafing through an ancient copy of *Hustler*. Bahadur saw images of hairy crotches and large breasts gracing each page and almost vomited. The thought of nude bodies among the putrid landfill made their stomach turn. "You don't see chicks like this anymore. I love hairy pussies. See, this was beauty. Of course, these women are, like, seventy years old now, but whatever."

Before heading to the cafeteria, the factory workers would go to the washrooms and try to wash their inflamed hands clean enough to eat, but rarely did the dispenser have enough soap. Knowing full well that they were in danger, Bahadur kept silent in the men's room so as not to reveal their higher voice. The men at the urinals began peering over their shoulders to stare at Bahadur as they washed up.

In the lunchroom, one worker removed his helmet and sat down among other men equally curious about Bahadur. "Didn't I see you in the men's

room?” he said, loud enough so Bahadur could hear. “Why were you there?”

“Aren’t you a woman?”

“Maybe she’s a she-male.”

“Really, are you?”

“Hey! Bahadur! Over here!” Ricky, the perverted white guy, invited Bahadur to his table with an eager swing of his arm. No one else sat with him. Bahadur made their way to Ricky’s table and ate quietly, hoping for the conversation to end. “So how does that work anyway? You know . . . muffin bumping?” Ricky banged the back of his fists together, sincerely asking for a demonstration.

The next day, Bahadur tried to go to the women’s washroom instead.

“We’ve had some complaints. Some of the women in the factory have said that they caught you looking at them while they were on the toilet.” Isaac leaned his office chair back enough that Bahadur feared he would fall. With their goggles strung around their neck, Bahadur shrugged.

“I can’t see them. We all pee in stalls.”

“So then, you’re telling me you *have* tried to peek?”

Bahadur stopped using the washroom altogether. Trans bladder. Surely an eight-hour, no-pee shift wasn’t going to kill them. After one week, they developed a urinary tract infection. With their crotch sore and throbbing, they waited for the thirty-minute alarm to go off and ran to the men’s washroom to pee in one of the closed stalls. It was just a trickle. Bahadur banged their fist on the stall’s walls. “Fuck!” They looked down. Two pairs of steel-toe boots stood outside the stall.

“Come on out, she-male.” The two on the other side of the door laughed. Bahadur managed to escape the stall but not without one of the workers cupping their chest to confirm the presence of breasts. “Don’t ever come back here, you fucking freak!”

The next day, Bahadur allowed themselves to pee through their hazmat suit. It didn’t matter anymore. They were covered in dirt anyway. The chemicals in the air had all the workers coughing. The moisture in the garbage had everyone’s hands rotten. Pee didn’t matter.

It was payday. Bahadur sorted garbage, considering that envelope of illegal earnings. Enough to pay for rent at the shared housing, groceries and maybe a fun trip to the dollar store to buy something frivolous or sweet. An alarm went off.

“That’s weird.” Ricky sat down on his stool across from Bahadur. “It’s not time for the thirty-minute alarm. But I’ll take it!” He took off his helmet and scratched his head. His face shifted, seeing something from behind Bahadur. “Who the fuck are they?”

The Boots bled down the complicated steel stairwells in their leather jackets and boots. At first it was a spectacle, like a choreographed dance, all in sync and graceful in their movements. But when the workers saw Isaac with his hands above his head, everyone stood up off their stools. Isaac attempted to flee and was swiftly shot. Screams. All it takes is one person to be killed, to be humiliated, to be raped, to make everyone compliant. They rounded up the Brown and Black folks without any further fight, shoved them into several cube trucks and drove off.

“Hello? Anyone there?” Ricky’s voice echoed amidst the silent machinery of the empty factory. Or at least he thought it was empty. Bahadur, at the first sight of the Boots, had jumped into a pile of recycled clothes, covered themselves and waited for quiet.

Months were spent braving cold nights beneath wooden stoops and escaping ice storms and floods under highway overpasses in an endless game of hide-and-go-seek. As the weather warmed, Bahadur managed to sneak into a condo parkade, where they nestled into a corner of the building’s storage room undetected. They slept between cages of surplus belongings with the hum of the electric lights ringing in their ear.

One night, when sneaking past security cameras to the condo’s dumpster for food, Bahadur noticed a black Grand Caravan with the driver’s window rolled down. A white man and woman sat in the front seats. It was trailing them. Bahadur ran. They bolted from the bin towards a line of bushes, but the van managed to circle around the bushes and drive directly into their path.

“Bahadur?” said the man from the driver’s seat. Bahadur flinched at the sound of their name. “Are you Bahadur? Get in the van.”

The automatic door closed and the man began driving. The woman looked back at Bahadur from the passenger seat.

“We’ve been searching everywhere for you. My name is Liv. I know Firuzeh.”

## 4

**I awake to find** that Bahadur and I have fallen asleep holding hands, both of us supine under the weight of blankets. Our grip is less like romantic lovers and more like the kind of grasp you use on someone you're fishing out of the water, someone who doesn't know how to swim. Only we don't know who is saving whom, our hands are so tightly clasped around each other. I try to loosen my grasp, but they only hold me tighter. Bahadur's eyes race right and left under eyelids squeezed tight. Their square jaw is clenched, chewing at a scene I cannot see. Even the tendons of their stocky neck pulse at relived trauma. I wonder what they are dreaming about. I relax into this odd embrace with a stranger, in this moving car driven by another stranger heading to somewhere we do not know. I have not felt someone else beside me in so long that I realize my skin hungers and longs for you. I shake my head of your memory and squeeze my eyes of the sting.

The van's radio is shut off and I can hear the wheels crunching along a dirt road now.

"Wake up, everyone. We're here." The white man rolls down the windows. The smell of chicken shit.

I lift the blankets aside and peek out of the van's window. Two silos stand against the cooling amber of the afternoon sun. Beside the silos is a low, grey open-air building. Across an expanse of coarse gravel is a two-storey house with faded blue siding. Everything looks like it's standing on its last legs and could collapse with one push of a finger.

"Who are these people?" I say to Bahadur, pointing to an old man exiting the farmhouse. He is wearing worn jeans and a sad button-up shirt.

At the sight of our van, he looks at our driver, confused for a moment, then settles his face into a grimace. He wipes his greased silver hair off his forehead and dabs the back of his sweaty neck using a handkerchief.

The van stops. Our driver exits. Slowly, with a faint smile he says, “Hi, Dad.” He rubs the blond stubble on his chin, unsure.

The old man shifts his feet like a soldier standing at attention. A retired military man. There is a look of recognition. A confirmation in posture.

“It’s me, Beck.” His voice cracks at this attempt to be forthright.

“I don’t know you.” The old man maintains a look of solemn contempt.

“I know *you*, Dad.”

“Don’t call me that.” They both look at their shoes. The stalemate is broken when the old man sees Bahadur and me peering at him from the van.

“Who’s in there? You brought people?! You brought Others over here?!”

“I need them to stay here for the next while.”

“Hell, no!”

“I have supplies for you and Mom.”

“I don’t want your supplies!”

“I know the floods hit McGregor’s Bend hard, Dad. I know you need these supplies. I have food. I have clean water.”

“I can get that at the Costco.”

“Twenty-seven kilometres away in North London? Between the fuel cost and them gouging people because of the shortages, you can’t afford that.”

“Why didn’t you come sooner, then?”

“I was still in service.”

“You could have called! You’re just here because you need something!”

The screen door creaks open and an old woman braces herself against its frame.

“Just shut up, the two of you, and get inside!” Silence. The old woman waves her cane towards the van. Her clumsy grey coif reveals a sunburned scalp and thinning hairline. “And tell those Others in the van to clean up before we eat. They look filthy.”

Beck leads me and Bahadur into the farmhouse, and I enter with caution. It feels like forever since I have interacted with white folks other than Liv, and I feel my body folding in on itself, making itself as small, as inoffensive, as possible. The old woman tells me to take off my shoes, but when I do so she sees my socks are no cleaner than my sneakers, so I have

to keep them on. Instead, I fastidiously wipe my soles on the mildewed welcome mat outside to ensure the pea-green shag carpet from the front entrance into the living room remains clean, even though it has been stained and tatted by moisture. With armfuls of supplies from the van, I enter and re-enter the house again and again, feeling apologetic for my very presence. When the last of the water bottles are brought in, I stand by the bottom of the stairs where dead-people pictures adorn the walls of a long hallway. I look closely at black-and-white images of babies in bonnets, men in overalls posing in front of a newly erected building, and plain women with intricate hairstyles smiling at the camera. The down on my forearms stands on end knowing these people most likely lived here once and all we have left of them are these creepy pictures. I scratch my arm skin to calm my goosebumps.

“Kay? Bahadur?” Beck says to us. I look to the side and see that Bahadur has not moved an inch from the front door and looks just as reticent as me. “You hungry?”

Beck opens four cans of corned beef using the attached key and divides it among all of us. Even with the congealed fat still waxy and yellow, layered between fibres of unknown meat, I bite my lip to keep myself from swallowing the plate whole.

We cautiously make our way to the kitchen, which is a sea of beige linoleum, and settle ourselves in the booth-like seats, side by side with these strangers. For a moment, all that can be heard among us is the ticking of a wooden clock sitting on the fireplace’s mantel. Beck and his parents exchange soundless glances. Even when the old man and old woman motion for us to say grace before the meal, it is done in silence. Their hands automatically stretch out to join in a praying circle around the kitchen table, but they both realize it means they will have to actually touch us. They silently decide to just hold each other’s hands in prayer. We sit awkwardly outside their grasp. The old woman closes her eyes.

Finally, she says, “Dear God. Thank you for this wonderful meal, for the hands that prepared it and for the generosity of Beck to bring it here.” The old man’s lips purse. Beck sighs. The old woman opens her eyes and looks at us sideways. An afterthought. “And thank you for these . . . visitors. I hope they like McGregor’s Bend as much as we do. Amen.”

Bahadur and I share a look, then eat.

“You all seem hungry.” The old woman daintily places a napkin on her lap and nibbles at her food in polite forkfuls. I am unsure if I should tell her that meals are a luxury after the Renovation, so thank you for letting us share your table, but before I can craft my sentence, she says, “My name is Hanna. I’m Beck’s mother. And this is Peter . . . Beck’s dad.” I open my mouth, about to say, “Thank you.”

“Don’t tell them our names!” A bit of congealed fat sits in the corners of Peter’s mouth.

“Don’t tell me what to say. They’re here. They should know our names.”

“Well they won’t be here for long, I’ll tell you that much. We don’t want to be accessories to whatever this is.” A gesture towards us before Peter scoops more corned beef into his mouth. He shakes his head.

“No. We won’t be here for long. You don’t have to worry about that. We’ll be gone by the full moon.” Beck downs the rest of his bottled water and looks at the bottle pensively. He heads to the kitchen sink and turns on the faucet. Nothing but a clanking sound followed by a putrid stream of liquid.

“Not a single clean drop since the flood. Unlike you city people, our wells have been left contaminated. Nothing fixed. Not yet. Not ever. We might as well be those Indians on the other side of the highway, drinking muddy water,” says Peter, who thumbs the last of his food onto his fork and mouths it clean. “Not that you even care.” He suddenly stands, pushes Beck aside and slams his plate into the sink.

Bahadur and I watch Peter leave the kitchen in a huff, then continue eating in silence. A door slams somewhere down the hallway. Beck goes out the front door. From my seat in the kitchen I can see him inhale and exhale while looking at the darkening horizon. Unsure of what to do, I eat the last of the corned beef, until all that remains is its stain on the plate. Hanna dabs the corners of her mouth, then throws the napkin onto the table.

“Well *that* went well.” She looks down at her white knit cardigan and realizes that the buttons are not lined up, resulting in a small ripple just above her buxom chest. “Oh, for heaven’s sake. Will you look at that?” She tries to redo her sweater, but her crooked arthritic fingers get in the way. “This is what happens when an old lady rushes to get dressed because of unexpected visitors, eh?” She chuckles.

“Do you need help?” I ask.

“Are you getting fresh with me, young man?” I hold my breath for a second, wondering if she’s serious, then she laughs. I laugh. Bahadur laughs along, nervously. We are all laughing. “I guess that’s not the case with you, is it?” Another round of laughter, this time to push the sting of words away. I nod, nervously. Hanna lifts her chin and consents to my touch. I redo the buttons. Each one is in the shape of a kitten’s head. So small. So delicate.

“Excellent. Thank you, young man. Beck will show you to where you all can sleep.”

Beck leads us outside to an adjoining cottage. He tells us that this is where the farmhands once slept, back when this was a working farm. Four spring mattresses on simple metal frames sit in one long row in this small cottage between the farmhouse and the silos. Beck struggles to open the tiny windows to let the thick air break through only to let in more chicken shit smell from outside. But at least the air is moving. Whoever was here last left a long time ago.

He lights two kerosene lamps in the last of twilight.

“Can we all sit down for a moment and talk? You should know where you are and who you’re with.”

The day Beck signed up for military service was the day after he was discovered in the washroom with Finnegan Waters.

Unlike Beck’s family, who farmed chickens, the Waters were a well-to-do family by McGregor’s Bend standards. They raised horses, and according to Finnegan, his parents had earned and lost vast fortunes over their lifetimes, thanks to horses. “Or at least that’s what my auntie said to me about why we moved to this shithole of a town.” The two boys became as thick as thieves when they were paired up during hockey practice.

“Collins!” Coach Trent screamed at Beck. “Can you teach this faggot over here how to skate backwards? Looks like the fancy-dancy Waters family doesn’t think it’s necessary to teach their eleven-year-old son how to play hockey.”

Beck looked to the right and saw Finnegan teetering in his heavy gear. Finnegan’s face was overrun by freckles, and when he looked at Beck he gave an eager smile. While the two runts engaged in peewee-level backward wall push-offs, the larger boys repeated backward crossover drills. It was humiliating, especially when that fucker Gary Tulle would come by and clothesline one of them. That asshole looked like he was

thirty-five and had just escaped from jail, when he was actually eleven and had just ended a stint in juvie. The entire time Finnegan wouldn't stop talking.

"I swear to god!" Finnegan's voice cracked.

"You're lying." Beck sniffed away a string of snot that pooled under his bulbous nose.

"But why would your dad put those magazines in the bathroom? Where everyone can see?"

"It was a mistake, obviously!" Another crack in Finnegan's voice. The pair had moved on to practising backward steps, this time off the wall. "My dad took a shit on the toilet and forgot his pile of dirty magazines there. He didn't mean for us to see it. Who would want their kids to see he was a pervert?"

"Your dad's a pervert?"

"Um, yeah."

"Why? What kind of stuff was in there? Like, boobs and stuff?"

"Well yeah, of course."

"Whoa."

"But there were dicks too."

"What?!"

"There was one magazine called *Slick*. There were guys. Big guys. Black guys. Big Black guys with their big Black dicks." Finnegan's eyes widened under his new helmet.

"So, it's true?"

"In that magazine it was."

Finnegan and Beck heard the sharp screech of the whistle, and Coach Trent waved them over to the group. "Okay, ladies. Once you're done with your knitting circle, maybe we can learn a thing or two?"

When Beck was invited for a sleepover, Mrs. Waters asked him to wipe his shoes at the door.

"Mom!"

"Finnegan. I ask everyone to wipe their shoes at the door. Beck is no different." She turned sharply and pointed at the top of her dress, where a hook-and-eye fastener remained undone. Finnegan clicked them together, looked at Beck and made a face. Mrs. Waters was dressed like her outfit was a portal to somewhere much fancier than McGregor's Bend. As though somehow her soft lavender dress and outrageous puffed sleeves would

transport her out of our chicken-farming town to somewhere like the Hamptons. Her hair was styled like Paige Davis's on that television show *Trading Spaces*, only spikier on the bottom and more voluminous at the top. Beck felt uneasy looking at her. Like his eyes were unsure where to rest: her colossal sleeves or her towering hair. Beck settled on short bursts of smiles to show gratitude and then looking at his lap. "Now go show Beck your room and get dressed for dinner. Your brother will be here any minute." She returned to taping the "Welcome Home" banner on the fireplace while the boys ran up the grand spiral staircase. Beck was confused. Wasn't Finnegan dressed already?

Finnegan had a train set that traversed the perimeter of the room. With a sigh he said, "Go on. Turn on the switch. Everyone wants to try it out." Another roll of the eyes.

"You don't like trains?"

"I did. When I was, like, five. I'm fucking eleven years old, which is only two years from being a teen, and I would really, really love it if my mom would stop decorating my room." Finnegan went into his walk-in closet and returned holding a small dinner jacket. Beck made his way to the window and brushed his overgrown mushroom haircut out of his eyes to see outside. He gasped.

"What's happening?"

From Finnegan's window, Beck could see the horse stables. In a clearing adjacent to the stables stood what appeared to be a gymnast's balance beam with four legs. A young woman with waist-length, curly brown hair pulled a stallion from the barn, its coat a glistening brown.

"Oh, that? My mom says that she's dad's lover."

"What?!"

"Yeah. That woman is Francesca. She's from Italy. They screw around sometimes. My dad fools around with everyone and he thinks we don't know."

"But . . ." Thoroughly confused by the madness of this household, Beck pointed at the stallion mounting the balance beam as if the beam were a mare. "What's that?!" A short balding man, who Beck assumed was Finnegan's father, slid a large tube over the stallion's genitals and collected a generous semen sample. With clinical efficiency, he capped the specimen and walked towards the stable, out of sight. The stallion was whisked away by Francesca, its hide soapy with perspiration.

“Oh that. My dad is a horse breeder. He’s collecting his stallion’s wet dream so we can keep this house.” Beck’s stomach churned.

“Mushroom soup?” Mrs. Waters asked Beck at the dinner table later that evening. Beck shook his head, but a bowl was poured for him anyway. He wanted to wretch at the sight of the creamy liquid, with the image of the semen sample still fresh in his mind. He picked at the next course, a dry chicken breast, and swallowed hard at the spit gathering in his throat. Across the table sat the guest of honour, Finnegan’s brother, Stewart, who had just returned from serving in Afghanistan. He too had a face overrun with freckles. He too picked at the chicken. He too wore a dinner jacket, although his fit much too small over the bulk of his new military muscle. The place setting for Mr. Waters remained vacant, as did the place setting for Francesca. Stewart picked at his food in silence.

“You can’t tell me this food isn’t a million times better than what you were eating in the mess halls.” Despite the store-bought chicken and the canned soup, Mrs. Waters adjusted her apron in a way that begged for a compliment.

“Mom. There are excellent cooks in the army.” His mother flinched at the insinuation. He backpedalled. “But this is . . . it’s better. Yes. You didn’t have to do all this, Mom. I know things are tight right now.”

“Of course I did! My baby is home safe.”

Stewart gave a tepid smile and changed the subject. “When is Dad coming?”

“Oh, you know your father. Always tinkering. If it’s not a repair in the stables, it’s a horse with an injury. He’ll come to dinner when he wants. But that won’t keep us from having our celebration, will it?”

Later, Mrs. Waters agreed to allow the boys to set up a tent in the field behind the house for the night. “I’m sure the sounds of the barn will help Beck feel more comfortable here on our estate,” she said with pursed lips.

When Beck made one more trip to the washroom before returning to the tent, he spied Stewart smoking a cigarette on the stoop of the side entrance.

“You know it’s rude to stare, right?”

Beck was startled. “I wasn’t staring. It’s just such a big house. I got confused which door I was supposed to use.”

Stewart took another drag of his cigarette and exhaled smoke into the night air. “Whatever, kid. Stare all you want.” A long pause dissipated as slowly as the smoke.

Beck twiddled his fingers and bit his lips. “Um. Did you kill anybody? When you were out there. In the war. Did you kill anybody?”

Even in the darkness, Beck could see Stewart’s jawline tense. When Stewart turned his head to face Beck, what little light shone from the field lamp made a perfect halo around his puppy-cut hair. Stewart’s silhouette stared back at Beck and said nothing, like he was letting the crickets’ and grasshoppers’ nighttime song do the talking for him. Stewart threw his cigarette on the grass, shut the door to the main house and walked past Beck with a slight limp.

Beck found his way to the tent with his flashlight. When he unzipped it, he found Finnegan sitting inside with his arms crossed like a petulant child, stifling his tears with coughs.

“I thought you had left.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because my family is weird. It happens all the time. I don’t even know where my dad and Francesca went. Well, I don’t know, but I know.” The dike that kept his sobs at bay broke, and he wiped at his face with the bottom of his pyjama shirt.

Beck didn’t know what to say, so he put his hand on Finnegan’s shoulder like he had seen his father do to his Uncle Rodney at Grandpa’s funeral. But instead of the wooden tap he once witnessed, his hand melted onto Finnegan’s bony neck. It melted so warmly that Finnegan responded by snuggling down into his sleeping bag like a small child being coaxed into slumber with a bedtime story. When they woke, they were tightly spooning, watching the shadow of dew run off the tent’s surface. Beck turned around and traced Finnegan’s freckles. Finnegan took Beck’s hands and inspected them.

“You bite your fingernails.” Finnegan kissed each of Beck’s stubby digits, then held his hand close to his heart. They both fell asleep until Mrs. Waters called them in for a breakfast of watery oatmeal and burned toast.

The boys grew older. Gary Tulle ended up in adult jail. Coach Trent graduated them from being pussies to being his star players, with Beck playing left defence and Finnegan as goalie. McGregor’s Bend was still McGregor’s Bend.

They never spooned again. The memory seemed so distant that Beck willed himself to believe it had never actually happened. The only touch they shared was in a fleeting hug or a manly tap on the back.

“A toast to this ugly son of a bitch right here.” Beck roped his arm around Coach Trent, now smaller than him, frailer than him. “Happy retirement, you punk!” Everyone raised their Molson’s beer around the old man, and for the briefest of moments the only sound you could hear was the sizzle of the Costco burgers on the barbecue grill nearby.

Coach Trent managed to release himself from Beck’s hold and raised his own beer. “I’d like to say a few things,” he said, to which everyone responded, “Speech! Speech!”

“Oh god, no! I don’t wanna give a speech, you assholes. I wanted to congratulate Finnegan here too.” Another brief moment of silence, this time a bit longer. All the players paused and shifted their focus to Finnegan, wiping his mouth of ketchup and waving his hand in faux humility. “Unlike you losers who will most likely be covered in chicken shit come the fall, this one here actually made something of himself. This one here is heading to university, and I’m proud of you. We’re proud of you. So go, and please don’t come back here to this shithole of a town.” Everyone cheered. Finnegan’s hair was tousled by his mates. Beck braced himself on the rattan patio chair and looked straight at him. Finnegan toasted Beck and awkwardly headed inside. Beck followed.

“You never told me you were heading out.”

“Well . . . I graduated high school, Beck. That’s what you do. You graduate, then you go to university. Where the hell is the bathroom here?” Finnegan searched Coach Trent’s empty house. The endless hallway of shag carpet and textured wallpaper had door after door of bedrooms and storage closets but no bathroom. The sound of guests outside echoed along the textured wallpaper. Beck followed.

“Where? Where will you go?”

“U of T.”

“Toronto?”

“Yes, Beck. That’s the T in U of T. I’m going to Toronto.” Finnegan finally found the door to the bathroom and stood facing Beck.

“Why? Why are you going so far away?” Beck surprised himself with the crack of his own voice. He suddenly remembered Finnegan’s changing voice when they first met. Finnegan in his heavy hockey equipment, barely large enough to stand up. Finnegan crying in the tent. Spooning.

Finnegan was a man now. Standing in the doorway of a dark bathroom. “That way I can be who I am.” Silence between them, save for the

boisterous laughter of people outside. Beck suddenly understood. It was who he was too. Beck took a chance and traced Finnegan's freckles. Finnegan closed his eyes for a moment, then looked at Beck's hands.

"You still bite your fingernails."

The kiss they shared was brief. Much too brief. It was just long enough of a memory for Beck to form in his palm and place in his pocket like a treasured rock to admire in the future. But it was long enough for Coach Trent to walk in on them. He turned the light on to confirm what he was seeing.

"Get out of my house."

"Coach—"

"GET OUT!"

A countdown began in Beck's mind: How long until Coach Trent would tell everyone on the team? How long until his father would find out? How long until Finnegan would leave town?

The next day, Beck's plan was to drive back to Coach Trent's house to explain that it was Finnegan who initiated the kiss, that he wasn't a faggot. He had no idea what was happening. He wasn't responsible, and what a faggot Finnegan was. How awful it was to have a faggot on our team the entire time. Maybe check with others to see if Finnegan was harassing anyone else. Right, Coach Trent? That would make things right.

The sentences were running through his head while he filled up on gas at the Spector Crossing strip plaza. As the numbers scrolled on the gas pump, Beck looked around, searching for signs that people in town knew. Two teen boys on skateboards were practising their ollies in the parking lot of the plaza. Across the street at McGregor United Church, Pastor James was replacing the letters on the street sign that had been stolen last week. A mother and her small child exited the convenience store with a stash of lottery tickets and a box of smokes and headed towards her minivan. It would be only a matter of time before everyone knew.

Beck watched a blonde, middle-aged woman in duty uniform exit her sedan. The army officer saw Beck looking at her and nodded in his direction. A nice, tight, efficient nod with her nice, tight, efficient chignon, perfectly timed with the ding of the scrolling numbers at Beck's gas pump. He tapped the nozzle twice and watched her enter the station's store. Beck followed her. He followed her into the lineup, watching her buy a pack of gum. He followed her as she drove to his high school, parked her car and

got out, a pop-up banner under one arm, the other pulling a wheelie case of brochures.

“Can I help you with that?” Beck asked.

The officer smiled. “That would be lovely.” Beck took the banner into his own arms and began walking with her into the school. She propped the front door open and looked at him. “I saw you at the gas station.”

“Oh yeah. Yeah. I saw you too. What are you doing here at Sir John A. Macdonald Collegiate?”

“Career day.”

“I’ve enlisted,” Beck said as he entered the family living room. Peter and Hanna were on the couch, ready to confirm the news around town regarding Finnegan Waters and their only son. Peter said nothing. Hanna said nothing. Beck had managed to avoid a speech about bringing shame upon his family by offering service to his country.

Six weeks later, Beck was in basic training at Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu. He left McGregor’s Bend without any fanfare. No toast goodbye from Coach Trent. While his body bulked up, his mind widened to believe in the collective power of his infantry, in the collective importance of the team. They were one animal now, in step with one another. He was not one man now. He was of many men. And in this collective, he remembered nothing of himself. Through constant drills, he successfully removed the treasured rock of memory from his pocket—a memory of two boys in a tent, a memory of two men found together in a small town—and tossed it like a troublesome pebble found in his shoe.

Time passed. Years passed.

They collectively watched the inauguration footage of a new American president named Colin Pryce, who used words like “animals” to describe illegal migrants and “pussies” to describe women. Medium close-up of his hand to his heart. Wide shots of mass protests. Clips caught on people’s phones of protesters being run over by trucks. People screaming and running in every direction. News reports of mass raids. Photos of a migrant bent over a car, being searched by law enforcement while her small child cries before being taken away. Photos of migrants crowded into an outdoor chain-link cage, looking at the camera. Hot sun on their faces. Families lying on mats along the concrete ground, waiting for deportation.

They collectively watched the new Canadian prime minister, Alan Dunphy, come into power. The pretty boy won by a landslide, partly because of his charisma and good looks, partly because his election campaign used the word “vermin” to describe refugees and “cockroaches” to describe the Disabled on social assistance.

“We need to derail this gravy train and derail it fast!” Dunphy exclaimed over and over again on the campaign trail. “If the Disabled can wheel themselves to the welfare line, they can wheel themselves to a job.”

In the aftermath of the floods, his predecessor, Marshall Pollack, had been too soft to use such words. But Alan Dunphy was no snake in the grass. One of his first actions in office was to establish a Zero Tolerance hotline to report terrorist and suspicious immigration activity. Within days, the hotline was saturated with messages from people snitching on their neighbours: too many Muslims convening in mosques, Black people hosting too many barbecues, Trans folks deceiving everyone around them with their gender identity. While white Canadians rejoiced in righteous indignation, Dunphy enjoyed photo ops near the shores of swollen bodies of water. He filled sandbags while cameras clicked, his handsome grin wide. More photo ops near the charred remains of a home, devastated by yet another wildfire, shaking hands with first responders.

They collectively watched broadcast footage of a newly formed militia in Toronto patrolling flooded city streets in their helmets and leather uniforms. Extreme close-ups of the militia using their steel-toe boots to kick down doors in search of illegal immigrants syphoning resources. Those same resources being distributed among “True Canadians,” who smile and give a thumbs-up to the news cameras. The militia strong-arming protesters demanding equal access to shelter, food and water; the establishing of checkpoints at major intersections. Anchors referring to the militia as “the Boots.” Politicians and pundits referring to the Boots’ actions as “the Renovation” and the populations they seek to correct and control as “the Others.” Boots invading tent cities and evacuating the displaced and homeless. Wide shots of classrooms filled with Others reciting the creed of the Renovation. A photo of one of the children sitting in the lap of a Boot while being read to. Video footage of the leagues of Boots marching in a parade towards City Hall. Cheers. Tiny white children clapping hands, sitting on the shoulders of their parents. Adults holding flags and pointing.

In the wave of this political change, Beck was sent to the rural town of Suffield, Alberta. Until recently, the region's part-time patrol group had been mostly manned by Indigenous officers, who facilitated evacuations from wildfires. Those soldiers were quietly dismissed in favour of people like Beck who would not question the disciplinary actions against a local First Nation that was protesting the construction of yet another oil pipeline through their reservation.

Beck found himself part of the newly formed full-time Suffield Infantry, which was responsible for guarding the construction site and controlling large groups of protesters—Indigenous and non-Indigenous—who gathered from across the country and from around the world to try to block the pipeline. Still, in the cool of the spring thaw, the rolling landscape became dense with tents and trucks. Independent media crews dotted the perimeter. The instructions were to stand ground at the site of the new construction. Some days passed with Beck and his fellow officers in full riot gear while the protesters sang and prayed in their faces. Some days erupted in rubber bullets and tear gas. Some days were spent cutting off clean-water supply and electricity and deactivating telecommunications towers. Still, the protesters refused to back down. Months passed. Media attention dwindled to a few select units. When the media released videos of protesters being beaten, being hosed down, the world watched and did nothing. By the time the heat of the summer approached, Beck wondered if the wildfire evacuations would become priority once again and his unit would finally be free of this place.

In his collective thinking, this one-animal thinking, which honoured and protected his infantry at all times, he was suddenly struck by the individuality of the protesters. He was like a lion confronting a pack of zebras, confused as to whether he was viewing one large mess of stripes or a series of beasts trying to fool him. To the hum of cicadas in the nearby brush, Beck would waver, closing one eye and then the other, seeing them all as a united power in his right eye, then as individual voices in his left.

“Charity. Hold Mama’s hand, please,” a mother said to her toddler one day as they moved about the encampment. The mother held a white lump in one hand, most likely a dirty diaper. Charity delighted in the fresh change of clothes and danced about to a song only she could hear. When the mother sensed Beck was looking in her direction, she scooped up her daughter and quickly entered their tent.

A group of teens took turns standing at the front line screaming their spoken-word poetry to the soldiers. An Indigenous teen stepped forward. He adjusted his dusty ball cap and began.

“MIC CHECK!”

The protesters within twenty feet repeated after him. “MIC CHECK!” The phrase was repeated farther and farther away among the crowd.

“THIS IS A HUMAN MICROPHONE!” Again, the phrase travelled in ripples along the protesters. “WE AMPLIFY EACH OTHER’S VOICES! SO THAT WE CAN HEAR ONE ANOTHER! SO THAT THESE SOLDIERS CAN HEAR US!” Waves of sound as the protesters repeated his phrases all the way to the horizon of the massive assembly. He continued, with pauses in between to allow the human microphone to share his words.

He flattened the pages of his leather-bound notebook and read his poem.

*We have been occupied*

*Papered*

*Carded*

*Listed*

*Interned*

*Torn*

*Ripped*

*Shorn*

*Walked*

*Blanketed*

*We have been occupied*

*Internalized*

*Assimilated*

*Bordered*

*Fenced*

*Reserved*

*Unrecognized*

*Colonized*

*Halved*

*Quartered*

*We have been occupied*

*Policed*

*Stripped*

*Searched*

*Patted down*

*Spotlighted*

*Assassinated*

*Imprisoned*

*Sentenced  
Executed*

*We have been occupied  
Whitewashed  
Dyed  
Bleached  
Shaved  
Starved  
Sterilized  
Stolen  
Sold  
Discarded*

*We have been occupied  
Indebted  
Unforgiven  
Schemed  
Played  
Traded  
Exported  
Imported  
Outsourced  
Foreclosed*

*These are names they gave us  
These are the ways they took from us  
These are the ways they tried*

*But we are like the waters on this land  
Slicing mountains in half*

*We have our own names  
We did not lose everything  
We survived them  
We are more powerful than what hurt us*

*We will remember our ancestors*

*We will drum  
We will sing  
We will feed each other truth  
We will look out for each other  
We will come together  
We will protect mother earth  
We will speak for those who cannot  
We will make way for our elders  
We will listen to our youth  
We will remember  
We are memory  
We will decolonize*

There was no applause. Some snapped in agreement. Some nodded solemnly. Without any pomp or circumstance, other poets stepped up, one at a time, to recite their work, the human microphone amplifying their words.

Beck easily tuned out the protesters' songs and chants. But the poets stirred something in a place so deep within his body he could not locate it, so elusive he could not name it. One poet compared the image of the pipeline to her own tongue cut in half after losing her language. One poet spoke of wading knee-deep in the blood of his ancestors, trying to follow the current back to his own heart. Another poet spoke of building false bridges made of bones arching over water filled with mercury, and the bodies of missing women acting as chevrons along the highway. No matter how hard Beck tried to hum or talk to himself, he was helplessly immersed in images of cut tongues, blood rivers and bone bridges. He shook his head and coughed so hard he had to spit the bile gathered in the back of his throat. Then their names, their many names, began seeping into the spaces between his teeth, beyond the reach of his eager tongue to dislodge them. They would call out to each other during conversations that did not include him. Vera. Hope. Ronnie. Wayne. Then their faces, their many faces, bored holes into the hollows of his tear ducts. Jayme, the one who adjusts her glasses. Peter, the one with the cut on his lip. Tanja, the one with the starfish tattoo on her neck. He could not escape their faces.

When the media released videos of protesters and their poetic resistance, the world watched and did nothing.

Another day, Beck met eyes with a middle-aged Indigenous war veteran who served bottles of water to a row of elders sitting in camping chairs. The group began to break down into smaller recognizable molecules that Beck could not digest, could not swallow.

"I see you, son," said the veteran to Beck. "I know you see me. I know you're starting to see us." At the sound of his voice, Beck willed his vision to become soft and unfocused.

One evening, Prime Minister Alan Dunphy delivered a moving speech. To the flash of cameras, he said, "Canada has completed consultations with rights holders on this major project. And working with our Indigenous partners has been paramount. To date, forty First Nations have negotiated benefit agreements simply because the benefits are clear: jobs, housing and financial gain," claiming the First Nation near Suffield was one of them. It

was not. And due to the newly imposed media blackout at the site of the protests and disconnected telecommunications towers, no one could report on this false statement.

The morning after, instead of being handed a rubber-bullet gun, Beck was handed a flamethrower. Beck did as he was told and set the yellowing grass on fire. The flames did what they were supposed to do and forced the frontline protesters to retaliate in screams and coughs. But then, by command from Sergeant Sullivan, the soldiers began rounding the protesters' encampment until the rear of their settlement, once a modest stand of brush, was engulfed in flames. Beck did as he was told. He watched, through his face shield, as a mother ran the perimeter of the fire, her toddler on her hip, searching for a way out. She, along with other protesters, quickly hopped into the back of a pickup truck, which drove out of the pandemonium. Numerous other pickup trucks returned several times to pick up dozens more people. He watched, through his face shield, as the veteran, carrying an elder on his back, stared helplessly back at him, their clothes set alight. Screaming from the pain, the veteran managed to fireman-carry each of the elders into another vehicle, and they too drove off the site. Hundreds of people screamed, all at different pitches, different tempos in their pleas for help. Most escaped by foot and, once outside the circle of confusion, looked back at their tents engulfed in flames and coolers melting in the heat.

The world was told that wildfires had spread throughout the area, forcing the protesters to evacuate. But Beck knew those who escaped by foot were put into cube trucks and sent elsewhere. To where, he did not know.

A month later, still with the smell of burning plastic in his nostrils and mind, Beck submitted his memo requesting release from the military, claiming his aging father needed help on the family chicken farm. By the time Beck flew back to Toronto, the city was also in chaos.

"Can I help you with your bags, sir?" said one uniformed worker at the Pearson Airport arrivals area. Behind the worker, Beck could see a Muslim family being forced to kneel. A security guard began rifling through their suitcases.

"Get them off!" The women of the family removed their hijabs. "Now hands up!"

“Sir? Sir? Do you need help with your bags?” Beck shook his head. He made his way to the exit to call for a taxi and saw a white woman standing by the automatic doors holding a sign that read “BECK COLLINS.”

His face betrayed his confusion. Who had scheduled a pick-up for him? Liv smiled. “Hello, Beck.”

“How do you know my name?”

“From your memo requesting release from the military.”

She slid the doors of a black Grand Caravan open. “Get in.”

One of the kerosene lamps flickers, and Beck adjusts the knob to make the light brighter and steady. My eyes are heavy and lulled by the softness of these beds.

“I know you’re both tired. But I need you to listen to what I’m saying now.” Beck sits on one of the beds and makes eye contact with me and Bahadur. “You have absolute agency to leave. You are free to leave at any time. I’m not here to boss you around. I’m not your leader. I’m working every day to be your ally. Do you understand?” We cautiously nod. “I want you to know that what we saw in Toronto with the mass round-ups and camps was just a pilot project. Because of its success, the federal government plans to make it a national initiative. There are people involved in a group that is fighting back, part of something called the Resistance, that has been helping to hide you. They are now setting up training camps like this all over the country. People are learning to fight back. We’re not the only ones. By no means are allies like me and Liv leading these camps. Instead, we are led by a network of Others who are heading the Resistance against the Boots. These Others expect us to adhere to an allyship code of conduct, and part of my allyship is teaching my skills in combat. As a gay man, I could no longer, in good conscience, serve in the military. But I can serve the Resistance. Here, I can teach you close-quarters combat and how to properly use your personal weapon.”

“Why would we put ourselves in danger? We’ve been running on our own already.” Bahadur looks at me, looks at Beck in confusion.

“Yes. You’ve been running, and it is a fucking miracle you both are even alive after the Renovation. But at some point, we have to stop running. What happens when we have nowhere to hide? What happens when we run out of allies? Out of food?”

“We?” Bahadur sneers.

“You’re right,” Beck backpedals and stutters. “I . . . It’s not me. It’s you. I have very little to lose.”

“You have *nothing* to lose.” Bahadur raises their chin slightly to meet Beck’s eyes, and there is a pregnant pause. I cross my legs tightly and look down at my mucky shoes. “You think just because you’re a gay man you can guide us in the Resistance? No. You don’t even have a clue what it’s like to be us. You’re gay. So what? You’re not a feminine Black man, you’re not an Iranian Trans person. All you’d have to do is be closeted, code-switch, and you’d be safe. Kay and I can’t do that, can we?”

“You’re right. I have nothing to lose. I’m sorry.” Beck breathes deeply. “What I should have said is if you want to stop running and hiding, you will have to learn to fight back. And my job is to teach anyone willing to learn how to do exactly that. Each camp is being taught these skills to prepare them for the uprising happening on the full moon.”

“Uprising?” I exclaim.

Beck continues in a calm, measured cadence for maximum clarity. “Yes. On the day of the full moon, there’ll be a Summit of Nations, where dozens of delegates from all over the world will travel to Toronto to witness the national launch of the Renovation. This may be our only chance to clearly state to the worldwide media that a genocide is taking place,” Beck explains. “The UN is already watching Canada closely. Both Ireland and New Zealand have declined their invitations to the summit in protest of the Renovation. We need to show the world that these aren’t workhouses, these are concentration camps. And people aren’t resisting arrest, they’re fleeing violence. The plan is to disrupt the summit by leading a procession up Yonge Street, and in front of the international media you will say your names.”

“Why?” I ask quietly.

“Then it will be on international record what you have survived and that you are survivors.”

Bahadur and I are frozen in an expression of bewilderment. At a loss for words, Beck gets up and grabs a kerosene lamp. He places it on the timber floor. He slides a bed to the side and uses his thumbnail to pluck one of the planks up. Underneath the slat of wood is a black vinyl hockey bag, covered in a layer of yellowed dust.

“Look.” Beck lifts the hockey bag with a laboured exhale and unzips it. Two rifles. Three handguns. Various boxes of bullets. Bahadur glares at me

and my eyes widen.

“What?! Why do you need weapons for a demonstration?” cries Bahadur.

“It will be more than a demonstration. This will be one of many uprisings in the city happening at exactly the same time on July 1.”

“And ours will be the one that the media will be documenting?” I ask, fearfully.

Beck nods and continues in his steady rhythm to ensure we understand. “Exactly. We’ll need to hit them where it hurts. Your productivity. Make them unable to exploit you. Think about all the atrocities committed by the Boots in the Renovation in the name of profit and to advance ethnic cleansing. It’s no secret what’s happening here. There have been leaked images and videos of mass incarceration, slave labour, deportations, killings all over the internet. What will stop the Renovation is destroying their profit by destroying production, and white folks like me demonstrating that we’re in allyship with that destruction. While we’re on Yonge Street, with the majority of Boots surveilling the summit, the Resistance will be strategically bombing every workhouse in the city.”

I think of the people who can be harmed. “What does that mean? ‘Strategically’?”

“It means the Others inside these workhouses, along with undercover Boots, are working strategically with the intention of escape and relocation to safety.”

I wonder at the idea of safety, too afraid to consider the possibility of you being among the freed. My ears ring. Was this what Liv meant? A chance to never hide again? A chance to be reunited with you?

Beck continues. “Yes, that means we have to use force. Yes, that means we will use weapons. But know that our aim is evacuation for the Others and pure offence on the part of the allies and undercover Boots.”

“You sound like you’re describing a football game,” Bahadur scoffed.

“It’s not a game to me, Bahadur. It was imperative to the leaders of the Resistance that any bloodshed will be at the hands of the allies against their own. The focus for the Others, everything I will teach you, is defence and escape.”

“No. No way. No fucking way!” Bahadur begins pacing the room. “I *just* left a war-torn country. You Canadians want to play war? You want to play cowboys and Indians? This isn’t a game. War means begging for men

to get off your body while they rape you. It means looking into the eyes of someone while you cut their throat open. Is this what you want, Beck?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Then what is it? You want us to just bow down and listen to some white boy’s advice about how to keep ourselves safe when it’s people like you who have gotten us into this shithole in the first place?”

“Maybe we should—”

“No, Kay!” Bahadur stops their pacing long enough to practically spit in my face. My cheeks flush and I bow my head down. “Beck, what did Firuzeh arrange with you? Was the agreement for me to be part of this . . . this uprising?”

“Firuzeh arranged for you to be safe.”

“And you call this safe? Is enlisting in a makeshift army safe?”

“I—”

Bahadur holds their hand up to stop Beck from speaking. “No. No. I don’t want to hear your nonsense. I don’t want to be polite about this any longer. I want to be frank. Can I be frank?”

Beck’s face is red. He silently nods.

“Thank you.” Bahadur continues. “I don’t trust you. I don’t trust you or your racist parents. I don’t trust that the world will somehow see our faces at this uprising and suddenly act on our behalf. Look at the Rohingya. There was solid evidence that there were atrocities committed against them by the Myanmar military, and the international community did nothing. Why? Because what did the international community have to gain from their freedom? Nothing. Did they have oil? Did they have any resources at all? No. It’s the same with the Others, Beck. But instead, the international community gains so much from our incarceration. It gains free labour.”

My head is down. I sense Bahadur looking my way, wondering if I will say something. I cross my legs tighter. My palms are buzzing and numb. I will them to move. I say nothing. I do nothing.

“And I love when you say shit like ‘You have absolute agency to leave.’ Are you fucking kidding me? Are you serious? What agency are you talking about? Can you imagine me and Kay walking off this farm, taking with us this agency you think we have, looking the way we do? Yes! Of course! Agency! We are dripping with agency. We have so much choice! Use your head, Beck. We’re out here and we’re trapped. We go out there and one person sees us on the highway and we’re dead. Anyway . . . Most

of all I don't trust some ex-army soldier who was paid to basically shut out tribal members from a pipeline site."

Beck nods. I look away. Bahadur sits on the bed with a loud creak of the mattress springs, then silence.

Finally, "Listen. I don't know what has changed in you, all of a sudden you think you're our saviour, but I can't go through with this. I'm not here to help you feel better about yourself."

"I understand." Beck looks at me. "Kay?"

I can't even look at anyone. I don't know what to say. I just stare at my muddy sneakers, considering why one set of shoelaces is double-knotted and the other is not. When was the last time I tied my shoelaces? When was the last time I walked around barefoot on clean floors?

"I understand. I . . . I hear you. You're welcome to stay here. But before the full moon, we have to evacuate." Beck makes his way to the front door of the cabin leaving one kerosene lamp for us, the other in his hand. "Goodnight."

## 5

**Check, please.**” Nadine gestured to our waiter. Even though the Bridge Restaurant was a victim of its own success, its dessert selection made it our favourite place to meet. Sharing a triple-decker cream-cheese French toast while catching up on each other’s news had brought us back again and again throughout the years. We had finished eating and had been staring at our dirty plate for at least twenty minutes. “Excuse me?” Nadine finally stood and raised her hand, hoping to get the waiter’s attention. The place was lousy with what seemed to be male models, all with expert fades and crisp black ties. Our waiter flashed his blue eyes in our direction and rushed to another table.

“This place is a joke. We’ll never get out of here.” Nadine leaned her elbows on the table and looked at me. “I guess this gives me more time to pry into your personal life.” I threw her a look of indignation. “What? I’m allowed to pry!” We shared a laugh. She piled the cutlery onto the plate so she could reach over and cradle my hands. “Are you doing okay? How are your roommates? Are they legit?”

I pressed my lips and looked down at the table. “They’re okay . . . I guess.”

“I knew it. Kay, you always have a place to stay with me.” I didn’t. Nadine’s father was very clear about my being a burden in their household, even though he was on business trips most of the year. But part of me could not endure the heartache of living with Nadine, watching her go to university each morning and learn to be an adult, while I was left to stare all of my barriers in the face. Thanks to her, I did not live my teenage years

homeless, but I certainly had no roots under my feet, and I felt it, emotionally and financially.

“Is it at least safer than the last place?” The last place was on Jarvis, a single room among many, no windows, bedbugs.

“I’m fine. The place is fine.” My most recent place was a townhouse near Dufferin Mall, west of Toronto’s downtown core, where the rent was still manageable for poor homos like me. Seven Queer artists, dozens of windows, bedbugs. Two of my roommates were a couple who spent their time either screaming at or fucking each other. One of them stole money from my wallet. None of them washed dishes. None of them flushed the toilet. “If it’s yellow, let it mellow. If it’s brown, flush it down,” read a paper sign in swirly, hand-drawn letters by the toilet. But my roommates seemed to have conflicting views on the spectrum of shades between yellow and brown.

“You promise? No one touches my Queen Kay. No one.” I smiled. She held my hands tighter.

That same week, I got a job washing dishes at a gay bar called Epic. Everything about Epic was small. It was in an alleyway that had been converted to an indoor space, like a thin slice of gayness on Church Street. Six small tables, one small stage lit up by one sad LED. And me, skinny and eager, washing dishes in the back kitchen over a tiny sink, not large enough to fit five glasses in it at a time.

“It’s not like we get a ton of customers eating here. It’s more like a place to grab a drink and watch a show,” said Henry, Epic’s owner. He was an astonishingly tall white man with a long and discerning face. “I would do the dishes myself but . . .” he held up his enormous paws. “My hands are so dainty and soft.” I liked the way he held on to the vowels of his words before capping them with the tiny tap of a consonant. *Soooooooooooooft.*

My first Thursday I was gathering glasses from the bar and checking for water marks. The bartender was put to task to paint over the giant “GAYLORDS!” and penis drawing, which had been scribbled on our front door the night before.

“Payday!” Henry entered dressed in full drag, holding a stack of envelopes. “Gerald.” He handed a cheque to the bartender, who was still holding a paintbrush. “Bee.” He handed a thicker envelope full of bills to the waitress, whose work permit had not yet arrived, so she was always paid in cash. “And you, young man.” Henry winked at me. “It’s only day three

for you. Just keep doing what you're doing and you'll get paid next payday, alriiiiiiiiiiiiiight?"

Henry had mistaken my awe of him for longing for pay. I stood there, unable to move at the sight of him. I had never seen a drag queen before. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror behind the bar.

"Fucking shit. My eyebrows." He turned his head right and left to confirm that they were indeed uneven. When he began making his way to his office behind the stage, I could not help but follow him.

He had left his office door open enough for me to see him wheel his chair closer to his desk and position a mirror in front of his face. He hummed to himself and began rifling through a large pink leather handbag. On the desk he placed a glue stick, a jar of powder, a large brush and a tube of concealer. Using a tissue, he removed his painted-on brows. He clicked his tongue. A tragedy. A mess. He started over again. Glue stick along the fibres of his brows. Powder to set the glue. Concealer. Sable liner to make two perfect brow arches high on his forehead.

"You know, I don't pay you to stare at me while I do this." I hid. "No, no. Come in." I froze. "Kay. Come in. Really. I was just joking." I tiptoed into his office. Four by six feet. The walls were covered with black-and-white photos of people smoking cigarettes and laughing. A woman flashing her breasts at the camera. Two men in an embrace sticking their tongues out. A line of men in tutus doing the can-can. "Come sit." He slid out a small folding stool that was stored between his desk and the filing cabinet. I cranked it open and sat. I wanted to cross my legs, but there was no room in that tiny office for me to do so.

"Where are you at with the dishes, Kay?"

"Almost done, sir."

"Oh god! Please don't call me 'sir.' You know, I had to call my father 'sir'? My own father. What a fucking prick. Anyway . . . When I'm in drag, you may call me Clara McCleavaaaaaaaaaaaaage." I nodded. I stared at Clara's reflection in the mirror. It was extraordinary.

"Hmmm. I don't have your shade in my makeup case." Clara began looking through her bag. My heart skipped a beat. Was this Christmas? "But I think I have a spare set of lashes and tons of lipsticks for you to choose from."

She took out a bottle with a pointed tip. "Do you know what this is? Surely you know." I shook my head. "It's weave bond. Haven't you seen

Black ladies use it to glue their extensions into place?” She circled her hand in my direction, assuming I could confirm this fact through an invisible network of “my people.” I shook my head. A line of the adhesive was drawn along the length of a set of lashes. Clara placed them carefully along my eye line. The wet along the rim of my lids felt tingly cold.

“Funny enough, we have weave bond on your eyelashes,” she shifted her razor-sharp focus from the edges of my eyes to the pout of my mouth, “and lash glue on your lips.” She pried open the plastic case of the lash set, and a small tube fell onto her desk. The white liquid was applied and its stickiness was used to adhere red sparkles to my lips. She reached into her handbag again and pulled out a lemon-yellow wig.

“Now, it’s not a lace front. It’s more like some possum your dad ran over with the car. But it’ll do for now.” Clara made me tilt my head forward as she positioned the cap of the wig to hug the nape of my neck. I slowly sat up, and Clara used a rat-tail comb to smooth out my new tresses.

“You ready?” She positioned the mirror towards me and I looked. “Oh! Sorry, hun. Looks like you’re tearing up. Maybe I put too much glue?” It wasn’t the glue. I was crying. I looked so beautiful.

“That’s . . . that’s me?”

“Yes. Yes, Kay. That’s you.”

Clara thought I was a quick study. At first, my job, in addition to washing dishes, was to pass the hat around the room for tips. Clara’s numbers were too heavy with dramatic staging to allow for the distraction of grabbing bills from adoring fans while pulling puppets from her bra. Then my job expanded to include escorting hecklers out of the bar who entered just to call us faggots and throw things at us. It demanded a lot of finesse; not strong-arming people, but using humour and shade. The paying crowd played along and booed the hecklers out.

“Let’s give them a soundtrack for their exit, shall we?” I would cheerfully say before we sang the “So Long, Farewell” song from *The Sound of Music*.

I wasn’t the queen you knew right away, Evan. I had some growing up to do. Back then, only my face and wig were in drag. I began visiting Shoppers Drug Mart to spend what little income I had on my makeup kit. Clara made me return several times until I found the right shade of foundation. All makeup that was even close to my skin colour was named

after food. Cinnamon Roll. Chocolate Fudge. Caffe Latte. As if we were meant to be eaten. Through clenched teeth, I settled for Hot Cocoa.

I pounded the pavement along Yonge Street's endless storefronts, past gelato bars and falafel counters, dodging pigeon poop and spit puddles, to a hole-in-the-wall shop called Zenith. I stocked up on women's clothes in size ten to fit my length and coupled them with a belt to cinch my tiny waist. In another Yonge Street hole-in-the-wall called Hairy Jane's, I bought my first pair of heels. It was the only shop the drag queens went to, because they carried larger sizes. I bought a pair of red patent-leather stilettos, size thirteen and a half. They fit like a dream. I was living a dream.

"Be careful in those. I wouldn't wear them in the streets if I was you," said the elderly clerk, squinting his eyes at me as I expertly transformed his dusty shop into my personal runway. I spied my legs in the shop's mirror and smiled. I was ready to perform.

Well . . . almost ready. Clara told me she had a gift for me. When I began jumping up and down in glee, she waved her hand, trying to get me to heel like an excited puppy.

"It's not really a gift so much as a thank-you for not wasting my time. I can't tell you how many times someone wanted me to be their drag mama when all they can do is that boring-ass step-touch dance move. Not everyone can do this, you know?"

She texted me an address close to High Park where she would meet me. She refused to tell me any more. The 1950s apartment sat adjacent to the subway station and the expansive urban park. I spiralled up several flights of stairs until I made it to the suite listed in the directions. I knocked.

"One mooooooomeeeeeent!" a voice sang from the other side of the door. The vintage brass peephole swung open and I heard another singsong "Well, hellooooooo." A fat white Queer opened the door and posed. His face was still undone. His floral silk kimono curtained across the round of his belly. Judging by his hairlessness, I was catching him just after his shaving ritual. In one hand he held a roach clip with a soggy, crooked roach letting loose a pathetic line of smoke into the already dusty apartment.

"My name is Korus, as in chorus girl." He waved his roach, gesturing at all the showgirl paraphernalia crowding the entryway behind him. "As you can see by my wardrobe, my drag acts fulfill my dream of becoming a Rockette without risking losing my girlish figure." Korus framed his fat body with his newly shaven arms and curtsied.

“My name is Kay.” I curtsied back and he giggled.

“You are so damn cute!”

“Stop flirting and bring Kay in!” I heard Clara shout from some unknown place in the apartment.

“Hold your horses, you old cunt!” Korus screamed back, then looked at me and smiled. Korus began leading me through his tiny apartment as if it were a museum. Every square inch was covered with various costume pieces. Racks of clothes covered every window, so there was little to no natural light in the home, and every bulb hung dim, waiting to be changed. Where “normal” people would put a television set sat a pile of hat boxes so crooked it threatened to fall at any moment. Where “normal” people would line up books on the shelf, Korus had lined up his footwear, from standard nude character shoes with their clunky heels and quick-release buckles to bedazzled boots.

“Don’t mind the platform sneakers,” he said despite pointing right at them. “It was during the Spice Girls era. I thought I could be Sporty Spice, when I was more of a pumpkin. The left shoe squeaks, but I don’t have the heart to get rid of it.”

Korus led me to a kitchen cum dressing room. Or at least I assumed it was a kitchen. A ballroom dancing dress hung over the fridge, its sleeves half covered with twinkling cheap purple jewels. A silver tube of E6000 craft adhesive sat on the counter beside it with a tub of purple jewels waiting to be affixed to their new home. It was the brightest room in the house thanks to his vanity mirror, with all twelve bulbs shining brightly in a golden glow. Sitting at the vanity was Clara, with her hair in a headwrap and large sunglasses on.

“You look like a Warner Bros. star the day after her movie premiere!” I smiled at her, hoping she was impressed with my comparison. She did not smile back.

Korus put out his soggy roach in a weed box underneath a Styrofoam wig mannequin. He held the mannequin head under his arm while smashing the roach to bits in the debris of his past joints. Clara sat among dozens of mannequin heads, each with a different-coloured wig, each sitting on a wall of shelves that reached the ceiling and blocked any light from an adjacent patio. It appeared as though I was facing a jury of queens and wig heads.

“Korus?”

“Yes, Clara?”

“Suit this bitch up.” I shuddered in anticipation. What was happening?

Korus opened what had been a cutlery drawer. Inside were dozens of tiny eyelash boxes grouped together in blue elastic bands. “Shit. Where is that thing?” Korus opened another drawer, where “normal” people would put serving spoons, this time with countless lipsticks. He opened another drawer—this one, deeper than the others, the type of drawer “normal” people would place Tupperware in—and found a large electrical saw among rolls of electrical tape and pantyhose.

“What’s that?” I said, alarmed.

“What does it look like? It’s an industrial cutter.” Korus plugged the contraption in. I took a step back. The saw and each of its gleaming silver teeth looked large enough to cut someone’s head off.

Clara pointed up and down at my sweatpants ensemble. “Take off your bottoms.”

“Excuse me?”

“How is Korus going to do his work if he doesn’t know what he’s working with?” She waved her hands in frustration, then eventually landed them on her lap for emphasis. I took my pants off. “Now show Korus your bum.” I lifted the bottom of my hoodie. They both nodded.

“What do you imagine?” asked Korus.

Clara pinched the end of her chin in thought. “Obviously Kay doesn’t need help in the back end, but he definitely needs help on the sides. We need to turn this triangle into an hourglass, stat!” Korus nodded, then left the kitchen/dressing room.

“What’s going on?”

“You, my dear Kay,” said Clara ceremoniously, “are getting a new ass and hips.” My eyes widened. If the blade of the saw weren’t so close to me, I would’ve jumped for joy.

Korus returned with a block of solid foam and placed it on the kitchen table/vanity. He strapped on a pair of goggles, picked up the industrial cutter and began carving an ass and hips.

After five minutes of foam pieces flying everywhere, I exclaimed, “Wait a minute, wait a minute. Why do you own an industrial cutter?”

Korus froze. His goggled face was covered with foam bits. Clara stopped powdering her nose. Korus looked at Clara. Clara looked at Korus. They both looked back at me.

“I’d rather not say,” said Korus.

“It’s best we don’t talk about it. Probably best you never know,” Clara added while nervously looking side to side. And that was that. Korus returned to carving, Clara returned to powdering, and I returned to sitting on a pile of Korus’s dirty laundry, still without my pants on.

When the carving was done, Korus instructed me to wrap the curvaceous foam creation around my hips before putting on four pairs of dark-brown stockings to match my skin colour.

“Thoughts?” Korus said to Clara, one hand still on the plugged-in industrial cutter.

“I won’t know until I see her in swimwear.”

I changed into a bathing suit and put on heels.

“Now?”

“Perfect, Korus.” Clara finally smiled at the sight of me. She removed her sunglasses, and I could see her right eye was swollen and bruised.

“Clara!” Korus exclaimed.

I stepped towards her. “What happened to your face? Who did that to you?”

“Shh, shh, shh, shh, shh,” Clara said, placing her finger to her painted lips. “Please don’t ruin this moment by reminding me of last night’s misfortunes. You, Kay, are just perfect. Korus, show Kay what she looks like.”

Korus opened up a tall cupboard door in the kitchen/dressing room, where “normal” people would put their canned goods, to reveal a long mirror and an image of a woman’s curvaceous body looking back at me. Now I was truly ready to perform.

That night, I stood stage right, waiting for my big moment. Clara McCleavage had just completed her ode to the horror movie *Carrie*, which ended with three audience members splattering blood on her white dress using spray bottles. Out of breath, Clara took the microphone. “I love being sprayed with questionable substances by complete strangers! It reminds me of last weekeeeend.” Snickers. Clara made her way to a tall stool where a tumbler of lemon water and a hand towel waited for her. She sipped on the water and then gently patted the sweat along her hairline and her upper lip. “I just wish you’d sprayed me more. Look at me. Hardly any blood. I imagined complete carnage, but this looks more like a paper cut. These are dollar-store spray bottles. You have to pump them and mean it. You have to

pump those cheap fuckers. This is an homage to a classic horror movie, people.” Clara rolled her eyes, then gave a sly grin.

After the applause settled, Clara winked at me, then took a breath. “Well, tonight, I am one happy drag mama.” My heart grew two sizes. “This is her first gig, so be prepared to catch her wig if she didn’t pin it right. Put your hands together for Caramel Kay!” The audience cheered. For a moment I was thrown off. I had told her my name was Queen Kay. Suddenly, just like the foundation colours at the drugstore, I too was fit for eating. I quickly tucked my embarrassment into the sides of my forced smile. Shaking my hands awake, I exhaled to centre myself and did one last check of all the props hidden in my pockets. *Don’t fall in your heels. Don’t fall in your heels*, I thought to myself.

An uncomfortable silence fell as Clara stepped off the stage and took a seat. She signalled the bar staff to press play. A slow and steady bass rhythm filled the room, and the audience applauded, recognizing “Giving Him Something He Can Feel,” sung by En Vogue. Instead of the iconic red dresses worn by the group in their music video, I entered wearing a sexy nurse’s outfit, which was tight enough to show off my new bum and hips, short enough to reveal my muscular legs. Cheers.

Determined to appear fearless and experienced despite being afraid and a rookie, I worked my way through the crowd, taking the vital signs of audience members in raunchy ways. I checked one person’s pulse while placing their hand on my buxom bosom. I used a stethoscope on another person’s crotch instead of their heart. With a more willing audience member, I took their temperature by making them suck a larger-than-life thermometer. In between each action, I would pass a patron who offered me a tip. I tried to remain casual and continue lip-synching, but each crisp bill represented a meal, represented rent. By the end of the song, during the final chorus, I welcomed someone to reach under my skirt and reveal my Godzilla-sized strap-on. The audience sang along while my fake phallus was stroked in rhythm with the bass guitar. The song faded in time with my exit. Standing ovation.

When the night was over, I sat in the office staring at the wad of cash I had earned, now damp from the folds of my fake titties. The adrenaline rush had yet to leave me, and I sat still, replaying the delicious details of my performance again and again. The faces of the audience. Each reaction. *I did it and I got a standing ovation.*

“You did it, guuuuurl!” said Clara, half out of costume. I smiled at her, unable to speak. I could feel the tresses of my wig painting my sweaty neck and the edges of my lashes fraying. Clara took one bill from her own chest of tips, slapped it onto the surface of the desk and said, “Now go buy yourself a hamburger. You deserve iiiit.”

I became a regular feature at Epic, along with regular guest queens such as Bitches of Madison County (specialty: housewife-turned-naughty scenarios) and Kamel Toe (specialty: foam body embellishments showcasing maximum vulva). I enjoyed sharing space in the tiny office while we transformed our faces. Our backstage exchanges with each other, both catty and endearing, translated onstage into me being hotter on the mic for insults and comebacks. This came in handy when we hosted Royal Travesty, whose shtick involved lip-synching to eighties British punk while wearing floral-printed dresses fit for Elizabeth II.

On the night she was scheduled, I greeted her at the entrance to Epic with my fervent hand extended. “I’m Queen Kay. We’re performing together tonight. It’s great to meet—”

She pushed past me with her large rolling suitcase trailing behind her. She wore extra-large sunglasses to hide her undone face. With lips pursed she said in a surprisingly deep raspy voice, “If you see a drag queen walking with her suitcase, don’t bother her,” before passing me and heading to the office/dressing room.

I was slated to perform after Royal Travesty. Eager to learn some new skills, I waited in the wings and watched. During her number, the Sex Pistols played on full blast while she waved her cupped hand “hello” to the audience. Everyone cheered.

Clara and Royal exchanged some witty repartee before introducing me. “Oh look, there was a sale at Goodwill.” Clara dryly eyed Royal Travesty up and down. She returned the gesture by inspecting Clara’s blue organza extravaganza.

“Will you give the audience a twirl?” Royal Travesty said. She gestured towards Clara, then turned to the audience with expert timing. “Don’t you just *love* estate sales?!” The audience winced. “Nothing like stealing a dress off a dead lady.”

Clara chuckled, then changed the subject. “Before we kill each other onstage, I think it’s time to introduce our next performer. Is everyone ready

for Caramel Kay?” Hurrahs from the audience. My name was said wrong again. I forced myself to smile, shake it off.

“Tell me about Caramel Kay.”

“She’s new on the scene, and she is quickly becoming one of Epic’s favourites. I taught her everything she knows about drag. I am so proud of her!”

Royal Travesty put her hands on her hips, readying the audience for another joke. “But did you teach her how to get a job?” Some of the audience members coughed in shock. Most of them laughed. The smile on my face wilted. “Do you know this joke?” Royal Travesty raised her hand as if she were conducting an orchestra, orchestrating my demise. “What is the difference between a Black guy and a large pizza?”

Clara awkwardly guffawed, then managed to spit out, “I don’t know. What is the difference, Royal?”

“The large pizza can feed a family of four!” The white people in the audience laughed and laughed. An Asian couple shifted in their seats uncomfortably. My ears were ringing. “Oh, come here, Caramel Kay.” The audience laughed again. I did as I was told. My arms were numb. I walked towards her feeling like my heels were stilts and my ensemble was rags. I smiled. “You know I’m joking, right? You thought what I said was funny, right?” She smiled a devilish smile at me. Pleading. Forcing. There was a long pause. I knew this was my opportunity to make things right, to break the ice. But when I saw an audience member covering her mouth in shock, I decided to throw shade instead.

“I’m sorry, what?”

Royal Travesty looked at the audience, looked at Clara, then at me. A wider smile. “It’s all in good fun, hun.”

“Sorry, I don’t understand what you’re saying. I don’t speak Asshole.” The audience gasped. They choked. Royal Travesty stepped forward, her bottom lip heavy, trying desperately to craft a comeback. She was either going to spit at me or kick me offstage. I was the younger, less experienced queen after all. Despite having crossed a line, I happily stood on the other side of it, delighting in the mess I had made of her emotions. I had never felt this sense of authority before, fuelled by the laughter in the audience. So drunk was I on this unfamiliar power trip that the width of my grin felt like it was going to break my face in half. Clara quickly intercepted Royal

Travesty, and she signalled to the bar staff to begin my music, which was a mash-up of songs from the musical *Fame*.

Wearing a 1980s leotard and tights, I began lip-synching to a recording of Debbie Allen's infamous lecture about "working your little tights off" to become a dancer. Laughter. I moved about the audience waving a teacher's cane in their faces and preaching that it didn't matter how big their dreams were; fame costs, and here was where they had to start paying. The cheap sound system suddenly blared my badly edited audio track of the signature "Fame" disco downbeat. The crowd went wild. Buoyed by their reaction, I pranced about onstage doing faux jazz choreography while lip-synching to Irene Cara's lyrics. By mid-song, everyone was clapping in rhythm to the music. I pushed the audience into hysterics by miming the electric guitar solos using my own leg. Peals of laughter. I struck my final pose and enjoyed yet another standing ovation. As I walked off the stage I looked straight at Royal Travesty and gave her my most aristocratic wave.

Upstairs, Clara and Royal Travesty finished their set of performances. I sat in the office/dressing room waiting for them. Down the stairs they stomped, both of them out of breath.

"Where is that fucking bitch!? Who the hell does he think he is, shaming me in front of everyone?"

Clara pleaded with Royal Travesty. "Come on. Kay is new. Maybe he took it too personally. He just needs some fineeeeeeesse."

"I don't give a flying fuck if he took it personally. This is a drag show, not art therapy."

The door of the office/dressing room slammed opened. Both Clara and Royal Travesty were drenched in sweat. Their made-up faces had melted onto the surface of their necks. At that moment, Clara was Long Faced Henry. Royal Travesty was Old Man Arthur. Only, both of them happened to be wearing dresses with wigs askew. The magic spell was over.

With the same rage she had displayed onstage, Royal Travesty glared at me, then glared at the steaming-hot large pepperoni pizza sitting on the desk. Three clean paper plates and three cold cans of cola sat next to the box. The rage shifted to confusion.

"I'm sorry to have hurt your feelings, Royal," I said while delivering the deepest of bows. "Pizza is on me." It was worth sneaking through the back door of Epic to Pizza Pizza in my full costume to see the look on her face. She warily grabbed a piece of pizza and took a bite, as if the flavour of the

slice would confirm whether it was a gesture of humility or yet another insult. I exited the room and changed back into my street clothes just outside the office. While stepping out of my tights, I watched through the crack in the door as they devoured the pizza like pigs at a trough. I felt a thrilling combination of amusement and satisfaction at hearing nothing save for their breathy bites through the crust and the occasional belch. Sure, it wasn't a family of four, but feeding two angry queens felt just as triumphant.

Years later, during yet another dinner at the Bridge Restaurant, Nadine gestured to the waiter. "Is this asshole going to give us our check or what?!" She kissed her teeth in frustration. She piled the cutlery onto the plate, now stained with maple syrup and icing sugar, so she could reach over and cradle my hands. "Are you doing okay?"

"Yes." I actually was. My newest place was a second-floor walk-up in the gay village. It was a small apartment just above the Pizza Pizza at Church and Wellesley. I shared it with two other queens named Fanny and Nolan. I explained to Nadine that I had first met Fanny during the 20-Minute Drag Workout, where a dozen of the city's most renowned drag queens guided spectators in high-heeled eighties aerobics during Pride. I was just a baby queen back then, so I watched on the sidelines in full costume and awe. It was all fun and games until someone in the crowd threw an egg at Fanny and called her a tranny ho. The front of her leotard was covered in yolk.

"No!" Nadine covered her mouth in disbelief.

"Yes. I had to think quick. She was about to cry. It was so humiliating. I stepped forward, removed my own dress and gave it to her. I happened to be wearing this Donna Summer wrap-dress, so it was easy to take off, it was easy for her to put it on over the mess, and she still blended in with the rest of the queens. Even though I was out there in my skivvies, the crowd cheered for us. Next thing I know, I'm over at her place while she's cleaning herself off, she's letting me search through her wardrobe for something else to wear, and she tells me she's looking for a roommate."

"Okay, how easy was that?" Nadine said with an absent smile while still looking for a waiter to give us our check.

"Well, finding our third roommate wasn't as easy, let me tell you. We had a whole whack of jokers messaging us on Facebook saying they had

seen our ad. Because of how desperate everyone is nowadays, lots of them didn't have jobs. Some smelled funny. Some of them, you wanted to disinfect the house after they came by for their interview."

"Nasty." Nadine waved at another waiter. He looked right at her and walked on by. She sighed.

"It was. Then I met Nolan. He was doing drag at Throb Nightclub, performing his famous *Miss Saigon* number with a tiny helicopter. I watched him work the room. Girl, he would earn his tips by hitting audience members with his red fans and demanding they cough up some crisp bills. I knew he would never be short on rent."

"But are they treating you okay? No more stolen money? Or fighting?"

I explained to Nadine that there was always body hair on the floor of the washroom, at least three ruined razors in the wastebasket every Friday, but there weren't any bedbugs. I gave her the impression that living in the heart of Toronto's gay village was a dream. I told Nadine about the topless gender-Queer youth who wore the Pride flag like a cape and ran down the street screaming, "Check out my top surgery scars, motherfuckers!" and I told her about watching the Wednesday-night American Sign Language class through the windows of the 519 community centre. I did not tell her that Epic had been vandalized yet again, that I had watched Henry sweep up the destruction one dust bin at a time, his dejected reflection shining off endless pieces of shattered bar mirror, or about Clara McCleavage's dwindling audiences. I did not tell her how we all avoided darkened alleyways at night, the rumours of our disappearances. I did not tell Nadine about the woman walking down the street, going from stranger to stranger showing them a photo, asking if they had seen her Trans sister who had gone missing the week before. Instead I told her it all felt like magic to me, living where I felt safe, despite being down the road from where I was assaulted by my mother's church folk. I could see from Nadine's face that her life was not so magical, either. I had to shift the conversation and unlock the mystery of her far-away looks.

"How's your mom doing?"

Nadine raised her eyebrows, and the edges of her lips twitched away a deeper emotion than she was allowing me to see. "She's okay. Her new boyfriend couldn't handle the breast cancer thing, so he's history. Probably for the best."

"And your dad?"

“The usual. Travelling constantly. Might see him having breakfast when he’s in town. But he spends his time ignoring me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not. I’m fine by myself in that house. Once I pay off my student loans, I’ll be ready to move somewhere else. Maybe closer to my Kay.”

In a rushed flurry towards another table, a waiter finally placed the black check folder in front of Nadine.

“Uh, thanks! Finally.” Nadine rolled her eyes. The waiter rushed off before she had a chance to pass her credit card to him. “Jesus Christ. I swear this city is getting shittier by the minute.”

I shrugged. I was finally feeling more like myself in ways I had never thought possible. “For reals? You don’t think so?” Nadine looked around her conspiratorially. “Like, I noticed things shifting around here. Like, people are getting more and more brazen with their actions.”

“What do you mean? Who is getting brazen?”

Nadine looked around again. “White people.”

“Not all white people . . .”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I really don’t want to hear it.”

“You’re half white.”

“Yes. I know. I see my white dad when he comes home. I know my dad is white. It’s not like he’s *not* part of the problem. He’s become more brazen too. After everything that happened during the flood, you can’t tell me things didn’t get fucked up and they didn’t show their true colours.”

Of course I could agree with her. I just didn’t want to say it out loud.

“White people are happy to go on their social media and share quotes from Martin Luther King Jr. on MLK Day. But as soon as they have their back up against a wall, as soon as they’re about to lose something, or in the case of the floods, when things get scarce, they’re quick to mark their territory.”

I looked around us, worried people would hear.

“You’re getting paranoid.”

“Like, look at this place. At first I thought it was just bad service or something. But man, we’ve been coming here for years. They’re serving everyone else. I think it’s us. We might find spit in our food one day.”

“Come on, Nadine! We just ate.”

At long last, the waiter made his way to our table with a wireless credit card terminal to process Nadine’s payment. “Your card was declined,” he

said, his face cold and unmoving.

Nadine's face twisted. "That's impossible."

"It was declined."

Nadine and I accompanied the waiter to the point-of-sale desk and tried her debit card instead.

"Declined," the waiter said, righteously handing back her card.

Nadine snatched it out of his hands. "I heard you. Do you need to say it so loud so you can embarrass me, you punk?" I touched her arm, worried about the possibility of an altercation. "No, Kay. This is ridiculous!" I quickly reached into my pocket and sifted through a wad of bills from last night's show. I paid the waiter, and he did not say "thank you."

Under yet another downpour, we shared an umbrella and walked to a nearby bank to check Nadine's debit card. Two ATMs sat in the foyer of a bank, with accordion doors dividing its locked main section after hours. Nadine slid her debit card into one of the machines, only to hear a crunching sound deep within. She slammed it.

"What the hell?!"

"It's okay, Nadine. I'm sure it's just a glitch." I slid my own bank card into the other machine next to her to confirm that the malfunction was unique to that particular ATM. It ate my card too.

"Shit! No!" I screamed into the slot like I could call the plastic card back to us. I banged the surface of the machine and shook my head.

Two ultra-femme gay white boys came into the bank foyer and took off their raincoat hoods. One of them drunkenly pulled his bank card from his back pocket.

"Oh fuck. I don't know if I'm sober enough to remember my PIN. Goddamn it."

"Oliver, come on. Lucas just texted saying they're already at Throb. Hurry the hell up!"

Nadine and I stood quietly and watched Oliver slide his card into the ATM and retrieve five crisp green twenty-dollar bills. They replaced their hoods, then the two danced and swayed themselves out of the bank foyer. At a distance from us, we could hear them singing a song by Lizzo, but we remained silent.

I looked at Nadine as we began to make our way along Church Street. She seemed to be foggy, as if in a trance. I followed her. We walked speechlessly into a corner store a block away. We entered and made our

way to the refrigerated section. Nadine reached for a bottle of water and froze. I followed her gaze to the quarter-dome safety mirror in the upper corner of the store. A Black woman was arguing with the cashier.

“Try my card again. I know I have cash in my account!”

“You’re holding up the line, man. Move along!”

“I’m not a man!”

“Could have fooled me.”

Nadine stood there, immovable, her arm still outstretched, her hand still grasping the bottle, marked by the heat of her touch.

“Hey! You with the Afro puff!” the cashier shouted towards Nadine. “Close the fridge. I’m not paying to cool the entire store.”

Nadine shook her head awake and we left, empty-handed.

I returned to work the next day, prepared to ask Henry to issue me my payment in cash. I found Henry at the bar, clearing bottles of booze to make way for a large espresso machine. He looked at the instruction handbook and at the machine quizzically.

“Good morning.” I had a sad feeling in my stomach. Nadine was right. Things were changing.

“Good morning, Keith.” I hated the sound of that name. Why did he use it? Henry adjusted the spectacles on his long nose. He was wearing a surprisingly butch ensemble that day, full of sombre neutrals. He could have been mistaken for a suburban dad with his golf T-shirt and khakis. He leaned on the bar close to me, but not so close as to be intimate.

“Keith, we’ve made some changes around here.” I looked around. The stage risers had been dismantled and several more tables stood in its place. The LED had been cut from its wire. Henry’s vowels were clipped short in neat suburban dialect. “I’m afraid you can no longer work here. Epic is now a café.”

“I can still wash dishes at a café.”

“I will have to ask you to leave.”

“What?! But—”

“Leave. I do not know you.”

Nadine texted, urgently asking me to meet her at the same bank where we had lost our cards two nights before. A queue of people overflowed past the exterior doors. All of them Others. When I approached her, she didn’t even hug me or greet me “hello.”

“You are not going to believe this, Kay. I went back to this branch wanting to get a replacement debit card. There’s this huge lineup. I’m waiting for forever. I finally get to the front of the line, and the teller checks my ID and hands me this several-page document to sign. I had to put my name down, my Social Insurance Number, date of birth, names of my parents. It was detailed. I laughed and was like, ‘Lady, am I applying for a passport here?’ and she says, ‘You’ll need to fill this out to confirm you’ve received your Verification Card.’”

“What’s *that*?”

Nadine reached inside her leather wallet and pulled out a plastic card. The letters of her name were punched into the surface of the card in official blocks. Underneath was a number. “And then she tells me that instead of using a debit card, I can use this to deposit or withdraw funds from my account. I’m all confused because . . . I don’t know . . . is this a form of identification, or is this a way for me to pay for things? And she says, ‘It’s both. It’s a streamlining of our system to make things easier for you.’ I’m feeling all uneasy but accept it for what it is. She smiles and asks me, ‘Is there anything else I can do for you today?’ and I ask for a hundred dollars from my account. She hands me the money and a receipt of the transaction.”

Nadine’s head looked left and right, suspiciously, then at me. “Kay, I had half the funds I originally had. I watch that account like a hawk! I know something’s fucking us up, Kay. I know something’s happening. Look at everyone in the queue. I’m not imagining things.”

I looked at the lineup, this obvious cross-section of citizens. Deep in my belly, I knew, too, that something was happening, but residing beside that big something was a muscular reaction, a contraction in the fibres of my being telling me that this was impossible. Surely this was a dream. Surely we were imagining things. The use of these Verification Cards was just coincidence between people who happened to sit at the crossroads of race, gender and identity. These things didn’t happen here in Canada. These things happened elsewhere. These things didn’t happen without folks stepping in and stopping them from happening. The pages of history told us to never forget, to never forget the atrocities of the past, yet here we were in a city that was actively forgetting. That is why I kept my reactions, the waves of shock, from Nadine’s pleading eyes. My body was so stilled by this disbelief that we were unsafe, that I could not even bring myself to put

a loving hand on her shoulder. She searched my face, from my eyes to my tight jaw, until she gave up and we began walking the streets again, silently witnessing the city falling apart.

## 6

**I awoken** with a sharp inhale of air, Nadine's name still on my lips. The once-familiar sight of her crown of curls has disappeared, and I see Bahadur asleep on the bed next to mine, frowning through a dream. I creak softly upwards from the mattress and make my way to the window of our room.

My Evan. If you are still in hiding, if you are in a place where real things exist beyond a window, or an underpass, or a set of dark stairs, let me tell you about how beautiful this morning is.

Through the cloudy glass, I can see a heavy fog sitting like risen cream above the wilted crops of long ago. A black bird flies above and below the fog in a lonely game of peekaboo. I wrap my blanket around my body and find myself turning the knob on the cottage door carefully. I actually turn a doorknob, open a door and move my body outside of a room, Evan. I am free, at this moment, to move my body from one place to another. And it feels good. I want to touch the fog myself. I head outside and the black bird flies out of sight. All insects stop their singing in fear of me, and I try to creep quietly among the reeds in the hopes that the insect songs will continue despite my presence. I fail. I can never be quiet enough for them to forgive me. Even the dew on the grass slips into the secret of the deep green as I pass.

In your mind's eye, take your shoes off with me. Undo the muddy laces and let your feet emerge into the world. Take off your soggy socks. Wipe your feet with me, along the dew of the grass. Feel each cool blade between your liberated toes.

I look at you. You are smiling. You are saying something to me, but your voice is replaced by the sound of rustling woods.

“What did you say, my love?” I ask.

I am alone in the reeds. I hear something stirring in the woods. I follow the sound. I feel foolish, like those people who go into the dark room in horror movies, but I can’t help myself. It’s been so long since I could walk through places and spaces. It feels so good to move my legs. I touch each tree trunk as I make my way into the thick of the bush.

In a clearing of cedar, wading in a pool of fog, stands Beck in his undershirt and pyjama bottoms facing away from me. He holds a long wooden staff and stands at attention like he is about to begin a phrase of martial arts movement. Just as I am crouching down, Bahadur appears beside me. I stifle a scream. Jesus Christ. Bahadur mouths out the word “sorry.” I roll my eyes and hold my heavily beating heart in shock. We slowly shift our focus back to Beck. What the hell is he doing?

“*When I do not act, I am complicit!*” Beck says while simultaneously raising his staff above his head horizontally, one end in each hand. He takes a deep breath here, steps forward with a lunge and strikes down his staff.

“*When I know wrong is happening, I act!*”

Bahadur and I flinch at this. It feels strange to observe Beck instead of receiving the blow. Beck rocks back in his lunge as if receiving energy; his staff gracefully rocks with him.

“*When the oppressed tell me I am wrong, I open my heart and change!*”

With his back leg in a lunge, he kneels and raises the staff above his head.

“*When change is led by the oppressed, I move aside and uplift!*”

Bahadur and I look at each other, then back at Beck. He goes through the movements and phrases again and again until his undershirt is pasted on his torso with perspiration, until the fog of the morning dissipates.

*When I do not act, I am complicit!*

*When I know wrong is happening, I act!*

*When the oppressed tell me I am wrong, I open my heart and change!*

*When change is led by the oppressed, I move aside and uplift!*

Raise arms, step forward, lunge back, kneel.

Beck finally sits on the corpse of a dead tree for a moment before closing his eyes and catching his breath. Bahadur shifts slightly, and Beck startles. He looks in our direction and wipes his face on his shirt.

“Sorry. Did I wake you?”

We quietly follow Beck back to the cottage. He sees a hose running from the side of the cottage. He turns the tap on just out of curiosity and sure enough, only mud sputters out, a snake of filth. He sits himself on the porch and looks at us.

“Can we talk for a second?” Beck asks. Bahadur and I sit on the porch with him. In the heat of the rising sun, I adjust my blanket to my waist and listen.

“You didn’t wake us up. We were just watching,” I say. I look over at Bahadur, but they avoid eye contact with me and begin to pick at the crumbling siding along the cottage’s exterior.

“It’s just . . . It’s not for show. It’s for me. For people like me. For white folks. You know the creed of the Renovation, right? *Through our work, our nation prospers. Through our unity, we end conflict*, and all that nonsense? The Others who led the Resistance knew we had to come up with a response to that creed. The Resistance challenged us allies to train ourselves out of this behaviour just as someone might train for a marathon or learn new dance steps. It had to be embodied the way white supremacy is embodied. It wasn’t meant for you to witness. It’s more like a prayer for change, but in movement.” Beck looks out at the black bird returning to the wilted crops, this time with a companion. Up and down through the reeds.

“Bahadur, you were right about what you said yesterday. I followed orders. I am responsible for what happened. I didn’t ask questions. I have blood on my hands, too.”

I shift uncomfortably under my blanket.

“I’m not asking you to forgive me. I’m not asking you to help me feel better about what I’ve done. I know those demons are inside me. When I was in training for the Resistance, there was something the leaders said that really stuck with me. You know when someone says something important to you that just ruins you? That feels like it tears you apart and you have to put yourself together again? Anyway . . . part of our training was understanding that we are not these white saviours, because a liberation from the Renovation isn’t just a liberation for the Others. It would mean white people could be liberated from maintaining the status quo.”

He shakes out his arms and looks at them pensively. “Even that word affects me now. ‘Liberation.’ I thought about it a long time and I realized how much of a price my body has had to pay. Every day, my body works to keep itself separate from and above the Others. My body forces me to fear, to see threat in the joy of the Others. To buy all the things, to display all the objects to show how much better I am than you. It’s empty. It’s so empty. I can’t tell you how liberating it feels to work through this emptiness and allow myself to be soft, to be wrong and vulnerable. If I survive the uprising, I want to teach other white people to know this feeling. It feels like . . . like . . . taking off your backpack after wearing it for a lifetime.”

Beck looks at us directly. “In the military, I was trained to do things. To protect my body, to fight. You’re not obligated to fight alongside me. Not at all. If it were my choice, it would be us allies fighting for your safety while you all were on a beach somewhere enjoying a piña colada.”

Bahadur stifles a laugh and looks at me, trying to figure out what I am thinking of this strange testimony.

“But I would love to share how you can protect yourself. And if you do decide to fight with me, to learn to protect yourselves, I would be honoured. It will take a bit of hard work, but I can show you what I know.”

“What if we don’t want to do anything? Can we stay here?” Bahadur avoids eye contact with Beck and continues picking at the cottage’s siding. The particleboard is rotten and mouldy.

“Yes. You can stay here. But the supplies will only last so long. And there aren’t many allies around. I can’t trust that my parents will not betray you. And I can’t trust I will return after the uprising.”

“Why won’t you return?” I ask.

“Knowing there are rebels like you won’t be a major surprise to the Boots,” Beck says while dusting off the top of his brush cut. “But finding out that we allies have used this last year to double-cross them will be a huge betrayal. I might not get out alive. You might not get out alive. That’s always a possibility when it comes to war.”

By the afternoon, Beck is digging a trench while his father watches. Bahadur and I sit on the porch of the cottage, still considering our options. Peter stands at attention, wishing and willing his body from old age to the bottom of that trench.

“Dad. Go ahead and sit down. I can handle this. No problem.”

“I never asked you to do this. We don’t need this.”

“Yes, you do. Those carcasses are festering. You might not be able to smell it, but we could down the road.” Peter’s chest wilts at the weight of his emasculation. “It’s not your fault, Dad. I just wish you had asked someone close by for help.”

“I couldn’t ask for help.”

“Why?”

“No one . . . no one wants to speak to us because of . . . well. They know what you are. *That* I know is not my fault.”

“Yes, Dad. I know. It’s mine.” Beck and his father look at their feet in silence. This is my opportunity to speak.

“Can I help?” I offer, hoping I have the strength to actually do so.

“I suggest you find something to cover your mouth and nose,” Beck says while resting his arm on the handle of his shovel.

Beck makes his way to the silo beside the cottage. Peter follows, his usual grimace growing more sour with every step. Despite all of us having covered our faces with old shirts, the smell of death sits unmoving along our path. While Beck inches his way up the ladder, Peter calls out to him, part apology but mostly an accusation.

“I didn’t know where to put them all!” Peter says as Beck peers into the silo. Hundreds of dead, festering chicken carcasses. I can see Beck stifling his vomit. I feel like purging too just at the sight of his reaction. Peter is ashamed. He can’t even look at me as he says, “First they couldn’t drink the water, then there was no water to give them. We weren’t even allowed to burn them because of the wildfires. We weren’t allowed to eat them because of the contamination. I couldn’t bury them because . . . because I’m too . . . because I was alone. This was the only place we could put them.”

We realize that we need the holes to be located farther away from the cottage. Beck and I dig four trenches in total. When I ask Beck if putting the dead chickens into the trenches may be an environmental hazard, he tells me the entire town is an environmental hazard. We create a system where Beck descends into the depths of the silo on the internal ladder, scoops putrid, soft chicken corpses onto an old shower curtain, gathers the corners together, then hands me the makeshift sack. I then descend the silo’s external ladder, open the sack and allow its contents to plop into our ditches to be buried. We do this one shower-curtain surface at a time. We do this as I gag, as Beck gags and reassures his father he is not a failure. We do this.

We finish the work. We cover the shame of the carcasses with neutral-smelling sandy soil. We don't have water with which to wash out the silo, but Beck pours three industrial-sized bottles of bleach into its depths, hoping to kill the stench. But we know it will do nothing. Once we are done, I use my face covering to wipe the mess off my arms and pants. Just as I am about to pinch the last feather off my forearms, I wretch into a bush. I wish we had water for a shower. I long for Liv's bathtub. I decide to use sand instead, like those pigeons I watched at Moss Park with my mother near my old apartment. They would clean themselves using dirt. I find a reserve of dry sand and begin using fistfuls to cover my body. The sand dries my sweat, dries the muck of the chickens, and I brush it off. I continue to do this until my body is dusty but somewhat clean. I stop only when I realize the sand reserve is from anthills. Some ants remain angry on my scalp and arms. I shoo away their bites. But I am clean.

I rubbed the coconut oil until it softened and melted into the surface of my skin, highlighting the sinew of my shoulders. I admired my reflection in Nolan's mirror, willing myself to leave the house.

It was Scorpio season. Nolan and I had planned to head to a joint birthday bash at some lesbian bar. There was a small cover fee to raise funds for someone's top surgery happening later in November.

"Who's getting the surgery?" I asked Nolan, while he flat-ironed his hair into perfectly silky sections. Smoke from his hair product filled the air and made me cough.

"Cole. Ex-lover. Long story."

Nolan gave this suffix to many people in the LGBTQ2S community: "Ex-lover. Long story." This description meant many things, ranging from having to change directions at the Trans march to holding Nolan's hand while he laughed loudly to give the impression that he had moved on with his life. When Nolan asked me "Is that what you're wearing?" I knew my job was to attend the party and appear to be his next lover and long story.

"Yes. I'm already wearing it."

He finished pulling his straightened hair into a high ponytail, then attended to my fashion choices.

"Listen, handsome. I know you wanted to wear that mesh top to show off your six-pack, but I want Cole to understand how my tastes have

matured. That's why I need you to wear this Victorian puff-sleeve blouse with this top hat."

I cocked my hip and pursed my lips. Nolan pleaded. "It's like upscale fag meets high-paid banker!" He went through his Rolodex of comparisons. "You'll look like Queen Victoria . . . on the day of her coronation." I raised my arms and permitted him to continue fussing over me. In truth, I wouldn't have done anything. I would have stayed home alone. It was my birthday, after all, and I hated my birthday.

"Bitch, what?!"

"Yeah."

"It's your birthday? Like, today?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"Girl, I would have never thought you were a Scorpio."

I didn't know what being a Scorpio meant, so I nodded in befuddlement. I knew little about astrology on the whole and often wondered if I should return my Queer membership card until I at least knew my sun, moon and rising signs, which Fanny once said were essential.

"Well . . . we will just have to celebrate tonight, won't we?" Nolan said while pinning a brooch to my lapel. "There! What do you think?" I looked into Nolan's long mirror. A tiny top hat sat sassily off one side of my head. The sleeves of the blouse were extraordinarily voluminous.

"I look like Queen Victoria after she discovered the open bar at a wedding."

Instead of Nolan's usual music playlist, our low-rent television broadcast a low-volume soundtrack to our club preparation time. He began his contouring regimen as he watched a news program in which the American president, Colin Pryce, addressed a news reporter's questions about mass deportation.

"You know what? If they come in illegally, they have to go out. These people are felons. These people are convicted of crimes. Next week, we will begin the process of removing millions of illegal aliens who have illicitly found their way into the United States. They will be removed as fast as they came in."

A cut to Canadian prime minister Alan Dunphy addressing media on Parliament Hill with a superimposed caption at the bottom of the screen reading "Two Nations, One Vision campaign launched by Dunphy."

“As Canadians, as neighbours, we will work alongside the United States in our endeavour to rid this land of invasive forces. Two Nations, One Vision is our joint strategy to target any threats to the values, to all we hold dear, which we have woven into the fabric of our collective societies.”

“Shit. If Pryce doesn’t watch out, he’s gonna get his ass killed.” Nolan began powdering aggressively, unable to peel his eyes from the screen.

“Maybe that’s a good thing,” I said, pinning my small top hat onto my hair so it sat askew.

“Hell, no. That’s not a good thing. You know what happens when a white supremacist gets killed? They become a martyr. Last thing I need is for a bunch of KKK bedsheets to have a patron saint of hatred. You heard about his last executive order banning hijabs? Fucking hell. You might as well go back to forcing people to wear Stars of David.” Nolan moved on to painting his eyebrows. He took a deep breath to calm down and steadied his hand. As he drew arches across his forehead, he added, “We’re in some critical times, my friend. I can feel it in my belly button. And I don’t have just any belly button.” He lifted his blouse to show me the peculiar pucker on his stomach.

“You see this? I was born with my intestines outside of my body.”

“What? No way.”

“Yes, bitch. If my parents were still in Cambodia, I would have been long gone. It took two months for my insides to go back into my body. Then the surgeon gave me this off-centre piece-of-shit belly button.” He looked down at it, caressed it with his acrylics and looked at me with fire in his eyes. “But I’m telling you: every time I get a bad feeling in this fake belly button, the thing I think is gonna happen, happens.”

“What’s it saying now?”

“That something bad is gonna happen. Like, really bad. Beyond anything we can ever imagine. Pryce is gonna burn things to the ground, and we’re gonna be the first to burn with it.”

“Us? Here? But we’re in Canada.”

“Are you kidding me? That shit’s been happening already with the Indigenous people here for hundreds of years. It still is happening. Why would we be surprised? The homos, the Trans folks, the freaks, the Brown people, the Black people, the Disabled, the old folks. They’re picking us up and shipping us out, one by one.” He began lining his lips with a blood-orange pencil.

“That can’t happen.”

“And why the hell not? It’s happened so many times in history. Why not now? Why not here?” He pressed his lips into a tissue and assessed his work. He seemed satisfied but uneasy. “And that, my friend, is why I live every day as drag as I can, as Brown as I can, as loud as I can. We aren’t safe. Not now. Not ever. Our days are numbered, Kay.”

The news program cut to two Black women addressing an audience. “Identical twins Adea and Amana graced the stage at Yonge-Dundas Square today at a concert in downtown Toronto.”

“Whoa! Who are they?” I asked Nolan.

“You don’t know Adea and Amana? They are Queer as fuck. I love them. They travel the world doing anti-oppression work, teaching people how to be woke,” Nolan said before pointing frantically at the television screen. “Oh my gah, look at those dresses! They always have these larger-than-life skirts that are joined together. You can fit an entire town under them.” The fabric featured twinkling lights, while the twins sang a song of resistance.

*From scar tissue we are born  
From bones we rise  
Everything you fear  
Everything you despise  
We are the Others  
Other from you  
But same with the land  
We are the Others  
The change we need  
The change we demand*

Their braids cascaded down their backs in infinite patterns of knots, criss-crosses and jewels. The crowd of Others cheered, some of them cried, some of them watched with their hands at their hearts, trying to hold on to the magic they were seeing onstage. Shots of police officers standing along the perimeter of the crowd, suspicious and poised for action.

The segment cut to the twins speaking to a reporter. “In the face of a dramatic increase in hate crimes, our duty is to travel from city to city to educate as many people as possible,” Amana said. Adea chimed in, seamlessly, the way twins often do: “We want safety for everyone, no matter what your religion. No matter what your gender identity. No matter what your skin colour. We want peace.”

Now that Nolan was in full drag, I could read him and his emotions easily. As we arrived at Wet Bar, he was already casing the joint looking for familiar faces. I had to remind him to pay his cover charge, he was that distracted. Across the crowded dance floor stood Cole with two big electric-tape Xs on their\* sweatshirt where the surgery was going to take place. Their asymmetrical haircut bobbed side to side, and they did a nonchalant step-touch to a bass-heavy R&B song. With that same amount of giving zero fucks, they nodded in Nolan's direction. That was Nolan's cue to begin the ruse.

"Kay! Not here!" With a faux chuckle, Nolan playfully slapped me, and his chunky Lalique ring got caught on the Chantilly lace on my sleeve. "Fuck." He continued his laughter as he pulled. He decided to cut his losses. He whispered conspiratorially into my ear, "Just leave it there and I'll cut it out later."

All was well once a dancehall song came on. It gave Nolan the perfect opportunity to show off his moves. During the climax of the song, he descended to the floor on all fours, ass-clapping to the beat. When the song shifted to some trance, he composed himself and whispered again to me. "Here's the deal, handsome. I'll give you a wink if I decide to go off and do my thing. Otherwise, let's stick together, okay? I need you!"

It didn't take long for me to receive the wink signal. A couple of songs, max. Some muscle-head with a mesh shirt, the same mesh shirt I was going to wear that night, caught Nolan's eye and he was off. His high ponytail disappeared among the pumping fists and slamming bodies. I sighed and looked around.

I moved past the dancing bodies to the side to assess my sad situation. Two hipsters stood beside me, leaning against the wall and staring at the bright lights.

"Fuck, man. Your dealer hooks it up."

"I know, right? He doesn't play."

"Like . . . my dealer charges twice as much and I don't feel this fucked up."

I rolled my eyes and sighed hard. There were worse birthdays, for sure. But this night was giving some stiff competition. I decided to tuck myself away in the corner of the lounge beside a long corridor to the back of the bar so that the darkened shadows could obscure my pouting. I made a mental note to commemorate all future birthdays in complete isolation. For

the rest of my days, I planned to brood in level-ten sulking all alone without anyone to bother me.

The lighting changed. A spotlight dragged itself across the sweaty crowd to the stage, where a femme with a 1920s bob haircut entered. It wasn't so much a stage as a raised flat of particleboard atop two mouldy skids. A nineties tune blared through the speakers, and the crowd roared in recognition. She sat on a chair and took out a bowl of raspberries. In time with the music, she put one raspberry on each finger on her right hand, then naughtily sucked each finger's raspberry into her mouth. The crowd went wild in anticipation of every lick. As the song faded, she made her way through the crowd, sexily slinking her way past me, down the corridor, to the back of Wet Bar. One person whose shoulder she touched in her journey swooned and held their\* heart. What a hot show.

Her titillating walk slowly switched into a tired gait the farther she got from the stage. As soon as she was out of sight of the audience, she removed her heels and sighed before entering the dressing room. Just as I was about to approach her and tell her what a stunning performance she had given, I felt someone brushing past me.

It was you, Evan.

In the dim club lights, I saw you holding a large sheet cake while fumbling with a lighter to touch it to the tips of a dozen birthday candles.

"Can I help you?" I offered.

"Yes, please!" I heard your voice for the first time. Deep and rich. I quickly held the bottom of the cake. A few flicks of your thumb along the spark wheel of the lighter and it became obvious the safety guard was confusing you.

"Would you like me to try?" I offered again.

We switched positions. You holding the cake. Me sparking the lighter. Our heads inches apart as I lit each of the birthday candles. The soft light from below catching your gaze upon me.

"It's—" Something caught in my throat and my voice squeaked out of nervousness. "It's my birthday today, too." You smiled, watching me finish the last few candles.

"Then I guess you'll have to join us." You took the cake from me and ceremoniously walked down the corridor to the dressing room. The muffled sound of performers prepping rose to full volume once you opened the door.

“Happy birthday to you . . .” you began, and everyone joined in. “Happy birthday, happy birthday, happy birthday to youuuuuuu!”

It was obvious by the look of things that the dressing room was actually the bar’s office during the week. With the performers present, a strip of bare bulbs screwed into the wall lit up two greasy mirrors. The ambience of the lighting helped us ignore the administrative elements of dusty photocopiers, posted staff schedules and laminated inspirational posters. The dressing room was larger than the one at Epic, but with the dancers doing their makeup sitting on office chairs and their kits sitting atop plastic inboxes, it was just as sad.

“Where are all the Scorpios?” you asked. “Inez, Kiley, Sandra! Blow out these candles before my arm gives out. This cake is huge.” The three performers stepped forward as if they had won something. “And you, birthday boy. Sorry . . . what’s your name?”

My face got hot. “Kay.”

“It’s Kay’s birthday today, too,” you said with a grin. I cautiously joined the Scorpios and we blew out the candles. Smoke filled the air.

One dancer approached me wearing only one tassel while she fanned the other nipple’s adhesive dry with a folded computer mouse pad. She gave me a peck on the cheek. “Happy Scorpio season, Kay.” She kissed you on the cheek next. “Thank you, Evan. This is amazing.” Another dancer approached me with a bong.

“Take a hit first so that it tastes like one of those artisanal cupcakes you get from a hipster pastry shop.” I obliged, and with eyes dry, I dug into the cheap chocolatey goodness.

“I wanted to pop in to see you all and let you know that thanks to your performances, we made our goal for Cole’s surgery.” Everyone cheered. I gulped.

What do I remember of you that night? Oh yes. Your suit was well tailored. I had never seen craftsmanship like that in real life. I had to fight myself not to touch the fabric. The deep-grey wool with the most modest lines of pinstripes sat well on your wide chest and brought out the sleek texture of your black skin. The light of the bare bulbs caught your eyes and reflected back to me as the colour red. I shook my head, wondering if it was an optical illusion, but when you stepped forward and extended your hand, your eyes went back to the most delicious shade of brown. Fuck. I admit, I was so stoned. It took every last calorie in me to not touch the perfect bald

fade on the nape of your neck, not to trace the exact lines of your beard edging, not to offer you the lip balm in my pocket in case your lips needed moisturizing. Instead I stood there, in my ridiculous Queen Victoria ensemble, and curtsied. You put your hand away and bowed deeply.

“Thank you for your help, your majesty,” you said. I fell in love. It was you who had organized the joint Scorpio birthday party in support of Cole’s top surgery. It was you who took me by the hand and led me outside for our first kiss. It was you who paid for the cab that drove us to my humble apartment, where we made love for the first time.

“Who put you in this outfit?”

“My roommate, Nolan.”

“Queen Victoria?”

“Yes.”

“Nice. Take it off.”

We made love like lions, growing skinny with the passage of time and sex. We took a selfie of us under the low canopy of my bedsheets, you biting my ear.

“You know when I post this on Instagram, it’s official, right?”

“I do,” you said while kissing the backs of my hands. We received dozens of well-wishes from friends who commented on the post. We were too busy making love to care about the comments from trolls telling us that we were abominations and deserved to die.

I ran out of groceries, and you went out to get supplies using your Verification Card. Like all of us, you too had mysteriously dwindling funds in your account.

“I had to use what little cash I had in my pocket. You okay with Pop-Tarts for dinner?”

“As long as I can have you for dessert.”

We strolled around Yonge Street, window shopping in the freezing rain. We held hands until we saw two cops doing a random check on a Black boy of about seventeen years old, arresting him for not having his Verification Card on his person.

“Let’s go into this store until they move on down the street.”

“Sounds like a plan, babes. I hope they leave soon.”

Time passed. You called your mother to tell her the good news of our partnership.

“Put him on the phone. I need to hear his voice,” she said.

“Hello, Mrs. King.”

“Hello, Kay. When can I expect you two for dinner?”

I enter the cottage looking for Bahadur, assuming that they ducked out of digging ditches and transporting dead chickens, but they aren't to be found. I proceed into the main farmhouse with the screen door creaking behind me.

“Is that you, Peter?” Hanna calls out.

“No, ma'am. It's me. Kay.”

“Come on in, young man.”

I wipe off my shoes, walk past the hallway of dead-people pictures and into the living room. Hanna and Bahadur are sitting on the couch together looking at old photo albums. An entire pile stands in a toppled-over mess atop a multicoloured crocheted couch cover.

“We've been at this for a while, but you're welcome to catch up,” Hanna says, motioning for me to sit down in the nearby corduroy reclining chair. I am surprised she even wants me to touch anything. I am covered head to toe in sand. When I sit my butt down, I sink into the soft comfort of its cushion. I feel weary and weak.

Bahadur looks at me with a forced smile, stressing each word to ensure I understand the torture they have just endured. “Hanna has shown me each and every one of these albums.” Blink. Blink.

“We got a bit sidetracked. Bahadur here was helping me sort out the last of our canned preserves. So many jars shattered in the floods. Next thing I know, I'm cracking open the spines of these old things, showing pictures of Beck during his hockey days.”

Bahadur and I share a glance. The album she holds has a soggy bottom, but the photos in the upper half remain intact, albeit discoloured. Hanna turns another creaky page of the album and uses her crooked fingers to pry open the adhesive sleeve. With one of her fingernails, she manages to lift up the corner of one photo, peel it off and hand it to me.

“Can you believe how handsome he was?” Hanna says wistfully. She leans her head on the tops of her knobby knuckles. In the photo, Beck wears full hockey gear, the blade of his stick extended in a staged slapshot. He has that awkward teen smile, where the grin is present but the lips do not want to betray the line of braces underneath. Even then, you can see a longing in his eyes. “When he was a toddler, I can't tell you how many times people would stop me, wondering why on earth I would dye my child's hair. I'd try

to explain that that was in fact his natural colour. He was blessed with the reddest of hair. It faded a bit to more of a strawberry blond when he became a teen. It broke my heart when he enlisted and had to get that darned puppy cut.” She sits for a moment, looking to the right, as if imagining what could have happened had Beck remained in town, then looking to the left at the trajectory of what happened following that life-changing haircut, wincing a bit.

“You, young lady,” Hanna says, grabbing Bahadur’s knee with what is meant to be a loving and firm gesture. “I hope *you* never forget who you are.” And with that, the old woman uses her cane to get up from the couch and heads to the kitchen to continue inspection of the canned goods.

Bahadur throws me a look so horrified I think their eyes are going to fall out of their sockets.

At the kitchen table, with all of us eating a modest dinner of pickled beets, Ritz crackers and jam, we hear a vehicle approaching the farmhouse. The sound of wheels over pea gravel. The sight of headlights through the front curtains. Peter tells me and Bahadur to hide in the attic. Quick as lightning, Beck pulls a seemingly magical ladder from the ceiling over the hallway and tells us to ascend. Before he lifts the ladder into place, he looks at me and puts his fingers to his lips.

Bahadur and I crouch in complete darkness. We both feel with our hands, as silently as possible, for a place to hide. My toe jams on a heavy box and I stifle a scream. I paw around until I can get behind the box. I crouch down further and make myself as small as possible.

From downstairs, we hear the screen door open and close. We hear Hanna’s cane poke the ground before her towards the front of the farmhouse, then silence. A few muffled sentences.

The screen door slams open, and we can hear Beck shouting orders. Beck suddenly pulls down the attic ladder and calls out to us.

“Kay! Bahadur! Come down! Quick!”

We carefully inch our way down the ladder, cautious of the scene below. It’s Liv. It’s fucking Liv! It’s her. She wears a leather jacket like the Boots. Her hair is in a tight ponytail. She looks at me and smiles, but when she sees Bahadur her jaw and lips begin to tremble, her eyes pooling and wet.

“She made it here. She’s safe.”

Bahadur stops in their tracks. Liv takes their hand and guides them to the kitchen table. Huddled on a chair is someone wrapped in a blanket,

wilted and weak. Bahadur almost loses their balance. I grab them at the elbows, but they propel themselves forward into an embrace.

“Firuzeh?! Is that you?” Bahadur lifts the blanket to confirm. Her head is shaven. Her face is swollen and bruised. Her breathing laboured. But it’s her. She attempts to stand at the sight of Bahadur, then collapses.

“Firuzeh! Fuck! Firuuuuuzeeeeeh!” Bahadur manages to brace her fall and sits her back down. All of us watch with our hands over our mouths as Bahadur weeps, gently rocking her in a pained embrace. “Look at you . . . Firuzeh . . . oh . . . what have they done to you? Oh no! I’m so sorry!”

Beck shakes his head out of its stupor and leaves the kitchen, returning with a first aid kit and a bottle of water.

Liv touches the surface of Firuzeh’s neck, checking her temperature. “Once we got to the country roads, we were able to move her out of the trunk of the car. By then she was looking pretty weary. She’s been having a hard time keeping any water down.”

Beck and Liv work together to get Firuzeh to drink, even a little. She takes in small sips, although most of it dribbles down her cut chin. I hold Firuzeh’s torso upright, while Bahadur gently wipes her bloody body using an old shirt dipped into bottled water, which Hanna has warmed up over the stove. I notice that Firuzeh’s fingernails are missing, but I say nothing.

“We’re going to clean you all up, okay?” Bahadur says between sobs. Peter leaves to cry in the living room in private.

Once Firuzeh is clean, Beck carries her to the cottage and sets her up on a bed. Bahadur sits beside the bed to watch for any progress.

“Did you want me to move your bed next to hers so you can rest?” I ask them.

“No. I won’t rest. I can’t rest. Not until I know she’s okay.”

From my bed, I spy Bahadur’s silhouette over Firuzeh’s sleeping body until they become a shadow in the darkness. In the middle of the night, I hear the cottage door creak open. It’s Hanna. Bahadur and I startle at her arrival.

“It’s just me.”

She shuffles and pokes her cane on the floor until she is beside Bahadur. She sits on the bed beside Firuzeh and shakes her head. “What a poor and awful sight.”

Bahadur remains still.

“I’m guessing you knew her? Were you close to her?” Bahadur cries quietly into their elbow. “Shhhhhh. Shhhhhh,” Hanna says lovingly. “You need to rest.” Hanna begins a rhythmic stroke down Bahadur’s back. “Whatever she’s gone through, it’s going to take a while for her to heal from. You need to rest so that when she wakes up, she sees a familiar face. You understand?” Bahadur nods wearily and succumbs to the stroke of Hanna’s hands. Once Bahadur is snoring softly, Hanna quietly makes her way out of the cottage and back to the farmhouse under the light of a half moon.

## 7

**In my sleep**, I dream about meeting your mother, holding my pillow and willing the dream to last forever. Perhaps if we work together we can both imagine the pieces of her well enough that we can conjure up her whole self.

We emerged onto street level outside King subway station to yet another political demonstration. We waited to catch a streetcar to head west towards Parkdale, but the throngs of protesters had the vehicle stalled at Victoria Street. Hundreds of people stood in three distinct columns, the rainwater from the night before splashing at everyone's feet. The centre column's folks held eight-foot-long posts with red dresses flapping like flags at the ends. The outside column's folks held smoke grenades, each one emitting a different-coloured cloud. They passed in intentional silence. My eyes widened at the arresting image. You threw up your arms in frustration. "I guess we have to walk all the way to Dufferin Street."

After an hour of walking through the soggy streets, we arrived at an old brownstone storefront sandwiched between two monstrous condos. We could hear Mrs. King's voice crackle on the old intercom. "You finally made it."

Her tiny apartment sat above a sewing supply shop. In the storefront's window, a headless mannequin stood, wearing a patchwork of featured fabrics on sale, with a measuring tape artfully cinching its waist. When the door to her second-floor walk-up opened, we had to back up on the narrow stairwell to accommodate its outward swing. Mrs. King stood there with

black dye still processing on her scalp and eyebrows. A stained towel protected her shoulders from the dark trickles down the nape of her neck.

“Hello, Mother.” You kissed her weathered jowls carefully, avoiding the line of ink-like liquid dripping near her ears.

Before I could greet her, Mrs. King took me by my wrist and forced me to stand in front of her. “Let me have a good look at you. Come closer. Yes. I can’t wear my glasses until I rinse my hair, so you have to stand about here. Very nice.” Her arthritic hands squeezed the muscles from my forearms to my biceps to evaluate me. Two deep-brown irises encircled by the blue of a ripe cataract studied every inch of me. The perimeter of my mouth. The balance between my right and left foot. The tiny protrusion of my belly button through my sweater. Then my hair. I gulped, suddenly recalling the sensation of my hair passing through a fine-tooth comb, my own mother pulling and pulling at her mistake manifested in my mane.

“Aren’t you ever handsome.” Mrs. King smiled. She looked at you and playfully squeezed your hand. “Be good to this one. The other one before made me want to scream with his gum-chewing. But this one is a good one.”

You sighed dramatically. “Mother, please don’t start.”

“First there was the boy who was always on a diet. Then the one after that who was hungry all the time but was a . . . what do you call it? What is it called, Evan?”

“A vegan.”

“Yes. A vegan. Kay, tell me. Are you a vegan?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Thank goddess.”

I bit the inside of my cheeks to keep my emotions at bay. I was thankful when a kitchen timer dinged and she broke eye contact with me.

Without discussion, you pulled a chair from the adjacent living room to the kitchen sink, your mother sat down, and you gently rinsed her hair. How did this come to be, Evan? This graceful way between you and your mother? How did love become a language? Become a dance?

I looked around the small space and decided to rest on a depression in the mid-century chesterfield’s upholstery, most likely your mother’s favourite spot. When I felt springs poke through the frame into my buttocks, though, I changed position to the less-worn wooden step stool in the corner.

“I’m sorry we took so long. Those damn protesters got in our way.”

“Nothing wrong with a little protesting,” Mrs. King shouted over the sound of the running water. She wiped moisture away from her eyes with one of her crooked fingers.

“I’m fine with it, as long as it doesn’t get in my way.”

“Evan, dear. They’re not going to give you the heads-up. They’re not going to work around your schedule. They want to disrupt. They want to get your attention that it’s no longer safe to be an Other. That’s why it’s called civil disobedience.”

You expertly wrapped your mother’s head in the stained towel. She used the corner of the towel to absorb water that poured into her ear before tucking the tail into the nape of her neck. “You kids nowadays don’t even know when your world is falling apart, and you don’t even know when it’s necessary to take a stand.” She gestured for you to help her back up to standing. She slowly made her way to the kitchen cabinets and got three floral-printed glasses.

“Back when I was young, it was as plain as the nose on your face when you were being wronged. Take this place,” she said to me while pointing to the four corners of her humble apartment. “I raised my son here. It was the only place I could find where the landlord was willing to rent to us. My husband, God bless his soul, said to the landlord, ‘Mr. Willems, I am willing to give you five months’ rent if you will let us stay here.’ He said yes. It didn’t stop him from pretending we’d only given four months’ rent, but we finally had a place to stay. So when we would march way back then, it was clear what we were fighting for.” She walked to the refrigerator, opened it, took out a bottle of ginger ale and a jug of orange juice. “Today, it’s not so obvious. But you know it’s there. People pretend more. Smile like it’s not a problem, when they still believe the same things about me and my son. I think it’s even more dangerous. Take Mr. Varela next door, for example. Lived above what was a 7-Eleven back in the day. Stayed my neighbour for thirty-two years. The man had to be wheeled out on a stretcher and taken by ambulance to the hospital. Heat stroke. I almost passed out myself last summer. Good thing we’re on the second floor. The floods didn’t affect us much other than some power outages. And I’m familiar with a can opener and a can of beans. I am not a fussy woman. I can live on very little. But the heat wave was unbearable. No one thinks about why those things happen, other than climate change this and climate

change that. But it's also because Mr. Varela is—or was, I don't know if he made it or not—a Venezuelan man, a Brown man, who was poor enough to live above a corner store with no AC. It's so complicated, no one is able to see the bigger picture and how it's connected to the Two Nations, One Vision campaign. They think it's two separate things. It's not. But when we marched back in the day, we never marched for people to be polite to us. It was clear as day what we marched for. We marched because we deserved to live." She poured a bit of ginger ale and orange juice in each glass, then handed it to us. The intense sweetness of the beverage could not drown the sinking, complicated truth of what she was saying that was growing in my stomach. I took several more gulps, and still the feeling remained.

"Tell me, Kay. Tell me all about yourself."

"He's a performer, mother."

"Did I ask you, Evan?" Your knees clamped together at the sound of your mother's discipline. "Go on, Kay. Pardon my son and his rudeness. He always fancied himself an expert in everything. Can you believe this fool had the audacity to suggest I redecorate my home? Please, Kay. You tell me about yourself."

I looked at the blue of her cataracts and held my breath before saying, "It's true. I'm a performer."

"How exciting. And do you like performing?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I can see it in your eyes. The hunch of your shoulders. The way you look down at your feet. The smallness of you transforming onstage to be as big as you want to be. Am I correct?"

"Yes."

"I am happy you know where your heart is. Not everyone in their lifetime will be so blessed."

She simply pointed to the refrigerator and you knew to take roast chicken and side dishes from the shelves, heat it up in the microwave and divide it among three melamine plates. Our hearty eating was punctuated every now and then with you giving your mother a tender kiss on the cheek. I could see the beginnings of you, the roots of you, and my heart was singing.

"We'll try to be back next week, okay?" you said to her as we made our way to the door. The late autumn sun had already set, leaving the home in

sudden darkness. You enveloped your mother in an embrace. I stepped forward, wondering if she would allow me to do the same.

She surprised me by cradling my face. “Look at me.” I tried, but in the twilight of the hour, Mrs. King’s face had faded away into a shadow, already a memory. “Be as big as you want to be, Kay,” said the silhouette. I nodded. Even though darkness had obscured my features, I knew she could feel my tears dampening her hands.

Time passed. The weather got colder. You and I fucked on the day of the first frost. We bit each other’s lips into the holiday season. We experimented with who was going to be the big spoon each evening, trying to keep each other warm. Outside the door of my room, the world was changing. Random pat-downs from the police. Random raids of nightclubs we once frequented or stores we once visited. Corner-store staff on their knees with their elbows spread wide, their hands on the tops of their heads, while authorities shook down their tills, toppled over shelves. Sikh men escorted by security out of a subway train during rush hour.

We shrugged our shoulders each time a restaurant refused us service, delightfully held hands and tried our luck elsewhere.

We wove through countless protest marches and political demonstrations to catch a movie, only to be told in not so many words that we were no longer allowed in such spaces, so we would shrug our shoulders again, head home and make love.

We made love after finding out you had lost your job as a graphic designer. We made love each night another one of my drag gigs was cancelled, our audiences dwindling to no one. The world was falling apart, and the one thing we knew we had to do was remind each other who we were.

On the night of the winter solstice, we had made plans for you to finally meet Nadine, in Kensington Market for the night parade. She was my chosen sister, after all.

“Did you try her again?” you asked, blowing warm air into your fists.

“I texted her. I called her and left her a voicemail message. She’s usually the one on time.” I tried my luck again. I jumped from foot to foot to bring life to my freezing thighs while I scrolled through my messages from the inside of my jacket. I didn’t want my phone shutting down in the cold. I looked through Facebook and Instagram for clues as to where she

was, but her profile was gone. Did she block me? Impossible. Maybe she deactivated her account after yet another breakup. I took my mitten off my warm hand and placed it on your cheeks at the site of frostbite.

“Let’s join the procession. She’ll text me when she arrives.”

We marched on Augusta Avenue, holding hands alongside the large crowd of painted faces and makeshift instruments, our free hands holding homemade lanterns. The air was like a bitter slap, and I looked forward to the end of the procession, when the effigy would be burned in celebration of the year’s longest night. Last year it was a giant star. The year before it was the word “Glow.” I wondered what it would be this year. The crowd began to form a circle around what was once a concrete wading pool and waited for the big moment. Crude recycled instruments like yogurt-container drums and coffee-can shakers were banged in a monotonous beat as a red-nosed clown approached the effigy and set it alight. The crowd cheered. Some children cried. Many took pictures with their phones. While my numb lips thawed at the sight of the flames, my throat grew hot at the sight of the effigy’s shape. Hay and twine burned brightly in the shape of twenty-foot-tall people joined at the hands. As the flames licked ever higher, the symbol of unity became animated into running, as though fleeing from immolation. I swallowed hard and shook my tingling arms.

Suddenly, I noticed people scurrying away, some frantically scanning their phones and some talking furiously in clusters. You looked around, suspicious. You grabbed your phone.

“Damn it. My battery has died.” I too looked at my phone. It had frozen in the cold and shut down.

I approached a white guy who had looked at his phone, scooped up his screaming toddler and begun walking away.

“Excuse me, sir?” He did not respond.

“What’s going on?” You couldn’t get an answer. I looked around. The effigy was burning, but no one was watching. In clusters people left. They left in a hurry. People swiftly snuffed out homemade lanterns and dropped them to the ground.

In the midst of the confusion, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

“Where were you?” I asked Nadine. She was frazzled. No hat. No gloves. Her hair was unkempt and untied. I hugged her and her arms were wooden. Her face was paler than usual, her lips chapped. I tried to continue as if I didn’t notice. “Nadine, this is Evan.” Nadine was out of breath.

“Evan, this is—” Nadine stopped my hand as it gestured towards her in my introductions.

“Stop. Stop,” she half-whispered. She looked at both of us, her curly eyelashes catching the light of the burning effigy. “President Pryce has just been assassinated.” The breath from her mouth made clouds around her face so thick I was certain we had heard her wrong.

“What?”

“I need you to hide.”

“What’s going on?” You were as confused as me. Both of us leaned in to her face and turned our ears to her mouth hoping for clarity. “President Pryce did what?”

“I can’t explain everything right now, but my dad asked me to pack my bags. I’m leaving for Melbourne tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t understand.” My lips were so numb I could barely speak. “Why would we need to hide if he’s dead? We’re in Canada.”

“That doesn’t matter! Not with the Two Nations, One Vision campaign. We’re not safe, Kay. None of us are safe. This assassination, the protests . . . The more we fight back against everything that president stood for, the more excuses they have to control us. We’re dangerous to them. Do you understand? They’ve been rounding up people like you and me. There are workhouses set up on Ward’s Island already. My dad, through his work, found out about them and he sent me packing.”

“Hold on, if—” You tried to reason with Nadine, whose eyes were as wide as saucers.

“Do you have a place to hide?” she interjected.

You and I looked at each other. Was this a trick question? “My apartment? Your apartment?” I answered half-heartedly.

“No. Not a place you call home. A place where no one will know you’re there. You can’t hide at my place anymore. It’s not safe. People know you in the building.”

“But why—”

“Do you have a place to hide?!”

“No.” I looked at you. We both looked back at Nadine and shook our heads.

“My dad has a connection with someone who can help you. I told him he had to set it up for you or I wouldn’t go to Melbourne with him.” I

smiled briefly hearing that. “Listen to me,” she said. Every word was precious. “I need you to remember this address: 72 Homewood Street.”

You took out your phone to make a memo and remembered that your battery had died.

“Do not write anything down. I need you to repeat what I just said. 72 Homewood Street.”

You and I looked at each other again. Was she just being hysterical?

“Do it!” she spat at us in a stage whisper. We flinched. We repeated the address. She continued.

“When you are ready to hide, you will meet someone by the name of Liv there. Can you remember her name?”

I jumped to answer. “Liv. Meet Liv at 72 Homewood Street.”

“If she’s not home, she said you need to let yourself into the backyard and hide among the recycling bins. Do you understand?” We nodded in disbelief. She reached out and melted into my embrace.

“I love you, Queen Kay. Do you hear me? Do you understand how much I love you?” If I had known it was the last time I would ever see her, I would have said, “I love you too.” I would have said, “Thank you for housing me. Thank you for forging that note. Thank you for naming me.” Instead I watched her run towards a Lincoln Continental waiting just beyond a set of yellow metal barriers left behind from the parade. The car drove away, and we were left dumbfounded by the exchange.

I couldn’t feel my face in the cold of Nadine’s sudden and confounding departure. You and I cautiously walked towards a streetcar stop, heading eastbound on Dundas. Had that conversation actually happened? When the streetcar arrived, we tried to get on, but the driver closed the doors in our faces. We waited for another streetcar. Same thing. No admittance.

In the bitter cold, we walked east towards home, occasionally warming our hands in heated bank ATM lobbies. We also tried our luck at each machine, hoping to retrieve some funds using our Verification Cards. Nothing but error messages.

By the time we hit Yonge Street, yet another political march was in full swing. This time it was almost impenetrable, with Black and Brown folks linking arms. It was hardly a march since the crowd could barely move.

“Jesus. How are we going to get home through this?” You stood on your tip-toes and looked over the growing crowds. “I’m freezing.”

I shook my head at the commotion.

“I mean . . . we’re all fighting for the same things, but I wish they’d at least create a path for people to get by,” you said, trying to speak despite your lips being numb.

We had to push past one group banging on pots and pans and screaming, “FUCK THE FASCIST GOVERNMENT! FUCK THE FASCIST GOVERNMENT!”

A Black woman with forearm crutches spoke as the crowd attempted to march past, her friend helping her be heard by holding a megaphone to her mouth. “Random raids! Denial of access to basic services! Mass deportations! If you’re like me and have been issued a Verification Card, ask yourself, ‘When was the last time I was able to enter the store and buy food? When was the last time I was treated by a doctor?!’” I covered my ears at the piercing treble of the megaphone’s speaker.

In the alcove of one store, a white reporter, lit by a bright light on a stand, held a microphone and attempted to deliver to the camera despite the racket. “Following the assassination of US President Pryce, an estimated six thousand protesters are present here today to march against what some are calling martial law, right here in Toronto.”

We wove through the crowd, past a large banner reading “Two Nations, One Vision: Excuse for Apartheid in Canada.” Two Indigenous women wavered under the weight of its poles, while one of them spoke on a megaphone, shouting, “Genocide since 1492: Forced sterilization! Land theft! No access to water!”

One protester’s sign was a photo of the Canadian prime minister and the American president shaking hands, with red paint splattered over it to look like blood. A series of Brown women held signs with the words “The Far Right on Both Sides of the Border.” A group of Black men wearing red targets on their jackets held up their arms.

You told me to look up. Above us, cops in riot gear stood at the edges of store roofs with their guns at the ready.

“Come on! Let’s go!” I grabbed your arm and led us down an alleyway just as we saw a banner being set aflame. I could hear glass breaking from the store windows. We ran through a maze of cars in a parking lot, with the muted sound of chanting transforming into screams not far behind us. “Figures. All of these people protesting violence by using violence. It’s absurd,” you said.

When we arrived back at my apartment, we found Nolan positioning the rabbit ears on his television to get a clear picture of a press conference being held at the White House. We all sat down on Nolan's bed to watch.

Pryce had been shot. An assassination. Most likely a Black extremist group based in Detroit, founded after the water crisis. Several threats from this group in the last six months. Details to follow. Riots in Washington, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal and other cities against the rise of a violent right wing.

Nolan changed the channel to Canadian news. Prime Minister Dunphy began his speech.

"We Canadians do not condone terrorist groups who believe that bullets will justify their cause . . ."

Fanny picked up Sedgewick and began pacing. "Do you think shit will go down here too?" She walked to my bedroom, opened the window and looked out at Church Street.

"Girl, things are already going down! Can't you hear them on Yonge Street?" Nolan said while putting tin foil on the antennae. You and I hadn't even removed our jackets or hats. We stood waiting for the best time to tell them what Nadine had told us. "That president represented all the hate white people have spent decades pretending isn't there. Now that he's dead, there's no pretending anymore."

I looked outside the window. "Compared to Yonge it's quiet out there. Too quiet." Fanny joined me at the sill to confirm my observation. Nothing but the buzz of the Pizza Pizza sign below. No one cruising. No blaring music from the clubs. No one lining up to wait for entrance to events. No one walking their dogs.

You and I didn't have the heart to tell them what Nadine had told us. We didn't believe it ourselves. Not yet. We still didn't believe it even as the curfew was put into place.

"We are declaring a state of emergency," said Premier Ogilvy at a press conference. "When day after day of demonstrations have left a scar on our beloved province, we must take action. When looting occurs under the guise of marches, we must intervene. When protests are no longer peaceful, we need to employ the help of peacekeepers."

"Please let me pass," you said to a Boot at the Wellesley and Yonge checkpoint early one morning. You held out your Verification Card, like an obedient child displaying last night's homework. "I need to make my way

to my mother's house in Parkdale. I'll be back before curfew." I stood beside you, fearful and tongue-tied.

"No. Stand back." The Boot did not make eye contact; rather, he scanned the barriers on all four sides of the intersection while blocking your way with his rifle.

"Evan, please. Let's go."

"I will. If you let me pass now, I'll be back before eight. That's the rule. I'm following the rules."

"The rule is you do what I say. Now go."

"Listen, sir. I'm not a protester. I'm just a normal man trying to make my way to Parkdale to see my elderly mother. I mean no harm. I just need to pass."

"Evan," I whispered.

"Where in Parkdale?" The Boot's posture changed.

"Excuse me?"

"What is her address in Parkdale?"

"What? Why do you—"

"Why don't we pay your elderly mother a visit?"

You opened your mouth, but you knew not what to say. I tugged on your jacket sleeve, pulling you away from the exchange.

"Both of you pansy n\_ \_ \_ \_rs get out of my face and off the street."

You think I didn't notice but I did. And I do not judge you for that, Evan. The Boot barely had to raise his voice. He stated each word nonchalantly as if he were teaching two dogs to sit. I watched you, unable to form the words in your mouth. You couldn't even step forward in protest. You just rocked slightly on the soles of your winter boots unable to bridge the gap between your self-image as a respectable citizen and the image of a disobedient Black man, which you had avoided all your life. We made our way back to my apartment, and you spent the rest of the day staring blankly at the wall in my bedroom.

What went on in your mind that day, Evan? What helped you continue to pretend along with me? How did we continue our disbelief?

We didn't believe we were in danger when the so-called peacekeeping cops began their rounds along each street to ensure people were not gathering for another demonstration. In every house, shelves were being knocked over; televisions, computers and phone screens were being shattered. Cupboards were left empty. We didn't believe we were in danger

when the cops came into our apartment. Two cops were patting us down aggressively when another white man came in. His laced black boots were shiny enough that I could see the silhouette of my body, face flat against the kitchen wall, on its surface. Instead of riot gear, he wore a black bomber jacket with a heavy-duty zipper. Even as he barked orders to the cops, he was slick. Graceful.

“Where is their circuit breaker box?”

“In the stairwell, sir.”

“Good. Cut off their power.”

Sedgewick fell out of Fanny’s arms and began yapping to protect us.

“Sedgewick, come here!” Fanny cried.

The Boot kicked Sedgewick into a corner where he whimpered and shook.

The Boot slowly paced along the line of us, our hands on the wall, four queens fearing for our lives. You and I looked at each other, our cheeks flat against the wallpaper. What were you saying to me in your head that day, Evan? Our pressed palms were only an inch apart. If I could turn back time and touch your pinky with mine, I would.

“Where are your cellphones?” Before we could choke out our answer, another cop returned from the bedrooms with all four of our cellphones, placed them on the ground before him. He stomped them into LEGO pieces. With every stomp of his foot, I could feel this version of myself, this version of me, who once took selfies, who once posted statuses, who once promoted my drag shows online, who once had proof of my existence, shatter onto the floor under his boot. Photos. Stomp. Passwords. Stomp. Profiles. Stomp. Text messages. Stomp. Phone numbers. My phone. A phone to call someone. *To call Nadine. To call someone. Anyone. I have no phone.*

We didn’t believe we were in danger when the curfew then became a restriction on leaving the house at all.

“To buy food,” I said to a Boot when he asked me why Nolan and I were visiting No Frills on Parliament Street.

“You don’t have money,” he said confidently as he pointed to a long lineup near a bank ATM where none of the Others could access their funds. Nolan showed him the handful of loonies and toonies that you, Nolan, Fanny and I had scavenged for in every nook and cranny of the apartment. Enough to buy a loaf of bread, some peanut butter and a package of beef

jerky was the plan. Anything that didn't need refrigeration or heating. The Boot slapped Nolan's palm with the tip of his gun and the change fell to the ground, rolling in perfect starburst lines from his feet.

"See? I told you, faggot. You don't have money. Move along."

Nolan moved to reach out for the change, but the gun blocked him. "I said move along." Nolan's jaw tightened in humiliation. We walked away from the cop, past two other cops tasing an Asian man off his bicycle, and I counted my blessings. My stomach grumbled on the walk home.

Nolan stopped at the sight of a large garbage bin and kicked a burned muffin tin still covered in overcooked crust. He picked up the tin, stared at it for a moment, then picked off some of the crust and ate it. He offered the tin to me and I joined in the feast. We paused. We both looked around in a brief moment of shame, then dug in deeper to a pile of plastic bags left beside the bin full of other people's trash. We returned to you all with two unfinished water bottles, a half-eaten hot dog and a bag full of cherry pits with meat still hanging on one side of each seed.

Yet again that night, in the freezing cold and deafening quiet, all four of us gathered under several blankets and coats and tried to sleep. We lay widthwise on Nolan's bed so that all of us could fit. I tried to make rings with my breath in the air. Fanny shifted constantly. Nolan suggested we sing songs together. We felt too weak to join in. You snored softly. We fought over who got to hold Sedgewick, since his tiny body held so much heat and petting him made us all less anxious about the things to come.

"Do you remember that ice storm that happened back in 2013?" said Fanny. We groaned, we shivered. "I remember breaking up with some loser who refused to wear condoms. I sent him and his dirty dick out into the slippery glass of the night and I locked the door. Felt good to let him slide and fumble his way home." We laughed quietly.

Sedgewick was in my lap. I placed my hands on his warm fur and could hear his tummy grumbling. That's when I felt the words finally come to my mouth. In my hunger, in Sedgewick's hunger, I finally believed what Nadine had said.

"My loves . . ." I felt the void of silence. I measured the silence's width, length and depth. I measured the words I was going to place in that void, unsure if they would fit.

"What is it, Kay?" Nolan said impatiently while tucking the edges of a blanket under his feet. Your soft snoring stopped and you came to.

I told them about our encounter with Nadine. What Nadine's father knew. 72 Homewood. This person named Liv. I told them that at some point you and I were going to run and hide. I told them they needed to come with us or they wouldn't be safe. We were in real danger, and we could be in danger for a very long time.

"No." Nolan suddenly left the bed, and the blankets became two degrees cooler.

"What do you mean?" I asked. The remaining three humans and dog all shuffled together again to conserve body heat. Nolan shivered towards his closet door.

"I mean 'no.' No I will not hide. I will not hide. I will not hide. I will not hide." He said it so many times it almost became a song.

"Nolan, please—" Fanny cried.

"NO! I have been told to hide my entire life. I. Will. Not. Hide." He opened his closet door and began rummaging through his things.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like I'm doing, Kay? I'm going out."

"Don't be a fool, Nolan." Fanny held the top edge of the blanket under her chin in two fists. "You're gonna get yourself killed." Sedgewick whimpered under the covers in protest of the conflict between us.

"You know who's the fool, Fanny? You, for keeping a dog in here, when we don't have the means to feed it and we can't even walk the damn dog in the night! Who the hell lets a dog shit and piss in the corner of a house?"

"I don't have a choice! We can't leave the house past nine at night, and I clean up the mess when we have water."

I added cautiously, "Yeah, Fanny. If we have to run, the reality is, we can't bring Sedgewick."

"And why not?!" Fanny scooped her dog and held him firmly.

"We'll be in hiding, not at the Holiday Inn. We can't risk the barking. We can't risk having another being to take care of. We need to travel light."

"He's my baby, not a piece of luggage!" she screamed back at me.

"Fuck this conversation!" Nolan threw his hands up in exasperation. He slipped on two thigh-high boots and a short fur coat to finish his look.

You chimed in. "The streetlights aren't even on, Nolan. Who knows who's out there waiting for you?"

"Exactly. I guess I won't know until I'm out there."

“You’re going to get yourself killed.” You rushed up and tried to block Nolan at the door frame. “I told you what happened when I tried to cross that checkpoint the other day. No one is getting through. There’s no escape.”

“You don’t even know what that means. You don’t know what it means to run. But you know who does? My parents. You think keeping silent, doing what they were told to do in the work camps kept them alive? It didn’t. I was raised by two Cambodian zombies, Evan. Two walking skeletons who lived in fear. Doing shit like that may keep you breathing, but you’re not alive. Hiding is like a death. This is me. I am proud to be me. I’m not hiding, Evan.” Nolan choked back a sob. He snapped his fingers, trying to place a memory. It was hard to remember things these days, when all around us things were changing. “What was her name? Our drag sister who died during the Pulse nightclub shooting?”

“Glorious.” I inhaled deeply at the thought of her. She was a big name in Oakland. She just happened to be in Orlando for a gig at the gay club’s Latino night. A shooter opened fire on the attendees, killing forty-nine of them.

“Yes. Glorious. Do you remember her dance number? The one with the bananas on her head and the bikini?” We all laughed wistfully. “Can you imagine the horror of that gunman entering the premises and just spraying bullets into people? The people rushing into the bathrooms trying to hide? The piles of dead bodies? Supposedly an inch of blood covered the floor. That’s how bad it was.” We listened with tight jaws. Nolan softly brushed the tears off his face and wiped the wet onto his pants. “Glorious was . . . she was glorious to the very end. She died in costume, with her stilettos still on. She died . . . being herself.”

“But what about those people who hid? They are alive today and able to be who they are because of it,” I added, hoping to change the tide.

“Kay. Those people, in this new world, are probably still hiding, or worse. I can’t chance that. I can’t hide. I will not hide.”

Nolan’s voice quavered. He wiped his nose, then composed his proud face. I watched you step aside. It must have been so hard, my love. But you did. You stepped aside and let him go. We all listened to the front door of our suite slam closed. Nolan stormed out into the blackness of the night. We listened to his heels clicking across the pavement until we heard nothing but silence.

We waited for him all night. The next day we watched the windows like they were televisions. He did not come back. The days passed. I'm unsure how many days it was. It was long enough that white folks began frequenting Church Street again. All the white homos were much less extravagant, much less frilly. All of them walking like straight folks, pretending things were right as rain.

"I guess the curfew isn't for them," Fanny said, while Sedgewick pooped in the living room corner. "It was meant for us." It was a sobering reminder: we aren't white boys who can take off the gay like a coat, hang it up in a closet, then lock ourselves in that closet. People like us didn't have a choice. You can't take off the skin. You can't take off the femme.

On New Year's Eve, Church Street was full of revellers, wearing party hats and blowing on party favours. In the early evening, you, Fanny and I wrapped ourselves in blankets and sat on chairs right next to the window in my bedroom to watch a straight white couple eat pasta in the restaurant across the street. Fanny lit a candle. I handed us all a set of cutlery, and we pretended to twirl our fettuccine before putting our empty forks into our mouths and savouring nothing. I wiped the corners of my mouth and poured all of us a glass of air. We toasted.

"To a new year." Your eyes watered. I swallowed back a sob.

"To a new year." A silent clink between each of us.

I waved my hands through the space between us to obliterate our imagined table setting and held your hands in mine.

"We can't leave each other."

"What are you talking about, Kay? Who says I would ever leave you? I love you."

"No one says you'll leave. But history is happening. And sometimes history means people get separated. People get lost. People make difficult decisions. People die." I wept into my blanket. You opened the wingspan of your comforter and enveloped me in your warmth. I shivered nonetheless.

"I wish we could wash this off! Our skin, our gay. I wish we could just pretend!" I snivelled into the hollow of your neck.

Sedgewick whimpered and Fanny held him tighter. Partly to stave off the cold, partly to stave off the truth I was speaking.

"And lose one minute of loving you?" You forced me to look at you. It was so dark without the lights on I felt like I was looking into the night sky. "Do you know the joy of risking our lives to be us? So many people in this

world will never know what it means to truly love someone. To truly be themselves. I am proud to say I have been me. I would never wash this off. I will never stop loving you. I will never stop.” We held each other and cried. When I caught my breath I looked at you again, into the dark night sky of your face.

“What do we do? What happens tomorrow? And the day after that? What if you try and find your mom and we get separated forever?” I asked you.

“Pray. If the universe loved us enough to make us, then the universe will love us enough to keep us together. And if either one of us dies . . .” You choked on your words. “If either one of us dies, that doesn’t mean anything. The universe still loves us. It just means we will be together in another way.” You opened the width of your comforter again so that Fanny and Sedgewick could join in and add to the warmth. We all embraced. On the last night of that year, the four of us slept side by side, Sedgewick being the smallest spoon.

In the morning, I woke to the sound of something outside. You were asleep beside me despite a fitful night. I heard the sound again. Someone shouting.

“Babes. You okay?” you said, wiping your eyes. “What is it?” Fanny stirred when I got up from the bed.

I opened the window. Church Street. The buzz of the Pizza Pizza sign below us. Softly falling snow. Nothing. I watched for a bit. Waited for the sound. Again. Someone shouting. From the horizon south on Church Street, I could see someone walking north along the yellow line in the middle of the street. Clumsy. Wavering.

“What do you see?” Fanny said, groggily.

I squinted my eyes. When I confirmed what I was seeing, I held my mouth and screamed silently. It was Nolan. Nolan was naked, save for his high-heeled boots. His head was shaved. His face was bloody. Teeter-tottering on his heels, he hobbled north on an empty Church Street screaming something I could barely understand. Fluid gurgling in his throat, blood down his neck.

“Ruuuuuuuuuuuuun!” he screamed.

You peered out the window. “Fuck! It’s Nolan! What is he doing?! We have to get him.” I put my hand on your chest. Something was about to happen.

“WAAAAAKE      UUUUP!      RUUUUUUN!      EVERYBODY  
RUUUUUUUUN!”

Fanny scooped Sedgewick into her arms. “What happened to Nolan!?” Sedgewick barked. “Somebody has to go get him.”

“Do not go outside, Fanny!” I said. Fanny ran to another window to get a better view of Nolan.

From the horizon an armoured truck slowly wheeled itself along Church Street until it was twenty feet away from Nolan. I held my breath. I remember you squeezing my hand. We watched Nolan try to hobble away faster, just as a Boot aimed his gun and shot Nolan in the throat. His screams were only gurgles. Another shot to Nolan’s head.

Chaos.

We watched silently as seven more armoured trucks made their way along Church Street. The Boots began crashing the butts of their guns into each store window. Broken glass. Fire. Screams. A line of people with their hands above their heads solemnly walked to the orders of a Boot. They were made to kneel in front of the Baskin-Robbins ice cream shop. One was shot. Screams. The others were put into another truck and driven away. One tried to run, but a bullet sent her head snapping back and her body collapsed on the pavement. I shut the window.

“WHAT’S HAPPENING?! SHIT! WHAT DO WE DO?” Fanny was pacing the hallway.

“Fanny. You gotta come with us,” I pleaded.

“I can’t!”

“Leave the dog and run! Come on!”

“I can’t! I can’t leave Sedgewick. I have to hide here.”

I gave Fanny a hug that I wished lasted longer. You and I did as we had planned: we grabbed our small backpacks, got dressed and headed to the staircase. You grabbed my arm.

“Kay. You ready?”

“Yes.”

“You remember the plan?”

“You’ll find your way to Parkdale, get your mom, then find me.”

“You remember the address, Kay?”

“Yes.”

We kissed. We kissed. We kissed one last time. I watched you run into a back alley and disappear. Then I ran in the other direction down another



## 8

**We march** with Beck and Liv towards a clearing in the woods. Slung over Beck's shoulder is a hockey bag, which he places carefully by a picnic table. Liv gestures for me and Bahadur to sit. Beck opens the bag and places two handguns on the table in front of us like he is serving us dinner. Bahadur looks back at the cottage where Firuzeh is still resting and takes a deep breath. A reminder of why we are doing this. Beck reaches into the bag again and places boxes of ammunition on the table. I remember Fanny opening her costume bag and placing various tools from her arsenal before me.

Razors. Bottles. Brushes. Liquids. Creams. I had begged her, as a fellow Black queen, to show me how to do my makeup. Wearing a pink velour jumpsuit and holding a cup of coffee, she told me to sit down. Fanny took one more sip of her coffee, then said, "First we shave."

"These are Glock 40s." Beck encourages us to pick them up. "Go on. Feel it in your hand." I take one in my hand. It is heavier than I thought it would be. I have never held a real gun before. The closest I ever got to purchasing a gun was in the toy aisle at the dollar store when Nolan wanted us to dress as Bonnie and Clyde for Halloween. My fake pistol was made of purple plastic and came with a spinning wheel of caps that made an ear-piercing snap with each pull of the trigger. Beck takes the weapon from me and shows us a firm grip. "When you hold it, don't be afraid. Hold it confidently."

“Drag isn’t just about looking like any lady heading to her accounting job on Bay Street. It’s about fantasy,” Fanny said, both of us crowding her vanity mirror, both of our eyebrows glued over. “Even our contouring game isn’t natural. But who wants to be natural? We are *supernatural*, darling.” A base colour was applied, this time perfectly matched with my skin. Using a large palette of nude tones, a perfect science of light and dark illusion played on my cheekbones. Fanny assured me that in time, it would take only an hour to put my makeup on rather than three. “Now press that powder on. Don’t brush. Press.”

“What you’re going to do is press the bullets into the magazine like this.” Liv shows us how to load the bullets into the compartment. She hands the magazine to Bahadur, and they accidentally drop a bullet onto the pea gravel. They nervously apologize and pick it up. They try again.

“Now, I’ve seen your numbers.” Fanny taught me in her bedroom. It was like drag queen university, only the school was a three-by-three-foot clearing in her room where there were no shoes or clothes. “I mean . . . one thing you’ve got going is your lip-synch is bang on. Bang fucking on. *But . . .*” Fanny picked up a round hairbrush and placed it in my hands. “It’s so much more than lip-synching. Any closeted gay boy from the suburbs can lip-synch. This is drag, remember? Fantasy.” She struck a pose, her eyes full of wonder. “Where are you right now? Are you in Fanny’s bedroom? Wrong. When you come out onstage, I want you to imagine a five-hundred-seat theatre complete with a lighting rig, dry ice and a fucking trap door. You have to imagine it for the audience even though they’re all just sitting in some nasty-ass dive of a bar with five sticky tables.”

Beck leaves us for a few minutes and returns with two wooden posts and supplies. Using a metal fence-post driver, he positions the posts upright and three feet apart. He then nails a large piece of cardboard to join the two posts and draws the outline of a head and torso.

Liv instructs me to slap the magazine in and pull the slide. I can barely hear her with my shooting earmuffs on. “Now your gun is loaded.” I can feel it. I can feel the power of every bullet in my hand. “Watch your finger. Always think of your finger discipline.” She shows me how to keep my right pointer finger straight to avoid a misfire. She corrects my grasp of the

gun so that my hands are hugging the weapon; my thumbs lie, one above the other, in a snug embrace.

“Look at your feet.” I looked down at my feet doing a clumsy step-touch to the tune of Paula Abdul. “Girl, you have gorgeous legs, but you need to be aware of how your body takes up space. Women learn from a young age to be small. But now we all have the freedom to play with that smallness and make it large. Pull your feet together and cock your hip. Now lean on the wall. Lean on things. Press into them. Play with your space.” I press into the wall and trace my knee along the surface coyly. “Yes, bitch. Yes. There you go. You’re almost there.”

“Widen your stance. Good.” I do as I am told. Beck shows me how to aim by aligning my front and rear sights. I thought the sight would look like a cross, but instead it looks like I have to line up a point in the front end of my gun with an open square on the back end of my gun. I line it up and can see the drawn-on shape of a person about twenty feet away. “Now, the trick is to press the fingers of your right hand into the palm of your left hand to create tension. That will help with the kickback. Now exhale and slowly pull the trigger.” I shoot. A thunderbolt of energy rushes through my body. A lightning current creates a ripple through the muscles from my forearm to my deltoids. A deafening crack. I hear a muffled cheer. Beck gestures to me to point my gun down and be mindful of my finger discipline. He walks to the target and points proudly to where I shot the target right in the head. “You okay?” Liv asks. I realize that I’m shaking.

“I want you to think of a story. You’re not some two-dollar performer up there singing along to some song asking for pittance. You are the queen of the stage. Do you have a crush on a cute boy in the audience? Are you on the run from the cops? Do you not fit in anywhere? What is the story?” I press play on another song, this time by SWV, and begin to experiment with feeling heartbroken. Fanny nods her head and does a slow clap. “There you go. You’re helpless around him. You don’t know what to do without him. Yup. Keep going.”

Bahadur tries their hand at shooting, but they aren’t as successful. Tiny clouds of dust explode at random close to the target but not close enough.

“Sorry! Maybe I’m not getting this right.” They speak louder than they need to on account of their earmuffs.

“Oh gosh, don’t even worry about it. You’ve got a good stance. So you’re ahead of the game compared to most people,” Beck says to Bahadur, who giggles sheepishly. “Everyone makes mistakes, and as long as we’re safe, we will learn along the way.”

“But what if my wig falls?” I said to Fanny while she rounded my newly shaven head with duct tape.

“Everyone’s wig falls at least once,” Fanny said while pinning my new lace front from the weave of the wig to the tape attached to my head. “That’s called a drag queen baptism. If your wig doesn’t fall off, you don’t get to go to heaven.” She laughed. “Just kidding. But really, everyone experiences it. No harm done. Make it part of your act. Start holding it in your arms like a baby. Make it your ex-boyfriend. Whatever.”

Beck takes a rifle out of the hockey bag. “This is an AR-15.” Bahadur and I take a step back at the size of it. “I will need you to learn this weapon because these will be carried by the Boots.”

I wave at Firuzeh, who is walking towards us, perhaps to watch us train. She does not wave back. Over the last few days her face has been, as expected, motionless and catatonic.

“Here, give it a try.” I cautiously take the rifle. This gun is different. Rather than front and rear sights, it has a scope through which I can see a pin-sized red dot. With the ergonomic butt of the gun against my shoulder, I aim, I exhale, I fire. I hear muffled cheers from Beck and Bahadur.

“Look! I got it again in the head!” I say. Suddenly I feel my grip on the AR-15 loosen as Firuzeh takes it from me. “Shit, no!”

“NO!” Liv screams. We collectively imagine Firuzeh pointing the gun to her own head, pulling the trigger, scattering pieces of herself onto our faces, the reverberation of her last moments echoing among the trees, anything to erase the horrors she has witnessed.

Instead, Firuzeh shoulders the gun, aims and shoots at the target several times until she hears the empty click of a used-up magazine. She screams. She drops the weapon and runs to the target, ripping it to shreds with her bare hands.

“FUCK YOU! FUCK YOU! FUCK ALL OF YOU!” She collapses on the ground in a solid heap, wisps of cardboard littered around her tiny frame. Long, agonizing sobs. We stand witness to this opening, this tear in her fabric. We witness it until she is silent, her voice hoarse and raw.

## 9

**In the main** house's living room, Liv and I sit on either side of Firuzeh and hold her hands. Hanna sits on the edge of the lumpy recliner and Beck leans on the door frame, both of them uneasy.

"How's this?" Bahadur tucks a blanket over Firuzeh's lap, then sits at her feet to listen.

"It's good. Thank you."

"Are you sure you feel ready to share? It's like what you told me when we first met: 'Feel *what* you want to feel. Feel *when* you want to feel,'" Bahadur gently says.

"Yes. I'm ready. I will stop if I need to. Thank you, *aziz-am*. I need to say all of this out loud. It's like telling someone your nightmares so that they don't come true. If I tell you this now, I know it will be in the past, far behind me."

"I wanted to surprise you," Firuzeh said to Bahadur before giving them a gift bag. "Today is supposed to be the first snowfall. I wanted you to be prepared." Inside the bag were a striped Blue Jays toque she had found at the corner store and some spare winter gear she had sourced from one of her Facebook friends.

"I look like a marshmallow."

Firuzeh laughed. "No! No. You don't look—"

"Yes I do."

"Okay. Maybe a little."

“Let’s schedule you in next week, okay? We have to finalize the paperwork for your work permit, and I want to get that done sooner than later.”

She giggled watching Bahadur exit the Transgender Assistance Centre, trying to make sense of the oversized winter boots with each awkward step.

It was Friday again. Firuzeh made her way to the cafeteria and heated up her leftovers from yesterday’s Loving Kindness dinner. According to her research on YouTube, the idea was to craft a Loving Kindness meal meant for herself and no one else as an act of self-care in the wake of her recent breakup. She got to choose the menu, not her ex, who happened to be a critically acclaimed chef at a critically acclaimed restaurant. She did not need her ex to dictate menu choices or remind Firuzeh that her calorie intake was high. She did not need her ex to bicker with at the grocery store over organic or non-organic. The meal was just for her. And, since Firuzeh was not a critically acclaimed chef, the meal she had created tasted horrible. Firuzeh’s mother always said, “When you’re in love, make a feast. When you’re heartbroken, eat out.” But since she had to shoulder the entire rent after her ex moved out, eating out was not an option. She watched the bland quinoa rotate in the microwave and considered her options for yet another evening practising painful autonomy and liberation from co-dependence.

“Hey, are you coming to the party tonight?” asked her co-worker Kyle, holding a Tupperware of cheesy lasagna.

“What party?”

“Drew’s Queer anti-holiday party.”

“Who’s Drew again?”

“Remember Drew who hosted that anti-Valentine’s party?”

“I can’t. Too many past clients in that room.” Kyle nodded his head in agreement, knowing the usual conflicts of interest frontline workers face in the LGBTQ2S community. Firuzeh explained, “I’m facilitating the Trans Elders’ Mindfulness group, then heading home.”

Kyle nodded. “Cool.” He adjusted his suspenders over his unicorn T-shirt and sat himself down to eat.

“Yeah. Just trying to be independent. Know myself. Be *with* myself. I’m trying to be the person I would want in a partnership, you know?” The microwave dinged. Firuzeh opened the sticky door to the 1980s contraption and looked at the steaming bowl of beige grains and withered cucumbers. She smiled weakly at Kyle.

“Cool.” Kyle took another bite of lasagna and opened a magazine to read. Firuzeh understood his signal and gave up trying to start a conversation.

The recreation room still smelled like cleaning products when Firuzeh entered. She sighed and opened the window to help the smell dissipate. She’d told the custodian again and again to use vinegar and water since several of the participants had scent sensitivities, but he refused to listen. She laid out fifteen yoga mats in perfect lines facing one wall and placed a chair behind each mat, in case of mobility issues. She used to arrange them in a large circle to encourage conversation, but the elders became confused over their right and left depending on where they sat in the circle. She then shuffled the curtain over the mirror to avoid any confusion about directions.

“If you find your mind wandering, just guide yourself back to the breath. No judgement. Just watch your thoughts like they are clouds in the sky.” As part of the exercise, each elder pointed at their distracting thoughts, imagining them passing over their head. Firuzeh found it ironic that she was teaching these folks to meditate when her own thoughts crowded her emotional brain. She thought of her ex surprising her at work with flowers. She thought of her ex dancing with her under a bridge while a train passed overhead. She thought of her ex painting her toes on a lazy Sunday morning.

“Great work,” she told the elders. “Follow your breath from your nostrils into your lungs and back out again.”

After most of the participants had left and Firuzeh had put away all the mats, she noticed one elder struggling with his jacket. It was Said, one of her favourites, although she would never admit to having favourites. She adored how in class he would assist Firuzeh by showing his fellow classmates his versions of various poses and encourage them, sometimes a bit too aggressively, to follow along.

“Hey, Said! Did you need help with that?” Firuzeh rushed to his side.

“If you don’t mind.” When she reached out to bring the sleeve closer to his arm, she noticed a scabbed-over scar running down his forearm.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

“My neighbours. They jumped out at me in the stairwell. All of my groceries fell to the ground.” He closed his tired eyes and shook his head before enduring the last push of his arm through the fabric of his sleeve. He groaned.

“What?! Why did they do that?”

Said smirked in contempt. “Why do any of them do what they do?”

“I’m so sorry, Said. I know you were just placed there recently.”

“Housing for people like me is hard to come by. I’m not complaining about the bedbugs. Not complaining about the constant noise. I just want to be safe.”

“Did you see the doctor? Do you need stitches?”

“No. Doctor told me to go home.” He managed to get his other arm into the sleeve and winced in pain. “The doctors keep turning me away. First it was my prescriptions. The doctor refused to fill them. Told me I had an addiction problem. Now this. They told me to go home and sleep it off. How can you sleep off a wound? Glad it has scabbed, though.”

Firuzeh’s throat grew warm. This wasn’t the first time she had heard of this happening to the Others. It was why the walk-in clinic at the centre was constantly full. With dry pursed lips, Said kissed both Firuzeh’s cheeks goodbye.

She closed up the recreation room, waved goodbye to Quin, the night security guard at the front desk, and headed home into the crisp winter air. Her head was full of worry about clients such as Said and Bahadur. *How fragile safety is*, she thought to herself.

Yet another Boots checkpoint was situated at the intersection closest to the centre. Firuzeh sighed and decided to take an alternate route home. Anything to avoid yet another pat-down by the Boots.

By the time the streetcar approached her home, Firuzeh had decided that, despite the cold, it was warm enough for her to sit in Riverdale Park and contemplate her new single status. She had a lot of time for this kind of reflection these days. She sat on a park bench next to another on which a couple was locked in a heated embrace, kneading their faces into one another. At the basin of the park, framed by a baseball diamond, Firuzeh could see another tent city alive with activity. Laundry hung on makeshift lines. Groups encircled smoky fires. Out of one of the tents, a Black woman emerged from the zippered door and braced herself against the brisk breeze. Ragged and weary, she made her way up the hill towards the public washroom with a tray full of dirty dishes and a half-empty bottle of dish soap. Firuzeh closed her eyes at the sight of the woman. These tent cities were becoming more common, with no solution in sight.

She took out the joint she kept in an eyeglass case in her bag. With each exhale, the smoke blurred the skyline. The CN Tower was changing colours from blue to red to green. Laser beams shot out from some event in the heart of downtown, an exciting event that did not include her. *How fragile life is.*

Firuzeh walked up the lonely staircase to her third-floor apartment, made a beeline to her bed and cried herself to sleep.

The next day, Firuzeh packed what was, thankfully, the last of that dreadful Loving Kindness meal and headed to work. A Boots checkpoint was set up at the intersection outside her apartment building. She casually waited in line with the Others. Raised her arms for a pat-down.

As per usual, the Boot opened her purse for inspection.

“And what is this?”

“It’s my lunch.”

The Boot winced at the container’s smell.

“Verification Card, please.”

The streetcar was, mercifully, less crowded than usual. She entered the Transgender Assistance Centre. She said hello to Justine, the daytime security guard at the front desk. Took the elevator to the third floor. Nodded in Kyle’s direction. Pumped some hand sanitizer from the dispenser on the wall and rubbed it dry. Sat at her desk and checked emails. Deciding that her emails would go better with coffee, she got up from her desk and headed to the hospitality station across the hall. She poured ground coffee into the filter and heard a noise. She peeked her head around the corner and saw seven Boots with leather jackets and shiny boots making their way down the corridor aiming their guns left and right. They were like an arrow. Swift. Graceful. They wore matching helmets and held matching rifles.

“Excuse me, sir?” said Jesse, the second-floor front desk administrator, to the man at the front of the pack. “Can I help you?” From far away Firuzeh could see one of the Boots in the back of the pack intercept Jesse, preventing her from following any further. Firuzeh couldn’t hear what was said but could see that it was a threat. Jesse’s hands went up and she stopped in her tracks; her face was red and she helplessly looked down the corridor. For a brief moment, she locked eyes with Firuzeh in a look of terror.

Firuzeh ducked back into the station and tried to put the filter basket back into the machine, but for some reason it wouldn’t fit despite her

attempts to jam it in again and again. She could hear their footsteps getting closer. Firuzeh knew in her heart the feeling of impending disaster. She had felt it many times. She knew what it meant to run for your life. So she did. She dropped the filter, and the coffee grounds spilled like soil onto the floor. She ran to her office.

Through the wall, she could hear the Boots speaking to Kyle. They sounded calm. Quiet. Smooth. Barely discernible. But Kyle was pleading.

“I just work here . . . I don’t know! Please!” The sound of an overturned table. Or chairs? A slam against the wall. Another smoothly delivered sentence. Moaning. A cabinet opened. Paper being scattered. Shattered glass.

Firuzeh frantically searched for her cellphone; it always slipped to the bottom of her purse. She started a live video on Facebook and aimed it at herself hiding behind her desk.

The video caught the sound of a doorknob turning. Firuzeh covered her mouth and shut her eyes, willing the nightmare to end. Two legs from the knees down could be seen rounding the desk. A Boot crushing the cellphone into static, into a memory.

With Firuzeh’s hands up in submission, the Boots also pulled the landline phone from its socket. All of Firuzeh’s files were tossed to the floor, rummaged through and confiscated.

At gunpoint, the Boots gathered Firuzeh and all the staff together in the cafeteria, down on the ground floor. Jesse could not stop whimpering. Her makeup had streaked across her cheeks. Daniel, the custodian, was so stunned he could barely obey orders.

“Sit there. Look down. Sit there!”

Daniel’s body froze.

“Did you hear me, freak?! Sit your ass down or I will make you sit down.” One Boot made him sit down by slamming the butt of his gun into Daniel’s forehead. Screams. Now forced into a seated position, Daniel calmly touched his head, looked at his blood-covered hand and stared out into the distance.

Time passed. Maybe two hours. It was all a blur. Firuzeh needed desperately to go to the washroom but didn’t want to risk punishment. She heard the sound of sirens, and two cops in full riot gear coolly entered. They walked up to one of the Boots and shook hands.

At the sight of this exchange a ringing stung her ears. Firuzeh looked at her co-workers. *What kind of partnership was this?*

“You got this covered?” said one of the cops to the Boot. It was difficult to distinguish between one person and the other. They all looked and acted the same. Even their gestures and voices seemed identical.

The Boots escorted the staff to the front door of the centre, where a large armoured truck was waiting for them. Just as Firuzeh was about to step outside, she looked back and saw a pool of blood on the floor near the front desk; Justine’s hand protruded from the corner of the desk, unmoving. Firuzeh did not scream. They were all beyond screaming. They silently got into the truck and obeyed orders to sit side by side.

In queues several blocks long, every visible Other you could imagine—Brown, Black, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Trans, Queer—was standing alongside the harbourfront. Some were elders. Some were children. Some were crying. Some were listless. So many Others. Everyone, including Firuzeh, was shuffled onto a series of ferries, coming and going. One boatload at a time. Gusts of wind scraped across everyone’s faces as they stood waiting and waiting and waiting. But for what? Firuzeh didn’t even have her winter jacket, since the Boots had forced her out of her office. To battle the cold, she danced on the spot and closed her eyes against the downpour of ice pellets from overhead.

“Where are we going?”

“You can’t do this to us!”

“Please! Help us! She’s just a baby!”

The Boots responded to nothing. They simply paced back and forth, save for moments of discipline when people protested.

To the right of Firuzeh, a pile of canes, walkers and wheelchairs sat precariously by the edge of the dock. Through half-closed eyes, bracing against the unforgiving sleet, she looked around frantically, wondering about the owners of those mobility aids. Firuzeh swallowed hard, realizing that everyone in the endless queues was able-bodied. Icy waves crashed against the complicated lattice of metal and wood until some of the mobility aids fell into the lake. A Boot came by and, with one swift kick, managed to toss the rest of the equipment into the water. Simultaneously, armoured trucks drove off along Queens Quay West, with the sound of muffled shrieks within.

A Boot standing to the left of Firuzeh sprayed a crackle of gunfire into the sky, and people in her queue ducked for cover with their palms over their ears. Screams. One woman ahead of Firuzeh ducked a fraction of a second later, looking around in delayed fear. Confused, she got up and began pacing the dock.

“Get in line!” the Boot demanded. The woman re-entered, but from the end of the line. “I said to get in line! Not there! Where you were before!” The woman stepped aside and tried to enter the line from the end again. “Are you fucking kidding me?! Get in the fucking line!” Firuzeh surmised that the woman was Deaf. She weighed her options, wondering if informing the Boot of this woman’s disability would risk the woman being shipped off to some unknown location, like the Others in the truck. The Boot poised the butt of his rifle to discipline her, and Firuzeh stepped out of line with her arms waving.

“Stop!” Firuzeh shouted. Firuzeh waved her hand at the woman and signed, “Are you Deaf?” The woman affirmed Firuzeh’s suspicion. Firuzeh turned to the Boot and said, “She can stay next to me. Please! I can interpret for her.”

What felt like a lifetime passed as the Boot looked back and forth between the two women, snow accumulating on his eyelashes like sand in an hourglass. The Boot filed both of them into the line. “Get her to follow instructions or she’s in the truck like the rest of them.” He began patrolling the other lines. Exhales.

“What is happening?” the woman struggled to sign with her frostbitten hands.

“I don’t know. But I need you to stay with me.”

At the front of each queue were small canopies, wavering in the wind. In the shelter of each canopy sat a Boot at a small desk.

“Next, step forward!” said the Boot at the front of Firuzeh’s line. This Boot was a woman with ruddy cheeks and lips that enunciated clumsily in the cold air. She wore a black parka over her standard leather jacket. Upon closer inspection, seeing the Boot’s light-brown skin and hearing the sound of her vowels, Firuzeh could tell she was also of Iranian heritage. They shared a split second of recognition, as though Firuzeh had interrupted her playing dress-up in Boots regalia.

“I said, ‘NEXT!’” The Boot shouted away the shame, still looking at Firuzeh. Her chin raised in defiance.

“No! One at a time, please.” The Boot shouted at the woman beside Firuzeh.

“She’s Deaf. I can interpret for her.” Firuzeh gestured towards her line-mate.

“Fine. I need your Verification Cards. Both of you. Get them out. Now.”

Firuzeh interpreted. They frantically pinched their cards from within their wallets, the frigid wind making it an almost impossible task. The woman finally produced her card with her name: Emma Singh. They both placed their cards on the desk.

The Boot struggled with the ink in her pen. She blew warm air onto its nib until the ink flowed once again in scribbles at the top of a page. She adjusted her clipboard and began entering the information from the Verification Cards in small fields, adding Emma’s and Firuzeh’s names to the columns upon columns of Others. Another clipboard was a spreadsheet of numbers. The Boot cross-referenced the spreadsheet, finding Emma’s Verification Card number of 2437 and crossing it out with a straight line using a ruler and her pen. She crossed out Firuzeh’s number of 1722. Ruler. Straight line. The Boot reached into an inside jacket pocket for her phone.

“Stand here, please.” The Boot pointed to a blue X taped to the dock, adjacent to the desk. The Boot used the camera on her phone to take photos of each of them separately, holding a dry-erase board with their Verification Card numbers. Flash. Flash.

Shaking violently with cold, Firuzeh and Emma boarded one of the ferries hours after the sky had turned lavender, squeezing in between a pregnant woman and a vomiting child. They encountered more lineups once they arrived at Ward’s Island, just south of Toronto’s skyline. The icy waves crashed along the shore as the arrivals were shuffled into more lines and assigned groups based on their physical strength and their obedience.

“Raise your arms. Open your mouth. Turn around.”

“You two! Come with me,” said one of the Boots to Firuzeh and Emma.

They joined a group of twenty other women and followed him down the road.

“Mama! Maaaaamaaaaaa!” a child screamed in their direction. Firuzeh could not tell who this child’s parent was, since they all kept their heads down, to avoid a beating. To avoid the child’s being beaten. “Maaaaamaaaaaa!” Emma tugged at Firuzeh’s sleeve to encourage her to look forward and continue marching.

Around them were the old homes of Ward's. The island was once the most desired location in the city to live, since the quiet and calm of the islands was a short ferry ride from the hustle and bustle of downtown. Oftentimes people passed the deeds to their houses down from generation to generation, in an effort to keep the sought-after community tight-knit. Then the flooding began happening every spring. The homes became mould-ridden, and what was once a charming and quaint haven for the wealthy and artistic soon became a ghost town. Firuzeh could see that the homes were tragically damaged. Each one leaned to one side or the other, unable to stand on its own rotten base, spotted with black mildew. Despite the cold, the air was thick with the smell of decay as they finally made their way to a wide bungalow.

The Boot opened the door and entered. They all followed, thankful for the warmth. Sniffles. Stifled crying. They walked down a long hallway with its walls covered with art installations, now soggy from the damp. A saturated photo of the lake had a Black woman smoking a cigarette in the foreground, a curious shape from the smoke emerging from her exhale. The woman's face had been crossed out with a black indelible marker. By a vandal? Or the artist themselves? Firuzeh couldn't tell. A large textile drooped heavily on the wall, smelling like garbage. When passing the fabric, one could see it was made of the fibres of newspaper headlines, woven together to spell the phrase "The End." Firuzeh realized this had been some type of artists' residency centre before the floods. This was a public space.

The Boot introduced the Others to a cohort of four Asian women in purple scrubs, each of them holding a nightstick and wearing a look of determination.

"Line up! Line up! Line up! Line up! Line up! Line up! Line up!" They screamed at the Others, poking them randomly and aggressively with the nightsticks. Like sheep, the arrivals were ushered down another set of hallways, where there were dozens of small bedrooms with two beds each. Emma and Firuzeh bunked together. The Purple Scrub women slept in four separate large bedrooms, which were set at intervals between the smaller rooms so they could surveil the Others. While passing one of the large rooms, Firuzeh could see a group of children, presumably belonging to the Purple Scrub women, playing a game of Monopoly.

“You didn’t count the money right! Count it again!” said a small child, trying to fan out her Monopoly money with her tiny hands. One boy had tossed the dice too hard and was searching for the missing pieces under the bed. Another boy was jumping squares along the game board, whispering numbers under his breath.

“Mooooom! Sebastian didn’t count the money right.” The little girl poked her head out of the room and called to the Purple Scrub woman leading the Others at the front of the line. Without looking, her mother screamed something in Cantonese.

The little girl exhaled and shut the door. They turned the corner of the hallway. A cafeteria. Then a great hall with expansive windows facing the frigid lake. A sorrowful shadow of mould crept up the walls to where the water line once had been.

It was in this great hall, under the dim light of the hanging lamps, where Firuzeh’s head was shaved. Where they were all shaved down regularly by the Purple Scrub women while the Boots stood aside and watched. Unevenly. Haphazardly. Aggressively. Like the sheep they had become. Firuzeh sat opposite Emma, whose eyes were like a buoy in this sea of confusion. *Look at me*, her eyes said. *Don’t let go. I’m here.*

It was in this great hall that they were forced to sweep their own hair into terrifying heaps and bag each of their identities before trashing them in the refuse container outside. They were each given an oatmeal-coloured long-sleeved scrub as a uniform. It was in this great hall that they were instructed at gunpoint to sew various items, including jeans, parachutes, plush toys and uniforms for the Boots. With Emma always stationed beside her, Firuzeh stitched heavy-duty zippers onto the fronts of jackets, wondering who would wear them, if a person wearing them would harm someone like her one day. It was in this great hall where, on occasion, a random beating would take place, for asking to pee, for sloppy workmanship, for passing out.

Each day, one of the Purple Scrub women paced between their sewing stations, all of her subjects silent.

“Stand! Stand! Stand!” the woman would say before the workers obeyed and recited the creed.

*Through our work, our nation prospers.  
Through our unity, we end conflict.*

*Through our leader, we find peace.  
Through order, we find tranquility.*

After long days, Emma would invite Firuzeh to sit on her bed close to the window to watch the moon thicken and thin across the night sky. It was the closest they could get to binge-watching television. Sometimes they would tell each other stories. Sometimes they would look at this physical, astrological manifestation of time passing in complete stillness. Sometimes they would lean on each other and weep. It felt good to communicate with each other in silence, without the patrolling Purple Scrub women interrupting them with their screamed instructions.

“I used to call this kind of moon a ‘fingernail moon,’ but then I visited El Salvador and my host told me that in Spanish it’s called *luna sonrisa*. A smile.” Emma’s face was wistful and glowing at this memory. “Fuck. I miss travelling alone. I miss being alone. My parents used to feel so sorry for me, thinking I would be this sad single woman all my life. I tried to convince them that I loved solitude, but they didn’t get it. They didn’t get me, ever.”

“Did you ever have roommates?” Firuzeh asked.

“Never!” Emma made Firuzeh giggle, slicing the air forward with a grimace. “Do you know how delicious it is to leave your dirty underwear on the floor? To watch television and eat chicken wings in your bed, buck naked? Being alone was awesome. No offence.” Firuzeh responded with an eye roll, followed by a smile.

“Maybe you should add ‘When I am alone, I get naked’ to this Renovation creed,” Firuzeh signed before pushing Emma’s shoulder.

Emma signed, “I feel sorry for you each time you have to recite it. I just mouth along and tune out.” There was a pause. “I wish we could come up with a creed for the Others.” They both thought for a moment.

Firuzeh struggled with the signs in her head, then figured it out.

*“Through rest, I allow myself to be more than what I produce.”*

Emma fluttered her flat palms in the air, her fingers splayed out in ASL applause. “Yay!” before adding more:

*Through fighting, I celebrate my will to survive.  
Through hiding, I celebrate my ability to navigate my own safety.  
Through choice, I celebrate my body’s freedom.  
Through pleasure, I celebrate my resistance.*

At this last sentence, Emma signed, “Roll up your sleeves.” Firuzeh obeyed, her face twisted in curiosity. Emma leaned the round of her shoulder against Firuzeh’s, then continued to watch the *luna sonrisa* sail across stars in slow motion. Firuzeh could feel soft down covering Emma’s warm skin. The gesture was not sexual. It was simply a reminder that two human beings, two people who cared about each other, sat side by side. In this room, in this six-by-eight-foot room, there was peace.

Firuzeh floated. That’s how she describes it to us, using her forearms in a wavelike movement to illustrate her disassociation. She floated through time, standing under endless rain/hail/sleet, making sandbags to protect the muddy shoreline. She floated through months of seeing fabric pass under the presser foot of her sewing machine. She floated past images of armoured trucks patrolling along the narrow roadways of the island, the same roadways that had hosted sandal-footed beachcombers not so long ago. She floated through nights of wailing in every room of the residence, of women crying for their children, of the residence becoming more and more crowded with Others as the Renovation moved into full swing. She floated past piles of burning books. Piles of burning picture frames. Piles of burning clothes. Piles of dead Others.

Emma and Firuzeh returned from morning snow-removal duty to see a mound of lifeless bodies near the dumpster beside the residence. Gentle white flakes of snow accumulated on every limb, in every open mouth. Emma stood for a moment, lost in thought. Firuzeh shook Emma’s arm and signed, “It’s cold. I’m going in. Come on.” Emma followed.

One night, Emma tugged Firuzeh’s sleeve, interrupting her dream of choosing which ice cream flavour she wanted at a shop with endless options. Firuzeh groaned.

Emma persisted, shaking Firuzeh until she awoke. The wind howled outside the glass of their bedroom window. Despite the dim light, Firuzeh slowly gained focus on Emma’s signing.

“Remember the bodies yesterday?” Emma signed.

Firuzeh’s eyes opened suddenly. A heat across her throat. She nodded slowly.

“There’s a doctor on the island. He’s an Other like us, forced to work here. He gave them something. I saw it. Outside the cafeteria. At night.

They welcomed me to join, but I wasn't ready. They all stood in a circle, swallowed the pills and said goodbye." Emma's signs were quick and aggressive.

Firuzeh was terrified by these words. And even more terrified by her own reaction. *Could this be a way out? Could I just swallow a pill and be done with this nightmare?*

"I think . . . I think I want out." Firuzeh couldn't speak. They looked at each other in the darkness, long enough that they both wondered if the signs had even been made. "This is my choice." Emma signed, pointing middle and index fingers up and using the other hand to pick at each fingertip with determination. "This is my body, but every day they show us how much our bodies are not ours. Every day they show us how they are in control. But this one thing, this one tiny thing: it's mine. I want my body back."

Firuzeh stared back, feeling nothing but betrayal. "But what about the creed we created?" Firuzeh signed the sentence. *"Through fighting, I celebrate my will to survive."*

"This is fighting back," Emma said. *"Through rest, I allow myself to be more than what I produce." I am ready to rest. 'Through choice, I celebrate my body's freedom.'* The Purple Scrub women made a choice to work alongside the Boots so they could keep their children. Saying goodbye to this world, this pain, is my choice."

Emma took Firuzeh's hands into hers for a moment, then signed, "Firuzeh. That's your name. My name is Emma Singh." She signed it with certainty, like she was confirming what once was. Even in the dark, Emma's smile was wide, her signs swinging and sweet. "I was once a photographer. Like, a real one who had exhibitions and double-page spreads in magazines. My parents, Ravi and Ishita, were Indian from Tanzania. That's who I am. I need you to remember me. Can you do that? Can you remember my name?"

Firuzeh angrily collapsed Emma's signs with her own two hands. "Don't ever wake me again," Firuzeh signed before whipping her body around and pulling her blanket over her head.

Two nights later, photographer Emma Singh, daughter of Ravi and Ishita Singh, joined the dead by choice. Emma's corpse lay face up with her back bent over the swollen abdomen of another underneath her. Emma Singh got her body back. Firuzeh looked at Emma longingly, aching for that kind of rest.

Firuzeh witnessed countless rapes. Witnessed obedient children get their heads shaven. Witnessed the Boots remove her fingernails for sport. She kept floating.

One morning the rains subsided and Firuzeh woke to the sound of birds in the bush outside her room's window. They were tiny chickadees all screeching at once, saying nothing in particular. She reached out and touched a green leaf emerging from the knobby elbows and knees of this bush, and the chickadees flew. Springtime was coming. Her tender fingers plucked the green leaf and placed it in her mouth. A gash near her lip stung when she moved her jaw, but she managed to get it onto her tongue. The leaf was bitter but fresh. Fibrous but real. Her Loving Kindness meal of the day.

A month or so later, with the warmth of the spring rising, with windows wide open in the great hall, the women were to complete a batch of dress shirts that had been commissioned just the week before. Yara and her crew were to do sleeves. Farrah and her crew were to fashion the torso. Firuzeh's crew was in charge of buttons. She completed the task with a final ironing of the shirt before handing it to packaging, which was located at what had been the schoolhouse.

Close to the deadline, an entourage of Boots came in, with a white woman strolling in behind them, also wearing a leather jacket. Since she did not wear a helmet, Firuzeh could see how clean her hair was in its ponytail. How soft the skin on her face looked and how clean she smelled.

"As you can see, Liv, Gibraltar Point has been converted from an artists' residency to an around-the-clock manufacturing shop," said one of the Boots.

*Her name is Liv*, Firuzeh noted.

Liv looked around the room and cheerfully waved at everyone at the sewing machines. Then, for a brief moment, she looked at Firuzeh at the ironing table. Firuzeh's heart sped up as Liv approached her.

"And what are you doing?" Firuzeh cowered. "Are you ironing the finished prod—" Liv touched the iron and it fell on Firuzeh's hand, the nubs where her fingernails once were.

"Ahhh!" At the sound of Firuzeh's pain, one of the Boots aimed his gun at her.

"No! Guns down. It was my fault. I'm so sorry!" Liv said, making meaningful eye contact with Firuzeh again. "This looks *very* bad."

“She’ll be fine. These shirts need to get done,” said the Boot, his gun still aimed at Firuzeh.

“I insist. She’s burned herself pretty badly. You don’t want any markings on these shirts, do you?” A pause.

“We’ll take her to the clinic. They can treat her there,” said a Boot as he gestured to one of the women working at another station to take Firuzeh’s place.

“No, no. Just point me in the right direction and I’ll bring her there. I want to take a look at this clinic, make sure we’re not wasting resources,” Liv said with a nasty smile.

“It’s past the schoolhouse, ma’am.” A look was shared by the Boots.

“Do I have to say it again? Go on!”

Liv gave them a gesture and they left.

Out of the sides of their eyes, the sewing team watched as Liv escorted Firuzeh outside and down the road towards a line of run-down houses in an enclave facing the lake, rotten picket fences enclosing each yard.

“Mama? Mama?” said a small voice. In one of the yards, a young Brown girl in a white ankle-length dress capped her hands over the sharp edges of the fence posts, her bowl cut of black hair shining in the sun. When she confirmed that Firuzeh was not her mother, her plea transformed into a playful song, her body swinging from the posts, side to side, dancing. “Maaaaamaaaaa. Maaaaamaaaaa.” Behind her, other little girls in the same white uniforms played tag. A Purple Scrub woman approached and banged her nightstick on the fence until the little girl joined the other children.

“I think this is where they told me to go,” Liv said while guiding Firuzeh past the uneven steps of one of the homes. A South Asian man in a doctor’s coat, with one of his eyes bloodied and beaten, answered the door.

“This woman has been hurt.” Firuzeh showed the doctor her burn, now weeping and inflamed. The doctor nodded and showed them to a treatment room, where Firuzeh sat on the paperless examination table. He began to rummage through the random supplies strewn throughout the room.

“Actually . . . can you give us a minute, doctor?” Liv said pointedly. “I want to have a look at her myself.” The doctor looked between Firuzeh and Liv curiously, then obeyed orders and left the room. Silence.

Liv walked to the window of the messy room and grabbed a bandage off the sill. “You know, Firuzeh . . . I saw you.” Firuzeh froze. How did this

woman know her name? “It was last month. I saw you reach out for a leaf outside your window and put it in your mouth. We’ve been watching you for a while, and there was something about watching you eat that leaf that told me this person, this special person, has hope. She hasn’t been beaten down yet.” Silence. Liv positioned herself to face Firuzeh and began inspecting her hands.

“Where are your fingernails?” Firuzeh held her breath at the question. “Did this happen here?” Firuzeh gave the smallest nod. “Do you know how President Pryce was killed?”

“Excuse me?”

“The president of the United States.”

“Last winter . . . He was . . . assassinated.”

“Yes. That’s what you may have heard. By that Black extremist group. That’s what everybody heard.” Liv took a half-used tube of ointment from a cabinet and applied some to Firuzeh’s hand. A sting, then relief. Liv stepped close enough to whisper in Firuzeh’s ear. “But did you know he was already dying of cancer? That he actually died of cancer. There was no assassination? Or maybe you knew that already.” Firuzeh withdrew her hand from Liv’s grasp. This was a trick question. This was a set-up.

“Firuzeh, would you like to leave here?” Silence, save for the fluorescent lights humming above their heads. “I know you’re scared. But there’s not a lot of time. I can help you.”

Firuzeh got off the examination table and made for the door.

“I’m serious. I can get you out and to a place of safety. You’re not the first one I’ve approached. I helped a man out of the workhouse in the Junction. I helped a mother reunite with her two children out of a workhouse in Scarborough. Both of them are now being trained to take part in an uprising. Firuzeh, we’re going to fight back. I can help you, but we need your help too.”

“I’m going to get in a lot of trouble.”

“Will you be any less safe than you are here at the workhouse? I know who you are, Firuzeh. Firuzeh Pasdar. You worked at the Transgender Assistance Centre of Toronto. I know you. I know your politics; I know you have the skills to lead people, to work within a group; I know you have supported people who have survived far worse than what you are surviving now. We need someone like you to work with us, to fight with us. I need you to listen to me. Give me your hand.” Liv began to bandage Firuzeh’s

hand, and Liv's voice became but a whisper. She leaned into Firuzeh's ear again. "There will be a work order for denim overalls next week. The following week will be bedsheets. The next week will be comforters. That week, when one of the Boots comes by to collect the work order, he will expect you to hide among the duvets before he wheels it towards packaging."

"A Boot?"

"Yes. There are a few more like him on the inside, helping others escape. The cart will not make its way to packaging, though. And I promise you, if you follow my instructions, if you tell no one, you will get out."

"But what about everyone else?"

"I can only help one person at a time. I need you to trust me. I will bring you to a safer place. I promise."

Liv made her way to the door, nonchalantly.

"Wait!" Firuzeh pleaded. "There are others." Once a social worker, always a social worker.

"I can't take any of the other women. Only one at a time."

"No, not here. I had clients. Please." Liv looked at her, confused.

"Please remember these names." Firuzeh struggled to remember the faces of her numerous clients, and finally one came to her. "Said Damji! He's a Trans elder who lived off Shuter Street."

"Listen: if he's an elder, the chances of his survival are slim. The Renovation tried to eliminate elders and those with disabilities first. We have relocated a few, but sadly, we weren't able to rescue many."

"Bahadur Talebi!" Firuzeh begged. "They're a gender-Queer youth. They just got here from Iran a year ago. I know in my heart they ran. They're a fighter. They're probably hiding somewhere. I know it. Please."

"You're certain?" Liv's lips tightened.

"Absolutely. I know it. I know they would have figured out a way to hide. Please find them a place where they can be safe. Please."

Liv nodded in agreement, then she placed a finger over her lips before opening the door. Liv escorted Firuzeh back to the sewing shop, with the bandage on her hand, and she began counting down the weeks. Denim overalls. Bedsheets. Comforters. Freedom.

Rolls of fabric and cotton batting arrived the day the work order came in for the comforters. The fabric featured the most unattractive scene of a bloodhound, an American cocker spaniel and a sheepdog playing in a rural

setting. It was hideous and hard to believe anyone would buy it. Still, there were a thousand of them that needed to be made by the end of the week. Firuzeh looked around at the Boots who delivered the supplies, wondering which one was in cahoots with Liv. None of them made eye contact. All of them moved the same way. Maybe Liv was a liar. Maybe no one would come to save her. Maybe she had betrayed Bahadur and put a target on their chest, now that she'd revealed their possible survival to a Boot. She would shake her head at these thoughts, choosing to believe that Liv's promises would unfold as planned. After Emma's passing, she had nothing to lose. Emma had made one choice. Now this was Firuzeh's.

The week passed. Daniella and her crew were to cut and size the fabric and batting. Farrah and her crew were on assembly. Firuzeh's crew did the final quilting pattern of alternating hourglass swirls across the fabric to ensure the batting wouldn't shift. She remembered what Liv had said, which was to not tell a soul about her escape. But with the completion of each duvet, she looked around the room wishing she could take each one of the women with her.

The deadline for completion of the work order had arrived. Firuzeh opened up the window of her room and saw that the bush was completely full of both birds and leaves. She plucked one leaf from the bush and placed it in her mouth. The taste had changed. Not as bitter and much more tender. She savoured the slight crunch of the leaf before heading to the cafeteria for the usual white bread with an economical smear of peanut butter and one glass of powdered milk. She looked around at the Boots who patrolled the cafeteria; all of them looked identical. No suspicious movements.

Firuzeh watched as the final comforter was assembled. The batting was tucked into the two sections of fabric, and they were sewn together with a flawless seam. She watched the fabric pass under the presser foot to create the wave patterns to quilt the comforter. Her co-workers were already stretching their legs when she pulled the final piece from the machine and cut its thread. Night had fallen. One of the Boots blew a whistle. Dinnertime. Two Boots escorted her co-workers to the cafeteria. Firuzeh stayed behind to stretch her back and looked around. She was to place the final piece into a large cart full of other comforters manned by one of the Boots, who would wheel it to packaging.

"Get in," the Boot said. They all looked the same. Sounded the same. Firuzeh remembered Liv's instructions and did as she was told. The Boot

calmly hoisted her into the cart, covered her with the duvets and began wheeling the cart down the hallway.

“What in the world is this?” said another Boot through the muffle of the batting. The cart stopped. So did Firuzeh’s heart. *This is it. This is the end. A pile of bodies.* “Who the hell would buy this?”

“I know, right?”

“What is on the fabric? Is that a cocker spaniel?”

“I think.”

“Fucking hell. That is ugly.”

“I know.”

“You’re off to packaging for that?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s that way.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“I mean, it’s a tiny island. You can’t get lost here.” A shared laugh. The Boot turned the cart around. The squeaking of wheels. A beep. A door opening. Cool night air. The cart stopped. The smell of cigarette smoke. The cart turned in the other direction again, and the pace was quickened. Another beep. Smoother floors.

“Where are you off to with that?” The cart kept wheeling.

“Delivering supplies.”

“They’re almost done serving dinner in the mess hall.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just behind. See ya.”

“Are those dogs on those comforters?”

“Ugly, right?”

“Fucking ugly. Who would buy them?” The voice was fading away.

“Who knows?”

A door opened and closed.

“Okay. Get out.” Firuzeh cautiously emerged from the blankets and found herself in a luxurious sitting room. A lavender chaise longue sat against a backdrop of silver-grey drapery, which covered the windows. A long tan leather sectional filled the corner. A crystal chandelier hung from the high ceiling. A large kitchen was adjacent to the sitting room, with white cabinets and tiled floors. Despite its opulence, the same familiar line of mould crept up the walls of the house to the water line from the floods. A slight damp smell.

The Boot opened the door to a pantry. “Get in.” Calm. Graceful. Firuzeh obeyed. She sat herself down on the floor of the pantry and folded her knees into her chest. The Boot nodded and closed the door of the pantry. He left the room, closing the door behind him. Time passed. Was she supposed to escape from here? Was she supposed to run while the room was empty? She sat, her heart pounding, confused and conflicted as to what to do next. After what seemed like hours, she could hear voices down the hall. The room’s door opened. Firuzeh watched through a narrow opening in the pantry. The room lights turned on and people entered.

“Can I get you more champagne?”

“No, Charles. I’m very close to making a fool out of myself,” Liv said to a Boot who wore a well-trimmed beard.

More voices.

“Dinner was excellent.”

“I rarely like lamb, but this was exceptional.”

“Champagne? Can I top you up?”

“Yes, please. Please do.”

Firuzeh could distinguish about four different people in the room. Since they had just eaten, they did not have their headgear on. From her vantage point, Firuzeh could see Liv lounging with the bearded man, Charles. Two other Boots, one with a strong cleft chin and another with a handsome moustache, occupied the room. They downed their champagne over more frivolous conversation, and then Firuzeh could hear the clinking of ice into tumblers. They were moving on to more serious topics with more serious drinks. The smell of cigar smoke.

“This is smooth.”

“Did Charles ever tell you we met at a bar? Yeah. I was serving back then. So if you all behave, I may mix you a drink later.”

Firuzeh nervously moved her head right and left to see what was happening. While Firuzeh was drenched in sweat, Liv acted as cool as a cucumber. Did she even know Firuzeh was there? Liv’s familiarity with Charles made her even more nervous. The image of her playfully rubbing his thigh had Firuzeh thinking this was all a set-up. She bit her lip and searched her mind for a possible plan B or C or D for escape, none of them sensible. She willed herself to breathe, albeit silently.

“Shall we bring them in?” Charles said, his arms wide across the sectional. He looked in Liv’s direction.

“I’m not leaving.”

“I didn’t ask you to leave. It’s up to you if you want to stay, Liv. It’s just shoptalk. I don’t want to bore you, is all.”

“Well where am I gonna go? Have a walk along the beach? Look into the windows of each of the workhouses? That sounds like fun.” A few laughs. “Where’s my cigar, by the way?” Charles obliged and lit her up. Liv took several puffs like a pro. Charles forcefully pinched her chin between his forefinger and thumb and gave her a kiss.

“Okay. Liam. Go get them, please.”

A door opening and closing. The sound of shuffling along the hallway.

“Here they are!” Charles exclaimed. At first, Firuzeh could see only fabric. Then she could see that the beautiful graphics of gold and black and red were on a large skirt worn by two Black women. Firuzeh covered her mouth in shock at the sight of them. It was Adea and Amana, the Queer twins who had travelled the world promoting peace leading up to the Renovation. *Of course they were captured*, Firuzeh thought to herself. *Peacekeepers are always the most dangerous ones in a time of revolution.*

Their skirts, as always, were wide enough to be parachutes and seamed together at the hips like they were conjoined through tulle. Their arms were tattooed from their fingertips to their necklines. Indiscernible messages from a lifetime ago. The Boot with the cleft chin nudged the two sisters, and they began to recite the creed as the Boots watched silently.

*Through our work, our nation prospers.*

*Through our unity, we end conflict.*

*Through our leader, we find peace.*

*Through order, we find tranquility.*

“Excellent,” said Charles. “Adea and Amana. My name is Charles. You already met Liam. And this is Carl. And this is Liv. Everyone, these are the twins.” Rumblings of introductions. The twins nodded silently and held hands, fearful.

Charles gestured towards the chaise longue. “Why don’t you two have a seat?” They both stood still, unsure of what to do. “No, really. Please. I insist.”

With reticence, Adea and Amana slowly made their way to the chaise longue and sat down in unison. Their skirts cascaded a printed waterfall

over the curve of the couch. Firuzeh's heart ached to see their beauty. It had been so long since she had seen racialized people clean and in the clothes of their choice. They were both the kind of femmes whose self-adornment was their magic. Every placement of every jewel, every choice in earring, of tattoo, was a form of expression and resistance. But their unevenly shaved heads told the story of capture.

"Would you like a drink? The booze and cigars aren't for you, but would you like water? A juice box?" Charles started making his way to the pantry, and Firuzeh held her breath. The twins looked to the pantry, made direct eye contact with Firuzeh through the crack of the door and said, "No. That's fine. We were taken care of already." Charles made his way back to Liv's side and his cigar.

Charles dragged an accent chair closer to the twins' chaise until they were practically touching at the knees. "I'm so glad you've been taken care of. I imagine it's quite different from where we found you. I mean . . . how long were you in hiding? Four months? Five months?" The twins held their grasp on each other. "It must have been quite the struggle without power or food in that community centre you hid in. I mean . . . when we busted down those doors . . . You remember, right, Liam?"

The one with the cleft chin nodded.

"It smelled pretty dank in there, right?" Liam nodded. "There you were among dozens of Others, hiding like cockroaches. I'm glad to have you both here where you are safe." Charles toked on his cigar. The twins were unmoved.

"It was extremely important to me that I meet with you face to face. While I know my men are quite capable of getting a message across, this message is different. Do you know why you're here?" The twins shook their heads cautiously at Charles. "July 1 will be the Summit of Nations, and it's taking place right here, in Toronto. Delegates from all over the world will be coming to the city to discuss everything from climate change to AIDS to trade agreements. Lots of lunches, photo ops, politicians shaking hands, blah, blah, blah. This is our chance to show the world the glory of our Renovation and the launch of the federal initiative, led by me and my team. You can imagine the last time we had such an event, the entire country was trying to rebuild itself, no thanks to riots inspired by people like you. Now that things have changed for the better, now that we're finally at peace, the Others are finally putting what little skills they

have to good use and it's very important that we make a good impression. Even Prime Minister Dunphy will be there. Now, I know you haven't seen any television for a while . . ." Charles looked at Liam and Carl with a smile. "So let me bring you up to speed. It seems the UN has some concerns over our tactics to ensure that people like you across Canada are put to work. Seems they have issues with cleaning up a place. Of course, from the inside, it's pretty clear how incredibly things have changed in such a short time. We need to give them that perspective. That's where you two step in."

Adea and Amana looked at each other knowingly, then back at Charles.

"During the summit, all officials will report to the mainstage, which will be set up at Yonge-Dundas Square, the same place you two held your concert before the Renovation. But this time, the world will be watching you, listening to all the details of how you have been cared for, hearing your story of being rescued from hunger."

The twins looked at each other confused. "Rescued?" Adea asked fearfully.

There was a pause. The pause was long enough that Firuzeh could hear the waves crashing on the shore outside. Long enough for her eyes to widen. Long enough to cover her mouth to keep herself from screaming inside the pantry.

Charles abruptly grabbed the back of Adea's neck and forced her head down in her own lap. Amana shrieked.

"Amana, can you please explain to your sister why you were rescued?"

"Because, because . . ." Amana scrambled.

"Because?" Charles held Adea's head down with increased force, and Amana covered her ears, struggling with the words.

"Because . . . we were rescued and brought here to safety!" Charles loosened his grasp. The twins held each other close, quivering with fear.

Charles stood over them, his tone suddenly a quiet bedtime story. "You will be delivering a speech about how the Renovation has created prosperous change. About the safety of the Others. That they've all found jobs. That the country has improved. Do you understand now?" The twins nodded quickly. "You don't even have to write the fucking thing. We'll write it for you. You just have to deliver it perfectly and believe it. And if you don't—" Charles pointed his cigar towards Amana's face and she shook in fear. Liv stood up.

“Hey. Leave it to me.” Liv took the cigar away from Charles and kissed him on the cheek. “Go on. I’ll meet you in the foyer after I’m done. I’m sure the truck is ready to take us to the ferry dock.” Charles passed his cigar to Liv.

“Thanks,” Liv laughed. “Now go on.” The Boots left. Silence.

“Firuzeh? Are you still there?” Firuzeh slowly emerged from the pantry, her legs cramping.

The twins approached Firuzeh. “Are you okay?” Amana asked. Firuzeh wasn’t sure what to say. “You can trust Liv. You can trust us.”

Firuzeh exhaled, and the entire group of women embraced.

“That man, Charles. He held your head down. Are you all right?” Firuzeh asked.

Adea nodded. “I was more scared than hurt. My heart was in my throat!” They embraced tighter.

Liv loosened herself from the circle and said, “All right. We don’t have a lot of time. Adea and Amana: let’s go over the plan.”

Amana started. “When we hit the stage, and once I get the signal from you, we will deliver the alternate speech.” Adea continued: “Allies will subdue the Boots, and we will lead a procession of Others north on Yonge Street. At the same time, the workhouses will be bombed.

“But what if we are attacked?” asked Amana. “What if they turn off our microphones?”

“We have allies throughout the crowd whose job it will be to protect you. The Others with you have been trained to defend themselves. And the media will follow the story. They’ll capture all the audio they need as we do the procession.”

“But what will happen after the procession?” Firuzeh asked.

“That’s a big question, Firuzeh. And I wish I had solid answers for you. I’m not going to lie to you. The international community may do nothing. The last step in any genocidal campaign is denial. We saw this with the residential school system here in Canada. But I can promise you that the allies will do everything in our power to relocate the Others to several strongholds outside of Toronto and negotiate your freedom under the guidance of the Resistance leaders.” Liv glanced at the door. “We should get out of here pretty soon. The truck will be here by now. Are you ready?”

The twins nodded in unison. They took the cigar from Liv’s hand, and Adea toked on it until the ember turned orange. Amana closed her eyes and

readied herself before Adea placed the burning cigar on her sister's face.

"YAAAAAAAAOOOOOOOOW!" Amana screamed. Amana took the cigar and did the same on Adea. Another scream.

Firuzeh's jaw dropped in confusion. Liv touched her arm.

"As for you. Let's talk about the most immediate plans."

All of us are leaning into Firuzeh, wondering what happened next. I want to give her enough time to wipe her face with tissues after recalling the events she has endured, but the agony of suspense is gnawing at me.

Finally, Bahadur pleads, "I'm dying to know: how did you get out of that room?"

Firuzeh looks at Liv and they share a weak laugh. "Do you want to explain this? I mean . . . I could barely see. And it's so unbelievable to describe it, even now."

"I'll try," says Liv. "Yes, it may seem far-fetched. But in history, the most preposterous ideas are usually the ones that work best."

The twins screamed from the cigar burns. Liv opened the doors of the sitting room to the foyer where Charles, Liam and Carl stood waiting. Charles was grinning from ear to ear. Proud. Liv emerged triumphantly with the twins behind her, each of the twins shaken, holding hands tightly. A perfect red circle marked where Liv had seemingly burned each of them.

"There you go," said Liv.

"All good?" inquired Charles.

"I'm pretty sure my message was clear," Liv said before moving behind the twins and forcing them to walk forward. The Boots led the pack, but Charles couldn't help but look back at the women.

"Jeez, Liv. What did you do to them? These twins are walking funny," he said with a laugh. Liv smiled in a smug way, knowing Firuzeh was hiding and crawling forward under the twins' immense skirts.

*In history, the most preposterous ideas are usually the ones that work the best,* Liv thought to herself, willing success as she nervously watched the twins make their way to the ferry dock. Safe passage to freedom was sung behind the backs of slave owners. Sharing self-defence techniques against colonizers had been disguised as dancing. Outlawed Indigenous storytelling survived by being woven as code into textiles. *Firuzeh is going to make it,* Liv believed. *She is going to escape.*

It feels like a lifetime since Firuzeh's story has ended. But my body is doing that thing it does when time does not matter, when my limbs are not screwed on right and my eyes are looking to the upper right corner of my vision, where all the bad memories sit like misbehaved children. They all sit here on timeout, waiting to be triggered and cued into place for me to relive again and again. Only this time, I'm contemplating the shape and form of my Whisper Letter to you, and I need your help, Evan. You see, when I was still in Liv's basement, I could divine with absolute clarity the transmittance of my messages to you. I could, without a doubt, envision you somewhere, in your respective hiding place, plucking my words from the ether and stuffing them into whatever you lay your head on at night.

Now . . . after hearing the horrors of Firuzeh's experiences, I fear you're not in hiding at all. I know now the likelihood of your capture. The commodification of your body. The subdividing of your most exquisite parts into the cogs of the Renovation's machine. The urge to fight back met with gruesome force.

Is this why I sense you beside me between the physical and spiritual realms? Is this why I feel you holding my hand or laughing at my thoughts?

I suddenly hear the sound of crickets. It is night. I am sitting on my bed. I squeeze my eyes shut after fixating on the frame of the cottage's window. I look around the room. You're nowhere to be seen, but I can sense you. Feel you.

Firuzeh stirs in her sleep, then sits up and coughs herself into waking. She looks at me. I cannot see her face, but I can see her piecing together her surroundings.

"Are you okay?"

She shakes her head silently. I slowly walk past Bahadur's bed and approach Firuzeh slowly.

"I'm not okay either."

Firuzeh clears space for me to sit beside her on the bed. I try to do so without it creaking, but the springs are too old for it to obey the slowness of my descent. Bahadur turns over on their bed and resumes snoring. We cover our mouths in a soundless chuckle.

Outside the moon waxes across the sky, fatter than the night before. We watch. Without words, Firuzeh rolls up the right sleeve of her shirt and I do the same with my left. We touch shoulders. Warm. Soft. I wonder about the quality of my shoulder compared to Emma Singh's. I imagine the spirit of

Emma sitting on the other side of Firuzeh, joining in on this moment of care.

And then it happens. I sense the spirit of you, on the other side of me, rolling up your sleeve, connecting with my right shoulder. I know now. The past tense of you.

We continue our training.

“You ready?” Beck asks Firuzeh, who nods solemnly and joins us. She has changed into one of Beck’s high-school track suits, and she rolls up her sleeves.

Beck draws lines in the soil beside the cottage’s porch with a brittle birch branch to illustrate the plan of attack. I follow the doodles of his instructions along every grain of sand, trying desperately to understand. Two lines representing Yonge Street. Squares. Xs. Arrows. Every scribble a movement, our movements, using our own bodies, using our own weapons. He makes us stand in formation. He demands that we act out every possibility, from best- to worst-case scenario. He says that for each one of us, the first action will be to disarm a Boot and use his weapon against him.

Days pass. The moon waxes. We continue the drills of four moves to disarm. Deflect end of rifle with left palm. Punch with right fist to the chin or kick to stomach. Butt of the gun to the face. Take the weapon. It is a clunky dance for me and Bahadur. Something stops the full breadth of our extensions, a forced passivity in a world that thrived on our inaction.

In response to this, Beck shows us another exercise. He demonstrates on me. He asks me to lie on my back; he straddles me, and Liv hands him punch mitts to wear.

“You ready? I want you to punch me from where you are. Keep punching and don’t stop.” I look at him. I notice I am holding my breath. My arms are at my sides, frozen. He is suddenly my ma.

“Keith. You are not like other boys. I can see that,” she says.

“Kay? Kay? Feel the ground underneath you. Can you feel it?” I nod. I hear Beck’s firm voice in the present. I begin to feel the rocks and sand on my tailbone. I feel the sun on my face. I can see the silhouettes of people above me. “Good. Breathe. Can you look around you? It’s me, Beck.” I see him. “Look around. Take your time. Can you see things that are blue? Can you find at least three things that are blue?”

Firuzeh's sweatpants. Beck's eyes. Liv's shirt. The sky.

"Good. Keep breathing. Now, I want you to be here. I want you to be here, seeing everything around you, but I want you to punch back at me. Can you do that?" I nod. I punch at Beck standing above me. It is a half-hearted punch, as I am still slowly coming back into myself. "Can you use your breath each time you punch? Can you make a 'ssss' sound when you punch this time?" I try. The exhale tightens my core, and the punch is stronger. The colours around me are more vibrant. Beck's voice is clear. I am more in my body. "Again. Again. Again."

Firuzeh, Liv and Bahadur clap for me, and the sound of their applause is crisp. My breathing is deep. My arms are warm. "Kay? How are you doing?" Beck searches my face. I give an affirmative nod from my position on the ground. "This time, I want you to punch left, right again and again, non-stop, and I will back off when I feel your energy push me back. Does that make sense? Can you do that?" I shake my head, unsure of myself.

Beck looks right at me, although I am uncertain if I am looking back at him. "Kay? I need you to remember why you're doing this. Remember how these actions are connecting all of us. I want you to feel that power running through your body."

I take a deep breath and begin. I punch, again and again. "Ssss. Sssss. Sssss. Ssss. Ssss. Ssss. Ssss. Ssss. Ssss."

"Lying with a man as with a woman is an abomination," Ma says as she brushes out my curls, my scalp bleeding.

"Ssss! Sssss! Sssss! Ssss! Ssss! Ssss! Ssss!" says the little boy with every punch.

"Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who have sex with men, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God."

"Ssss! Sssss! Sssss! Ssss! Ssss! Ssss! Ssss!" Soap bubbles bursting. Soap souls going to heaven. The sound of applause in the congregation upstairs. "SSSS!" the boy exhales, extends a punch, and the daycare washroom collapses in a pile of dust. Ma covers her ears at the deafening sound. "SSSS!" A soundtrack of Liberace plays at full volume. Thousands of fairy costumes fly through the air, and a kaleidoscope of scripture passages explode into beautiful fireflies protecting his tiny body. "SSSS!" Another final punch and the lattice of the Winchester church implodes. The steel framing melts. Every wall hiding every secret crumbles into shadows.

Ma, in tiny pixels, becomes grains of sand. She watches in pain as her body is wished away by wind, by time, by my own breath.

Applause. I hear applause. Firuzeh and Liv embrace me. I am crying. Bahadur squats beside my supine body, crying too. Beck is covered in sweat. He tosses the punch mitts and extends a hand to help me up. I stand. I hold Beck and continue bawling, fully trusting. Fully in my body.

Firuzeh looks at me and ceremoniously rolls up the sleeve of her T-shirt. I tearfully do the same. We touch shoulders. Liv, Beck and Bahadur join in, rolling up the sleeves of their shirts and touching deltoids. A circle. Joy.

As the days pass, our drills become more graceful, become muscle memory. Some days Beck holds us each at the waist, guiding us sideways as we shoot three targets using an AR-15. Some days Liv has us practise loading ammunition in the dark. Some days we review the plan of attack. Each day ends with us dirty, covered in dust and watching the waxing of the moon.

While we train, Bahadur and I witness another curriculum that does not include us. Every morning, Liv and Beck make their way to a clearing and practise the embodiment of their resistance, complete with corresponding movements and words said out loud:

*When I do not act, I am complicit!*

*When I know wrong is happening, I act!*

*When the oppressed tell me I am wrong, I open my heart and change!*

*When change is led by the oppressed, I move aside and uplift!*

And each morning, Bahadur and I have followed them to the clearing, overwhelmed with curiosity. At first, we experienced the same discomfort we would feel when witnessing white folks taking up too much space with their guilty tears or their complete denial. Each morning we waited for the shoe to drop, for their ritual to suddenly become performative. It was obvious to us that it had taken years for them both to arrive at this level of awareness, because their chants were said in a whisper, their movements delivered with authenticity. There was something about their efforts having nothing to do with us, that their unlearning and undoing was not leaning on our labour of explanation nor our praise, that made this a ritual for us too. It

forced Bahadur and me into a place of ease, of witnessing, of relaxing while folks processed their allyship. It felt foreign to us to not have to bear this burden. Foreign and delicious. It became our daily morning event, without Liv or Beck even knowing of our presence.

One morning, Bahadur and I watched Hanna make her way to Beck and Liv in the clearing.

“Where are you going?” shouted Peter from inside the house.

Without turning, Hanna shouted back, “Where does it look like I’m going? I’m off to spend some time with our son!”

Once she got to the clearing, she stood with her cane bearing her weight and asked questions.

“So, you do this every day?”

“Yes, Mom.” Beck wiped sweat from his brow.

“But why every day?”

“Because we have to unlearn every day.” Beck went down on his haunches and retied the shoelaces on his combat boots. He looked back at his mother, whose face was twisted in confusion.

Liv chimed in, hoping to clarify things. “Oppressing others is learned from the minute we’re born, Hanna. It’s like trying to sink a beach ball in the water. It pops up every now and then, whether we want it to or not.”

“And when it pops up, we either pretend it’s not there or we ask oppressed people to help us keep it down or we ask them to praise us for sinking it.” Beck tentatively held his mother’s hand. Hanna shuddered at his touch. Her face and neck were red. “For me, the most challenging part is not crying. It’s hard to not feel shame, to not feel guilty for having this much privilege. But shame or guilt doesn’t help anyone.”

The rest of the day unfolded with Hanna unable to look us in the eyes. Over dinner, she quietly crunched away at crackers, her eyes focused on some unknown point on the horizon. When she rose from the table to leave, the crumbs that had gathered at her waist fell to the floor, and she absentmindedly wandered back into her bedroom for the night.

“I’m really sorry you have to watch my mom struggle through all this,” Beck said awkwardly once she was out of earshot.

“No, no. We’re all accustomed to this type of discomfort,” said Firuzeh, smiling eyes meeting mine, then Bahadur’s.

Miraculously, Hanna returned to the clearing the next day. Her eyes were swollen from crying.

“When are you making breakfast, Hanna?” Peter called from the house.

“You’re perfectly capable of opening a can of cocktail wieners,” she answered as she made her way to the clearing.

“Hi, Mom. Are you ready?” Hanna nodded wearily. She proceeded to learn the set of movements and the set of chants and adjusted them to suit her level of mobility.

Some days, she argued with Liv, her left hand flapping in the air as if to dispel any of Liv’s truth into the ether of their collective shame. “I gave them all a place to stay, didn’t I?”

During these times, Liv would hold her palms up as if to calm a wild animal she had cornered with truth. “Yes, you did give them a place to stay. But we need to dig deeper than that. What makes us believe we are better than them, that we are entitled to certain privileges? That’s what has led us here.”

Hanna would storm off, pushing past branches and brush towards the house. On these difficult days, she would intercept me in the hallway of the farmhouse and say, “I’m a good person!” then make her way to her room to cry some more. I would force my arms to my side, willing myself not to assist her in her process. I have done enough of that in my lifetime.

Some days, Hanna would change her tactics. “Why do you and Liv need to lead this fight?! Why can’t we leave this uprising to them?”

“It’s different, Mom.” Beck would hold his mother’s shoulders and stare deep into her eyes. “We’re not leading it. What we’re doing has been planned by activists who have fought their entire lives just to live, to work, to love. Everything, from what we’re saying in our chant to how we’re moving when we say that chant, has been guided by them. They have done that work. And believe me, Mom. They had to do a lot of work on me to get me where I am now. I will continue to do that work, on myself and those around me, for the rest of my life. And you know what? It feels good. It feels good to wake up and stop pretending. It feels good not to be afraid, not to set myself apart, not to defend what wasn’t mine in the first place.”

Hanna looked around helplessly. “But why *my* son? Why do you have to fight? What if you die? What will happen then?! You might not have a life to live!” She attempted to embrace Beck to soften his approach, but he held firm.

“Mom, I need you to understand that, for me, even having a choice to fight is a gift. People right now are being raped, killed, taken away from

their children, being forced into workhouses. I will not let that continue. I choose to fight.”

Hanna shook her head wildly to keep Beck’s words from sticking. “Not my son! I’m not one of those evil Boots! I’m a good person!”

Liv had had enough. She approached Hanna until they were face to face, Liv’s glare demanding connection, willing eye contact.

“Look at me right now, Hanna. I don’t give a shit if you think you’re a good person.” Liv was seething. Bahadur and I looked at each other with mouths agape. I turned back to the trio, wondering if this exchange would transform from peaceful conversation to a rowdy episode of the *Ricki Lake Show*.

“How dare you! You watch your tone with me.”

“No.”

“Excuse me?!”

“I said, ‘No.’ I will not watch my tone. I won’t. We’re trying to enact change, Hanna. We’re not here to make you feel better.”

Liv wiped the hair from her face and retied her ponytail as perspiration surfaced on her blushing skin. “I was once like you. I once believed that a few good deeds were a job well done. I thought I was one of the good white people. I wasn’t like my family, who lived in small-town Ontario all their lives, who could trace their English lineage all the way back to colonial times, who would collect the arrowheads found in the garden and place them on the mantel like prizes they’d won. Surely, I didn’t benefit from the land they took away. Surely, I was not complicit in their actions. As long as I looked at my great-grandfather with shame for his slave ownership, his penchant for Black women, as long as I recited the Indigenous land acknowledgement every morning to my fifth graders, then I was doing the work, right? Oh, and even better, to show everyone how progressive and Queer I am. Hell, I could shack up with a Mohawk woman! Save her by having her live with me in my fancy home in Hamilton. Yeah! I’m not a slave owner. I’m me. I’m a good person.” She shouted towards the tops of the trees, pacing. Hanna cowered, trying her best to maintain her grimace.

“Erin didn’t deserve that. She didn’t deserve to be my little experiment, my statement, my cause. But she stuck with me. I shudder to think of how many times I put her in a position of explaining herself, to be paraded around to my family and friends and at my school, to deal with my fetishizing her, using her to assuage my own guilt. My great-grandfather

had his arrowheads. I had Erin. It was . . . it is disgraceful. Everything I did with her was to prove that I was a good white person.

“Next thing on my agenda was to have a child together. Of course, it could have been me who got pregnant first, but no, I really wanted, deep down, a Brown baby so I could parade it around too. Another arrowhead. I still remember us driving an hour east to our donor in downtown Toronto, booking two separate hotel rooms, running the sample into ours, and Erin propping her legs up on the wall after inserting the semen. She was like, ‘Wow. Isn’t this romantic?’” Liv stopped pacing and sat on a tree stump. She paused and swallowed back the sweetness of this memory. Her tone softened.

“I watched Erin grow. I loved seeing her get out of the shower. I would pretend to brush my teeth, but really, I was looking at her. She would towel off her tummy and I would wonder how I got so lucky.” Liv looked up at the treetops for a moment. The hum of cicadas. “When labour started, we drove to the hospital. We were so excited. Between contractions, Erin was on her phone telling her grandmother and her aunties to start heading over from Six Nations to see her. I can still hear them all on the other end cheering, even though it was three in the morning. They must have been waiting for news from us. The labour went faster than we expected. We got in there, and they checked Erin’s dilation and they were like, ‘She’s ready to push.’ Baby Myles was on an express train out. Once he arrived, he let out this healthy cry, and Erin and I laughed and laughed. We were so happy. I didn’t know you could smile that wide, ever.

“I thought the nurses were supposed to clean him up, then place him on Erin’s chest, but they wheeled him out of the room in his little bassinet instead. I thought, well, they’re medical staff, they know what they’re doing. I was still kissing Erin’s face and thanking her for giving me this beautiful gift. Then, just after Erin birthed the placenta, a nurse comes walking over to us all official and stern.

“Erin asked, ‘Where’s our baby?’ The nurse hands us a clipboard with a contract on it. She tells us that if we want to get our Myles back, we have to sign this contract for Erin to be sterilized. I lost my shit. They almost had to call security on me. I was hysterical. Erin was screaming for our baby. I was running down the hallways of the hospital searching for Myles, calling out his name as if he could call back. This was a nightmare. A horror story. This wasn’t happening to us. I was going to change it. By the time I ran

back into the room where Erin was, she was holding Myles, bawling her eyes out. She had signed the contract. She told me, ‘I had to. I couldn’t live without holding my baby.’ I was so angry at her. I had the audacity to say, ‘How could you? They don’t have a right to do that!’ and she looks at me and says, ‘You don’t know what it’s like to not have rights.’

“She got a tubal ligation. We got our baby. And I got the wake-up call of my life. I was one of the many good white people who never believed that forced sterilization of Indigenous women could happen in Canada. It was just a news story of something vague and unproven. And once I saw it happening, right in front of me, I knew I had to name it for what it was. I knew I had to call it genocide.

“Shortly after the tubal ligation, and after we heard of the supposed wildfires in Alberta, we knew we had to change things. We decided together that Erin and Myles would go into hiding. I would leave my teaching job, change my name, dissolve the house and join the Resistance.

“And you know what is the most shameful thing about it all? It took the mutilation of my partner’s body for me to understand what being an ally is. That’s how deep it runs, Hanna. What will it take for you to wake the hell up? What are you willing to lose? What horrible thing are you willing to watch before you understand that you have to change?”

Hanna reached out to Beck’s body to stabilize her stance. Liv pivoted herself around to face the forest and cried silently. Hanna stepped forward with the instinct to apologize and console, but Beck held his arm out and gestured for them to give Liv some time alone.

The training continued. Despite Hanna’s frustration that no one among us would coddle her, would lessen the blow of these lessons by affirming her or congratulating her, still she returned. Still she trained.

“I wonder what internal dialogue goes on inside that woman’s brain to have her come back for more,” Bahadur said one morning while wiping their face with their T-shirt.

I rolled my eyes. “I kind of don’t care. Whatever it takes for her to learn and do the work is good for me.” We chuckled.

In the time it took for Bahadur to finally figure out how to shoot a target, there was a shift in Hanna. When we first arrived at the farm, the tip of her nose pulled away from us, more like away and up, as if allowing her body to share the same spatial plane as us was too much of a risk. She

began to share space easily with us. She began to ask us sincere questions that stemmed from sincere curiosity about our lives. She began sitting quietly to listen with her whole body, with her whole gaze, while we spoke.

In the clearing one morning, Hanna said quietly, “Last night I had an idea.” Excitement brimmed in her eyes. Liv and Beck looked at each other, then gathered near Hanna.

“You know how you said that being an ally is a verb and not a noun? That I had to ally every day? And I shouldn’t ask for praise? I was thinking we could add another movement. Something to train us to never ask for praise. Something to keep the focus on them instead of us.” There was a pause.

Liv nodded. “That’s a great idea, Hanna. But is there a way we can do that without it being performative?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like . . . a lot of oppressed activists complain about how much space we take up congratulating ourselves for doing this work.”

Beck chimed in. “That’s tricky, right? We want to show prospective allies this important element, but we need to do so without being showy.”

We watched from afar as they experimented with the movements. Hanna finally showed them a promising gesture. She placed one hand firmly over her mouth and the other hand in the air. “No, wait. Let me try again. That seems like I’m telling them to be silent. That’s not what I’m trying to say. Wait a second.” She thought for a moment, then performed another gesture. This time she used both hands to cover her mouth, then moved her hands to her heart in humility.

Beck hopped gently in place, buoyed by his inspiration. “Yes, and then we can pass the focus. So we put our hands to our mouth, hands to heart, then we can point one hand toward the oppressed party that needs to be seen and heard.”

“I like it,” Liv said, trying the gesture a few times. “It’s performative, but only as a way to get other allies to join us in the Resistance, then it challenges us to shift focus to those who need the attention.”

Tonight, we sit around the dinner table to eat canned artichoke hearts and beef jerky. When the conversation turns to the loved ones we have left behind, I tell the group about how you had planned to find your mother, then meet me at Liv’s house.

“But now . . . after everything I have seen . . . I doubt very much we will find each other again. I doubt very much he is alive. No . . . I know he is not alive and I have accepted that.” This is the first time I admit this out loud. As soon as I say it, I feel your forgiveness wash over me.

Peter rises from the table and heads to the living room to sit in his reclining chair. The awkward silence is broken by Hanna shifting in her seat.

“Evan. Evan.” Hanna struggles with the words and we all hold our breath. Perhaps she will tell me that loving you was wrong. Perhaps she will cry and apologize until I am forced to soothe her. Perhaps she will expect me to praise her for not being like the other folks who kept you away from me. “He sounds like a beautiful man. And you sound like a beautiful couple. I am so very sorry this happened. You both did not deserve this. I will work hard and pray that things will change.” With the help of a gentle hand on my shoulder, she rises from the table quietly, tosses her beef jerky wrapper into the garbage bin, then makes her way to her bedroom.

When she closes the door, I look around in shock at Firuzeh, at Beck, at Bahadur and Liv. I silently say, “Whoa!” Firuzeh covers her mouth to stop herself from giggling. Liv exhales. Bahadur shakes their head in wonder. Beck holds his hands up in a hallelujah. Change is possible.

## 10

**Look up,**” Firuzeh says to everyone as we set up camp outside the cabin. The waxing moon hangs low enough above our heads that I’m tempted to reach up and grab it. I imagine putting it into my mouth and crunching it between my teeth like a crater-covered potato chip, along with the astronaut and the American flag. Crunch. It’s Firuzeh’s idea to sleep outside tonight. “I want to feel what it’s like to sleep with nothing but nature around me. No ceilings or walls.” We all agree. This may be the last time we will experience such things.

Beck builds a fire in the centre of our gathering. He uses bunched-up newspaper at its base, their unhappy headlines going up in flames and ascending into a smoky memory above the trees. Soon, if all goes as planned, we too will be headlines in those same papers, and maybe, just maybe, we will make history.

“Do you think it’ll matter? You know . . . us calling our names at the summit?” I say while we all unroll our sleeping bags for the night.

“*If* all goes as planned and *if* we’re able to say our names at the summit.” Bahadur looks into the centre of the flames, their faraway gaze making black marbles of their eyes.

I turn to Liv and Beck, hoping for clarity. “I mean . . . our plan is to lead a procession up Yonge Street and say our names, and we’ve all been working hard to follow instructions and strategize the best way to do this without getting killed. But sometimes I have to wonder what it’s all for. The bombing of the workhouses makes sense to me. If the Renovation sees us as nothing more than producers and products, it makes sense to resist by

ending our productivity. But saying our names . . . I don't know." Liv and Beck nod their heads slowly, absorbing my words, one at a time.

"No. I don't doubt the importance of this." Firuzeh stands and says with conviction, "Do any of you remember those Palestinian children who broke the Guinness World Record by flying the most kites simultaneously? It was incredible, watching news footage of tens of thousands of kids in Gaza, flying their kites. Each kid had decorated their kite with their dream of what a life free of apartheid would look like." She illustrates with her hands so that we can all imagine the numerous kite lines and tails soaring along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. "One can look back at that and say, 'So what? What did they accomplish?' But you see, what they achieved is so much more than a metaphor. These are children who were born in war and will most likely die in war. When they flew those kites, though, they became the kites. They flew beyond borders. When they flew those kites, they knew freedom." Firuzeh looks me in the eye. "When I say my name at the summit, I will be a kite." She reaches out to squeeze my hand and returns to setting up her sleeping bag.

The evening wears on. We're supposed to be resting, now that all of us are settled for the night, but we can't stop chatting.

I can tell by Beck's body, in its freedom of movement, that his parents are inside, keeping to themselves, not wanting to be feasted upon by the mosquitoes. Here, among us Others, he is comfortable in his gayness, his squat wide as he pokes at the embers.

"I wish we had marshmallows," says Liv wistfully.

"Shit, I wish we had a side of beef!" Beck says while rolling his sleeves up to showcase his defined deltoids. We all eat our crackers and wince at the familiar blandness of dry goods. "If the Renovation never happened, I'd probably be out, having a burger on a patio somewhere."

"I love that!" Liv exclaims. "Jeez. What would we be doing if the Renovation never happened?" She hums a bit and rubs her chin pensively. "Around this time, my wife, Erin, and I would probably be chasing down our son, Myles, trying to get him into the bath. What about you, Bahadur?"

Bahadur sits up and begins shyly making a pile of rocks in the triangle made by their crossed legs. "I don't know."

"Come on! What's more boring than bath time?"

Bahadur exhales. "I . . . would . . . be . . . most likely . . . surfing porn." We all burst out laughing. I am rolling on the ground unable to control

myself. “I had a roommate in the shelter who had data on their phone. I traded an hour of internet every week for doing their laundry. Hey—you’d watch porn too if you spent all day sorting garbage.” We laugh even harder.

Bahadur raises an imaginary wine glass, and we join them in a toast. “To porn. God, I miss porn.” Everyone clinks imaginary glasses. Bahadur looks at Firuzeh and says, “Okay. Your turn.”

Firuzeh laughs and almost spits out the cracker she is munching on. She waves her hands in embarrassment. We all egg her on. “Okay, okay.” She wipes her mouth and flicks crumbs from her lap. “Prepare to be underwhelmed, everyone. Okay. I would be home making a Loving Kindness meal for myself.” We all look confused. “It’s because I was trying to heal from a really bad breakup, coming out of a co-dependent relationship. So I had to learn to make a meal just for myself. I had to learn how to date myself. I had to learn how to love myself.” A pregnant pause ensues, with everyone’s faces slowly evolving from deep compassion to withheld laughter. We begin to spit out our guffaws. “See? I told you it was underwhelming!”

Liv adds more logs to the fire and our faces get brighter. “It’s not that it’s underwhelming. It’s more like, it’s funny because of how hard Queer relationships are, and how much we worked at them and worked on ourselves. I miss those conversations. I miss processing.” We laugh even harder.

Firuzeh adds, longingly, “Perhaps something a bit more exciting would be the workshops. Back at the centre I would head these workshops and sometimes they’d schedule them for Fridays, and then you’re stuck in a room full of Trans youth who’d rather be at a club picking up than with you learning about writing theatre scenes or learning movement. But then each of them would get up, turn on some music, dance to their favourite song, and you could see how important these sessions were. It’s as though performing in front of each other, being seen, is medicine. We’re told by straight people that we’re lying to ourselves, that we’re not real. There’s something about being onstage, using our imagination. Instead of being invisible, we are the stars of the shows in our head. And that keeps us alive.”

There is another pause and my face gets hot with the weight of everyone’s gaze on me.

Beck breaks the silence. “Kay. Queen Kay. What would you be doing tonight if the Renovation never happened?”

“Well . . . what day is it?” I sit on a log and cross my legs, longing for a pair of heels.

“It’s Friday,” says Beck.

I look up at the moon, this almost-full moon, and I imagine a spotlight. “I would be performing.” Everyone leans in, curious.

“Where?” Beck asks.

“Probably the cabaret space at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. That was my usual place on Friday and Saturday nights. Epic on its Thursday club night and Glad Day Bookshop for the Drag Brunch on Sunday mornings.” Everyone’s eyes are full of wonder, full of memories. “Around this time, I would be heading into the dressing room. The place would be lousy with queens. Beside me, Fanny, my old roommate, would be powdering down her face and bitching.” Bahadur stands and looks at me. It’s a moment in which we can hear each other’s thoughts. Just as Firuzeh said, performing in front of each other, being seen, is medicine. It is time to imagine. It is time to play. To be the stars of our own show in our heads. We nod in agreement.

Bahadur sits next to me and begins powdering their face, pretending to be Fanny. Everyone laughs, but it triggers something inside me. It’s like Fanny is sitting right next to me. The forest around me fades into the underground dressing room of Buddies in Bad Times Theatre. I am no longer sitting on a rotting log; I’m sitting on a rickety plastic chair with bras hanging over my backrest. I look down, and I am no longer wearing my runaway clothes covered in chicken shit. I am wearing my signature red-leather strapless pencil dress, the one I found for \$14.99 at the Goodwill.

“Girl, tell me the truth. What is the difference between a sixty-five-dollar highlighting palette and two-dollar glittery eye shadow?” Fanny would say to me, her face framed by a halo of bulbs and a mirror.

I look at Bahadur and play along, my heart aching. “Nothing, I guess.”

“That’s right. Nothing. All you gotta do is use a big-ass blush brush and you’re off to the races. Thank you, dollar store. No thank you, Sephora.” As I am outlining my lips, Liv gets up from the fire and walks into our imaginary dressing room, turns one of the dead lightbulbs on our mirrors clockwise, and it is alive again.

“Evening, ladies.”

“That’s ‘goddesses’ to you.” Fanny corrects her playfully.

“Well, goddesses. You’re up in five.” Liv exits and heads upstairs.

“Thank you,” I say, as I lean forward to turn my head upside down and crown myself with my cherry-coloured wig. Before I put my red evening gloves on, I help Fanny into her dress and zip her up. She does the same for me. We do one last pat-down of any sweat in our armpits and head up the two flights of stairs to the cabaret space. We can hear bass music pounding against the concrete walls. When we enter, the place is alive with shirtless men. Quartets of gender-Queer folks book-ending each other and swaying to the beat of the music. A couple of leather-dykes kiss in the corner. Three baby Queers wearing rainbow suspenders take selfies on the dance floor. We pass the bar. Beck gets up from the campfire and joins in on our improvisation. Behind the bar, he wipes down a glass and nods in our direction.

“Hey, Queen Kay! Hey, Fanny! Are you up soon? Have time for a shot?”

“We always have time for a shot!” says Fanny.

Beck pours us all tequila shots, including himself. We toast each other, down the golden liquid and suck on limes. Liv interrupts us before heading to the tech booth.

“Goddesses? Places, please.” We wince at the strength of the tequila and nod at Liv at the same time. We head to the stage. The light changes, and Fanny gets the mic. I take my place in the wings.

“Happy Pride, bitches!” The crowd goes wild. Fanny scowls and she assesses the crowd. The spotlight is so powerful that she has to shield her eyes with her flat, gloved hand. “Uh-huh. Uh-huh.” People giggle. Fanny spots a handsome bearded man in floral printed briefs. “Yes, please.” More giggles. “And you, ma’am?” Firuzeh gets up from the campfire and points to herself.

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” Bahadur reaches out their hand and brings her into the scene onstage. Firuzeh is suddenly onstage with Fanny, nervously covering her face. “What’s wrong, darling?”

“I’m so nervous!” she says.

“Let me guess.” Fanny puts her fingertips to her forehead like a psychic. “You have just been through a breakup.” Firuzeh nods and giggles. The audience laughs. “And you’re here to celebrate Pride and maybe . . .

perhaps . . . if you're lucky . . . you're hoping to find a meaningful relationship?" The crowd guffaws. "I mean, that's where you find meaningful relationships, right? At Pride? That's where I find my meaningful relationships: during Pride, at the bathhouse." More laughter. Firuzeh covers her face in playful embarrassment. "What's your name, darling?"

"Firuzeh."

"Well, who here would like to help Firuzeh have a great Pride tonight?" The crowd cheers. "Who wants to bite her box?" More cheers. "Who wants to put a dog in her bun? Who wants to teach her the Big Finger Bang Theory?!" The crowd goes wild. "Well, beautiful Firuzeh, if I have my friend, Queen Kay, sing a song for you, would that help you get over your breakup?" Firuzeh nods eagerly. "Okay. You go ahead and have a seat among these good-looking people."

I wait in the wing of the cabaret space, knowing my moment is coming. I go over the lyrics of the song in my head. I practise the hand movements.

"Now, who is ready for some show?" Screams. Thunderous applause. "Next up is the performer I know you've all been waiting for." The audience goes silent. It's quiet enough that I can hear Fanny's hand rub against the handle of the microphone. I can hear her laboured breathing. "Let me tell you about her. You may know her as Queen Kay. But I know her as my sister. She told me to run. I didn't listen. And I know every day she thinks of me and wonders if I am safe."

I can't resist peeking my head around the curtain of the wing. I can see Fanny's stunning fat silhouette against the heat of the spotlight. It is a voluptuous shape achieved from our countless weed sessions and late-night poutines. My jaw drops at the sight of you in the front row, wearing the suit you wore when I met you. You are smiling from ear to ear. You sit proudly, awaiting my performance.

"And tonight, I want to tell her that no, I may not be alive. Her beau, Evan, may not be alive. But girl, thanks to you, we lived." Liv, Firuzeh and Beck's eyes become misty, and they hold hands waiting for me to step onstage. "Everyone put your hands together for her royal highness. Queen Kaaaaaaay!"

The crowd cheers. Liv puts leaves on the campfire to create smoke. It diffuses the light of the moon above my head. I take my place, my back to the audience, taking hold of the wall.

In the mist and semi-darkness, Liv cues a Deborah Cox song and starts the laser light show from the tech booth. Everyone is on their feet, screaming and dancing to that familiar song with the endless intro. A side light bathes my silhouette in red. The light shifts to a crisp spotlight over my head. Applause at the sight of me. When the lyrics begin, I whip around and lip-synch, looking directly at Firuzeh. She shyly points to herself and I nod my head in approval. I sing to her as if she is an unwanted romantic interest, someone I cannot resist despite having given up on love long ago. I hold on to the wall, stifling my desire for her, and the crowd howls. Firuzeh's face erupts into blushing.

In the audience, a bearded queen twirls her skirt, revealing her fat, hairy legs. A lesbian elder dances as if it were her very own show, her audience in the corner of the bar. A Trans femme twirls a baton into the air and catches it. The beefcake in his floral briefs nods his head to the music.

As the song crescendos into a frenzy of bass beats, you begin dancing to the beat of the music, your arms conducting a staccato symphony of Queerness. My eyes well up with tears. My beautiful Evan. My beautiful people. We are visible. We are dancing. We are fearless. We are fierce. Full length, width and depth. Our bodies at full volume. Unfurled. Unhiding. Just as the song reaches its zenith, my lips quiver the sustained final note in mock vibrato, you toss a handful of golden sparkles into the air, and we all watch the sparkles fall.

The cabaret fades away. In its place, a meteor shower streaks the night sky. We are surrounded by trees once again, the sound of crickets singing among the reeds.

We hold hands, shaking, crying. The five of us Others. History-makers. Soon to be dead. Soon to be free. Under the cosmic light show of our resilience.

# 11

**When I wake**, I sit up immediately to confirm the location of the moon. It has moved since last night. It now sits prettily in the sky to the west of us, just above the skeletal remains of a rotten cedar trunk. It is the full moon now. It is time.

Beck pours a bottle of water over the campfire's embers, and smoke sizzles up towards the cloudless blue above. We are taciturn, considering our precious last tasks on the farm. We pack up our sleeping bags. We eat another humble meal of dry goods. Liv takes inventory of the weaponry and distributes it among us. I sit beside Firuzeh, and we load our magazines with bullets. Click. Click. Click. Each one a life we may take today. I notice Bahadur standing over the remains of the campfire with their eyes tightly closed.

"Hey, Bahadur," I say gently. "Are you okay?" They smile weakly before picking up a stray cracker sleeve wrapper from the ground and wandering away from my concerned gaze.

Hanna stands on the porch, watching us carry supplies to the van. Back and forth. She cradles her big bosom like a bag of spoiled apples she no longer wants, her face sour with helplessness. Each time Beck passes her I can see words forming at the edges of her lips. And each time those words are about to spill, I see her catch the eye of Peter, who is scowling as always and pretending not to care about our impending journey. Beck makes his way to the van again, this time with a case of bottled water. He almost falters in his grip and Hanna steps forward. Another strong scowl from Peter and Hanna backs off, swallowing hard.

We all enter the van. Liv covers Bahadur and Firuzeh with a blanket and looks at me, ready to tuck me into hiding yet again. Before I join them, I look back one more time at Hanna, choking on tears.

Beck places his jacket over the back of the driver's seat and makes his way to his mother. They stand about six feet apart. Hanna wrings her hands together in a continuous circle trying to make sense of this final exchange.

"Mom . . ."

Hanna goes towards her son, her arms outstretched. "Please don't—"

"Hanna!" Peter shouts from the front door. He does not make eye contact with Beck. "Let them all go. They made a choice. They all made a choice. Let them do it."

"Beck."

"Hanna! Get inside the house. Now." Peter makes his way into the house and closes the screen door. A gesture. A symbol. A line. A border.

"Beck?"

Beck sobs. "Yes, Mom."

"Beck. Beck." Hanna feels the word in her mouth. Lets the word lift from her lips into the air. An experiment. "This is who you are."

"Hanna! Will you get inside?!" Hanna turns to Peter with the look of the devil in her. Her face is red.

"Shut up!" Peter's mouth twists, and he moves inside, away from the door and out of sight. She turns back to Beck. Wipes her face. Starts again. Love. "Beck. My son. My beautiful son. I love you. I love you. My beautiful Beck. I love you. Just the way you are. Just the way you are now. I love you. And I hope whatever shape you are in, whoever you turn out to be, one day you can love me back."

Beck's shoulders are pumping up and down. Hanna reaches out and holds him. Maybe even holds him up, he is shaking so hard. It is a full-body hug. She laces her fingers into his hair and covers his forehead with kisses as he whispers into her ear something that makes her release a single, vocal sob. It comes from deep in her belly, a place so deep, a place she hasn't touched since her first cry into this wicked world. Then she looks at him straight in the eyes and says, "Okay. You go and fight."

We drive. The dusty road is bumpy and unforgiving. It jostles about our silence like it jostles our supplies in the van. Before I go under the blankets with Bahadur and Firuzeh, I see Liv considering whether to say something comforting. Instead, she holds her concern in her throat and between her

eyebrows. Liv turns on the radio and scans for a station. Country music. Static. Soft rock. Static. A vague signal of a news program. Static. She gives up and shuts off the radio.

We drive. The sound of the squeaking shocks is replaced by the constant hum of rocky asphalt. With the blanket covering only my legs, I lie back and run through our plans in my head the way I used to run through choreography before a performance. Thumbs, one above the other, in a snug embrace. Line up the point in the front end of the gun with the open square on the back end of the gun. Slowly squeeze the trigger. I catch myself imagining the paper target Beck created for us on the farm transforming into a Boot. A leather jacket. The zippers. His rifle pointed straight at me. A decision moving from my brain down the length of my arm into the tip of my finger, to kill or be killed. My bullet flying out of my weapon and piercing the surface of his chest. I shake my head to douse the image burning in my mind. I wipe my face of the imagined blood sprayed from the Boot's wound. Your imagined touch on my arm calms me, and I exhale. Evan. My beautiful Evan.

"Kay. The traffic is getting heavier. You need to get under the blanket before a truck sees you," says Liv.

I lift the blanket enough to see that beside me, Firuzeh is spooning Bahadur, who is shaking like a leaf. I break our silence.

"What's going on? Are you okay?" I motion to remove the blanket. Bahadur stops me, as much as their shaking will allow. They try to spit words out, but I cannot understand. "Do you need help? Do we need to stop?" Firuzeh is behind them trying to stifle their shakes.

"I . . . I can't! I can't! Please . . ."

"Shhhhh . . . Shhhhhh." I hold their hands together, two hands in a fisted prayer. Their knuckles are white in their tight grasp. Sweat. Drool. Tears. "Breathe, Bahadur. Come on. Breathe with me." They take a breath, then another, then another. They finally slow down enough to speak, but every now and then they hiccup on their own tears.

"I . . . don't know if I can do this, Firuzeh. I am not a fighter like you. I'm a runner. I run. I know how to hide. I know how to make myself as small as possible so that no one can see me, harm me. I know how to freeze and go somewhere else, go outside my body when bad things are happening to me. But I don't know how to fight."

“I saw you, Bahadur,” Firuzeh says, tenderly. “You can fight. We all have learned how to fight. We’re capable.”

“No. No. I can’t!” Sweat. Drool. Tears. Firuzeh tries to will them to breathe again. I can see that she is working hard to contain Bahadur in her loving arms.

“Is everything okay back there?” I hear Liv call out from the passenger seat. Bahadur suddenly emerges from the blanket cover and unlocks the van door. Beck is forced to pull over on the country road as Bahadur tumbles out of the van. They collapse on the side of the road. We all huddle around them as they scream.

“What’s going on?! We can’t be out here. Everyone back into the van!” Beck demands in a stage whisper. He looks around frantically. The van is a black rectangle in a vast stretch of open field. Rows of corn stand low and green to the right of our vehicle. Rolling hills undulate softly in the distance. At the top of one knoll, a farmhouse sits beside a droopy willow tree, its windows framing the scene we are creating.

“Just wait!” Firuzeh says to Beck before she crouches down to Bahadur’s reddened face. “Bahadur! Look at me. Look at me!” Firuzeh attempts to touch them, but Bahadur flinches.

Bahadur starts spitfire monologuing. “Firuzeh. What if this were a movie? What if we were all in a movie right now and all of us were characters? We would be as we are in real life: the first ones to get killed. The first ones to become invisible. Silenced. Disappeared. We’re the ones. We’re gonna die. We’re all gonna die!”

“SHHHHH!” Beck spits at us. I look out at the farmhouse Beck has been eyeing, and we both see the curious homeowner open the front door.

A middle-aged man with a red golf shirt shifts right and left, wondering what’s going on behind our black minivan. He waves and says something inaudible. I hide. Firuzeh hides. Bahadur shakes. Their sobs transform into hysterical choking, as if fluid has gone down the wrong pipe. Their tongue hangs just outside their lips. Their face is beet red.

“You need a boost, young man?” the man repeats to Beck. Liv quickly emerges from the side of the van, pretending to wipe the front of her pants.

“Just a couple of sick kids, sir.” Liv poses in pretend irritation and laughs.

“Boy, do I miss those long drives with kids!” the man says sarcastically. He gives a dismissive wave and goes back inside. The distant sound of a

screen door closing.

Beck waves, then focuses on us with an alarmed glare. “Get in the car!”

“We’re gonna die!”

Firuzeh holds Bahadur’s face in her hands.

“No. Not today. Look at me, Bahadur! Not today!” Firuzeh screams, loud enough that my ears are ringing. Everyone is silent, including Bahadur. Everyone is surprised by the sound of her voice. “Look at me. Look at me!” Bahadur obeys, their breathing still laboured, spit gathering in the corners of their mouth. Then quietly, calmly, “You will not die today. You are not that character. This is not that movie. You are not invisible. You will not be silenced. You will not disappear. You will not die. You will not die. You will not die. You will not die.” She says it again and again until I, too, believe it. Until she has little breath in her body. Firuzeh models deep inhaled and exhaled until Bahadur’s face slowly returns to its normal colour and their breath slows. We all crowd around Bahadur, silent in the wake of Firuzeh’s words until Beck finally, solemnly, speaks up.

“We need to get into the van before somebody sees you.”

We drive again. The sound of the rocky asphalt becomes the sound of city potholes. Under our blanket cover, Firuzeh continues to spoon Bahadur, who faces me, speaking prayers into our six intertwined hands as we enter Toronto.

I close my eyes and consider all those who have come before me, who have prayed over the barrel of their own gun, before fighting for their own survival. What objects did they touch in the corners of their pockets to steady the beat of their hearts? What pictures did they kiss to remind them of their reason to fight? I touch two fingers to my own mouth, imagining you kissing me good luck.

I close my eyes and remember that dreaded day I was exorcised. At dawn, after my mother’s church folk released me, I walked, Evan. I walked for as long as my legs would allow me, my head unevenly shorn. In the light of dawn, I walked north on Parliament Street, away from my neighbourhood of St. James Town, away from my mother, away from those who prayed over me. A store owner cranked his awning open and shuddered at the sight of my humiliation. Seeing me in my soiled pyjamas, a woman walking her dog avoided me and crossed the street. I kept walking. I descended a steep hill under a bridge into a ravine, hoping for quiet, away from the sound of the city and the repetition of scripture. I

walked until there were no longer sidewalks, until the only people who passed me were joggers who assumed I, too, was on my morning run. I walked until I saw a white bridge towering above me and underneath it an old cemetery. I approached the weathered headstones, each leaning in different directions, each one moist with the morning dew. I felt nothing. I, too, was dead. Perhaps if I sat down among them, I would have something in common with someone else. Maybe I would belong. I ran my raw and newly clipped nails along the surface of the epitaphs. 1850–1911. 1872–1895. 1922–1963. I found one that read “Lord, we give you our littlest angel,” for someone by the name of Beatrice Annabel Anderson who had lived and died in the year 1937. It was a humble, flat marker. I lay my head down on its cold surface, outstretched my arms and legs, closed my eyes and prayed to join her.

That’s when I felt the sensation of being watched. I jolted upright and searched the forest and bridge for yet another person about to attack me. The crack of a branch breaking startled me again. From the grouping of headstones I saw a majestic doe. Her neck peeked out from the grass she was eating and she looked me in the eyes. She chewed for a while and then swallowed, the grass going down her graceful throat. The fearful pounding of my heart slowed in the presence of her. As minutes (hours? lifetimes?) passed, the glow of the morning sun warmed the surface of her golden fur as it warmed the surface of my weeping face. What did she transmit through her gaze that day? What message did she have for me from beyond? I still cannot put into words what was communicated. Only images. In the reflections of her eyes I saw myself as a young child again, listening to the magic of a piano playing. Me spinning about the room as an LP turned on its table. Dancing like birds just about to take flight. Dancing like eyes slowly opening in the morning. Dancing like the fog dissipating in the warmth of the sun.

I knew then, being my true self now more than ever, I was a child of God. I stood, walked towards school and never returned home.

## 12

**Do you know** how to use this?” A sound technician holds a body microphone between his thumb and forefinger. Adea and Amana nod in unison. The technician wears a Boot uniform, albeit sadly. One can tell by its ill fit that underneath the leather jacket he is just a ninety-pound geek who serves the regime with his expertise but not his heart.

“Do you need me to wire it up for you?” His voice cracks. Adea and Amana look at each other knowingly, then look back at the technician, who is quizzically inspecting their enormous skirts, bridged together as if they are conjoined twins in golden sparkles and pink tulle.

“No. We’re good,” they say in semi-convincing rounds.

“You sure?”

Rather than look at the diminutive technician to assert her authority, Liv looks into the bulb-framed mirror and removes a smudge of lipstick from her two front teeth. She interjects from her lounge chair in the dressing room.

“They said they were good. Now leave.” Liv shifts from one bum cheek to the other to deliver a sly grin at the technician, her black pantsuit in drastic contrast to the twins’ skirts. “I want to have a conversation with these two young ladies before we start.”

The technician looks at Adea and Amana, then leaves reluctantly, assuming that Liv will discipline them. The door shuts.

Liv hears static on her walkie-talkie, and she picks it up. “Liv here.”

“What’s your ETA? The delegates are already in place and are waiting.”

“We’re just putting mics on the twins and then I’m escorting them out. Give me five.”

“Five it is. Over.” Static. Liv shuts off her walkie-talkie.

The twins each quickly pinch a body mic onto their respective bone corsets and expertly thread the wire along the inside of its seams, then connect the wire to a receiver. They help each other clip the receiver to the back of their corsets, barely moving the parade float of a costume.

“Are the body mics off?” The twins check each other’s receivers and nod at Liv. “Good. Everyone is in place. When I give you the signal, we will begin.” They all hug as much as the skirts will allow, foreheads touching. The twins’ faces have healed from the cigar burns, and their heads are evenly shaved now to appear intentional, fashionable, and not an act of humiliation. Just in time for this internationally observed event. Breathing heavily, their heads all meet in the centre of this circle and their arms intertwine in a last embrace. Liv releases herself from the circle to meet eyes with the twins. She holds their hands in hers, the corners of her eyes gathering water. They embrace one more time. Looks of fear. Of ending. Everything final. Liv turns on the twins’ mic receivers and places her forefinger to her mouth to alert the twins that people may be listening. The twins nod.

Liv walks to the double doors of the dressing room and opens them. They continue through a darkened theatre, slowly walking past marble walls, empty box office windows and dusty chandeliers towards the sound of a raucous crowd. Two Boots stand at the doors of the theatre and open them for the procession.

Liv speaks into her walkie-talkie.

“This is Liv. We’re about to exit the theatre. Over.”

“Copy that.”

Liv leads Adea and Amana out into the hustle and bustle of the Summit of Nations. Cameras. Reporters. Microphones. The twins squint their eyes against the dazzlingly bright sunshine.

A tall brunette woman, wearing a pantsuit and a headset, approaches Liv.

“Hi, Liv. I’m Joan. Is everyone ready?”

“Yup. They’ll stay right behind me.”

Joan rushes to the front of the procession, where a marching band awaits in their crisp red-and-white uniforms, and gives a signal. A team of

baton twirlers in maple-leaf-printed track suits waits patiently behind the marching band. A whistle is heard. A rhythmic percussive intro starts a rollicking rendition of “O Canada.” The twins begin to step forward and Joan rushes to intervene.

“Not yet,” she says with her arm blocking them, looking at the marching band’s progress down the street. “I don’t want any bottlenecking. I want it to be nice and smooth.” Joan talks into her headset, then another signal. “Baton twirlers . . . Go!” The team obliges by dancing in the direction of the marching band. Joan lifts her arm. “Okay. Twins. Go!”

Amidst the noise, Amana looks at her sister and sends her a silent message through her eyes and the tight grasp of her hand. Adea looks back, her breath shaky and her eyes clear, confirming that the message is received. The twins gracefully step forward. Joan signals for three Boots to clear the path for Liv and the twins as they make their way from Victoria Street to Yonge Street, then to Yonge-Dundas Square. Joan waves goodbye and says, “Have fun!”

“And we’re off to the races!” says one of two commentators sitting in an elevated platform overlooking the procession, their image broadcast on the giant screen in the square. One commentator with blond ringlets flashes a lipstick smile at the camera, and the other’s bushy moustache hovers over his handheld microphone. Both of them sport Canadian flag T-shirts and white straw hats.

“Well, Kelly, it looks like thousands of proud Canadians are gathering here today to kick off the Summit of Nations. Why, people are so rowdy, you’d think this was the Santa Claus Parade!” says Moustache, buoyant and cheerful.

Kelly giggles and waves at the crowds. “Well, Paul. It’s not Santa Claus, but we certainly celebrate our esteemed delegates from afar . . .”

The international media representatives do not don the same smiles. Instead, they each wear a face of determination. A reporter in the crowd squeezes between several spectators holding Canadian flags to reach the twins. “Adea and Amana! What does your presence say to the world about the Renovation?” she asks in an Australian accent.

Other international reporters materialize and chime in.

“Are you being held captive?”

“Are all Others like you safe?”

“Do you believe the Renovation was beneficial to you?”

The media scrum that has appeared on the parade route is tight. Another reporter manages to elbow her way between two cameramen. “Adea and Amana! Delegates from New Zealand and Ireland refused to attend today’s summit after expressing concern that the Renovation is a sign of the rise of a fascist regime here in Canada. Do you agree?”

They move slowly in their immense skirts, observing the banners celebrating the Summit of Nations and Canada’s birthday. Yonge Street is a sea of spectators wearing white straw hats with red bands, all fighting for a better view. Once they gain access to the front of the barriers, they gawk at the twins walking freely on the street and tainting the city. Some eyes are wide at the sight of them. Some laugh. Some take pictures. Some spit at them.

On the east side of the street, a vendor sells straw hats, Canadian flags and popcorn. He catches the eyes of the twins as he twists a plastic bag closed and hands it to a young couple. His glance is solemn and serious. Is it apologetic? Disgusted? It is unclear.

Farther south, a father carries his toddler on his hip and points at the twins. His older child jumps in front of him, begging for a better look at the procession.

On the west side of the street a pair of women sandwich a Boot and take selfies. All three make the peace sign before taking several photos. “Yay!” the women exclaim.

Behind them a man sits atop a newspaper box. He watches the twins pass. His arms bookend his fat belly. When the twins make eye contact with him, he mouths the word “Sorry” before descending from the box and disappearing among the masses.

The media continue to follow the sisters north on Yonge, both Adea and Amana seemingly calm, their faces neutral. The crowd begins to chant.

“REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN!” Liv can feel the breath of the crowd pushing against her chest with each unified word punctuated with cartoonish war cries. “REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN!”

Adea squeezes Amana’s hand and gestures with her chin to look up. Boots pace along the edge of each building rooftop. Guns point at the twins’ heads. Helicopters circle the sky. The twins interlace fingers to join their now sweaty palms and continue their graceful procession.

As they approach Yonge-Dundas Square, they see risers full of international delegates in their finery waiting, watching, with translators by their sides. A sea of more than three thousand white spectators in their straw hats parts, and the twins slowly ascend a wide ramp to the concrete stage, which has two large speakers on either side.

Liv reaches her hand out to stop the twins momentarily as Prime Minister Dunphy begins his speech. He is even more handsome in person than he is on television, although slightly thinner in build under his charcoal-grey suit. His charismatic smile flashes at the audience of delegates, and they can't help but smile back. Beside him stands Charles, smirking at Liv. Liv smiles back and stands guard over the twins. A quiet descends upon the crowd.

“Good afternoon, my fellow Canadians.” Cheers.

“Ladies and gentlemen, *mesdames et messieurs*. One year ago today, I stood on Parliament Hill doubting everything we were celebrating. We faced some of the greatest challenges our country has faced since its inception. Widespread floods followed by drought and wildfires left countless Canadians homeless and businesses out of commission. Leading a nation forward while its citizens were on their knees begging for mercy was no easy feat. But I was determined to lead nonetheless.” Dunphy chokes up. He takes out a tissue and dabs at tears that do not exist. Cameras click. He continues. “In the wake of such turmoil, difficult decisions were made during difficult times, including the Two Nations, One Vision campaign, which, along with our neighbours in the United States of America, worked to rid our lands of terror and tyranny. I can tell you that despite the madness of those times, the Government of Canada never stopped believing in the power of democracy and the power of its people!” Cheers. “Here in Toronto, the pilot program, the Renovation, has created jobs and has helped feed families across the nation. The founding of seven strategically placed workhouses in this great city has transformed the manufacturing industry into a local operation, made for Canadians by Canadians. On these compounds live flourishing, healthy communities of Others who are given free housing and shelter. Within walking distance of each workhouse are schools, ensuring the next generation of Others will receive an in-depth education in the skills they need to succeed in the future. It is with Canadians in mind that we assert the Government of Canada's constitutional authority to expand this vital project as a federal initiative. It

is with great excitement that we announce that on this day, on this nation's birthday, we launch Renovations in Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal and Halifax. From sea to sea, this nation will see the glory of hard work, of unity and peace. This time in our lives is a time of great transformation, here in Canada and around the world. From climate change to the rise of extreme politics, we must fight against the forces that have the potential to pull us apart. The Renovation will help us weather these changes the way Canadians always do when faced with adversity: by pulling together!"

The crowd of straw hats lets out a thunderous cheer. Liv steps aside to stage right as the cheers die down. Adea and Amana step onto the stage and make eye contact with Dunphy. Silence. The twins, still holding hands, bow ceremoniously, spreading the enormous tulle of their conjoined skirts into a pool of pink at the feet of the prime minister. He grins. The crowd roars. Submission.

"Adea and Amana. Internationally renowned heroines of the LGBTQ2S and Black community, it is with great honour that we welcome you to the stage to share with the world the beauty of change, the beauty of the Renovation." Cheers. The twins proceed to the microphone, and the prime minister takes his seat among his entourage. Charles and the rest of the Boots cross to stage right where Liv stands. The delegates watch with bated breath. A media scrum pools at the foot of the stage. Reporters point their recording devices towards the twins and adjust their headphones for this momentous occasion.

When the sisters, still holding hands, assume their position, they see that two transparent teleprompters have been placed on either side of them, projecting the speech that Charles has prescribed them.

Amana starts as per the scrolling script: "Good afternoon, Summit of Nations." Her voice is even. Calm. Smooth. The audience is completely silent. "My name is Amana."

"And my name is Adea."

"We are here today to not only welcome the world to our wondrous nation, but to celebrate its birthday." Thunderous applause.

Adea continues. "This milestone is marked with revolutionary change helmed by our esteemed prime minister." The prime minister waves back at the twins, offers a small wave to the delegates and the crowd. A flash of that charismatic smile.

Amana reads, “Since its inception only seven months ago, the Renovation has created thousands of jobs across Toronto in manufacturing and distribution. In addition to making goods for Canadians by Canadians, all workers are entitled to housing for themselves and for their hardworking families. All Others like me and my sister have been put to task, living the creed of the Renovation: *Through our work, our nation prospers. Through our unity, we end conflict. Through our leader, we find peace. Through order, we find tranquility.*” Applause. Inquisitive looks from the media scrum, waiting.

Liv takes a tube of lip balm from her pocket, applies it and looks straight at the twins. The twins nod. They reposition themselves away from the teleprompters.

Adea continues, this time with conviction in her voice. “Perhaps this may all seem familiar to you. But they are lies. Because what our prime minister calls jobs, what he may call ‘housing,’ others call forced labour camps.” A collective gasp across the crowd of spectators.

Charles stands. Liv steps close and points a gun into his back, hidden from the crowd. He stops. “Remember, Charles, the world is watching.” Liv flashes a look at the prime minister, who glares back at her with surprised contempt. The crowd waits, frozen.

“People of the world, international media, know this. What you are seeing is a ruse! And my and my sister’s presence here is simply subterfuge to distract you from a greater tragedy! A continued tragic story spanning back to the genocide of this land’s Indigenous people. We are not free! We are among millions of Others who have been forced into camps or into hiding! We must liberate our fellow citizens from this tyranny. At this very moment, every workhouse in the city is being destroyed. The Renovation must be stopped!” The microphone is abruptly disconnected, and Amana’s speech can no longer be heard.

The spectators raise their voices in a collective uproar. The media scrum around the base of the stage goes into a frenzy, microphones pointing at the twins, hoping to catch audio.

We emerge from the tulle of the twins’ conjoined skirts. Three of us at first. Firuzeh lets out a loud yelp. Hearing the signal, five more emerge from behind the speakers. From under the stage, another twenty. Us Others. Holding guns. A round of shots is fired, and one of the Boots is flung from the top of a building to his death. We look up and see a Boot who has

pushed another Boot to his death. He removes his helmet and lets out a yelp to reveal himself as an ally. We look around and see several like him, stepping to the side and turning on their own as part of the Resistance. They each remove their helmets so that we can identify our allies. Yelps of identification. The delegates and prime minister hit the deck. Screams among the crowd.

We follow our plan. Firuzeh and I each disarm a Boot. Deflect end of rifle with left palm. Punch with right fist to the chin or kick to stomach. Butt of the gun to the face. Take the weapon. Bahadur, given their height, struggles a bit. I hold my breath, wondering if they have it in them to do as we were taught. Bahadur finally delivers a kick to the Boot's stomach and manages to disarm him. They hold the rifle in the air and scream away the fear, their eyes focused and their body full of adrenalin. As instructed, we holster our Glocks and shoulder our newly acquired rifles. I look through the scope at Liv speaking to Charles onstage, her gun aimed now at the back of his head.

"Stand down!" Charles hesitates. "Tell your men to stand down, Charles. NOW!" Charles debates this in his head, whether to obey Liv. His arms up. His masculinity fragile. He looks around confused and enraged as he sees Boots pointing guns at their fellow officers in resistance. "Every camera is on us right now, and at least half of your men have turned against you, Charles. Do it!"

Charles sees Prime Minister Dunphy, his security ushering him from the stage. Delegates balled up on the ground, screaming. Liv steps back slightly and shoots. The bullet rips through Charles's ear. "Stand down or I won't miss next time."

Cameras shift from the twins to the mess of artillery pointing in various directions. Holding the bloody mess at the side of his head, as if the blood is music he does not want to hear, Charles gives a signal and the remaining Boots reluctantly stand down. Through the scope of my gun, I can see Charles making one last attempt to reach for his own weapon, and again Liv shoots. She does not miss.

"Good boy," she says to the corpse beneath her. Looking at me, she nods.

We Others proceed to move about the crowd, taking the Boots' weapons, the guns still warm from their hands. We act as we were trained to, assessing danger at every level, every angle.

Two Others in wheelchairs—one with a frayed denim vest and the other with a series of piercings in their\* ears—move swiftly among the fallen. They bulldoze past screaming spectators who move to the side at the last second, seeing the unapologetic determination in their eyes.

Denim Vest approaches a fallen Boot, still twitching and bleeding from a towering fall. They lean over to dislodge the rifle. After a few earnest pulls, Denim Vest punches the air with rifle in hand, yelping at their acquisition. They continue their work of disarming the bloodied and still bodies of Boots.

The Other with piercings launches several multicoloured smoke bombs, wheeling their chair in larger and larger circles to force the crowd to clear the way, bulldozing anyone who dares to block their path. They signal for us to move forward as planned, and we obey their orders.

The rest of the Others gather in a circle around the twins. Some of us wear our runaway clothes. These clothes we wore before we disappeared, now weathered and stained. Some still have their heads shaved. Some have mouths that end in frowning scars. We rush towards our circle. All of us have the look of terror in our eyes. One disarmed Boot attempts to infiltrate our circle and another Boot shoots him in the neck. He collapses. The shooter removes his helmet and yelps to identify himself as an ally. More screams.

“Fucking n\_ \_ \_ \_s!” One spectator throws a can of cola at my feet. My face gets hot at the sensation of the brown liquid pooling at my shoes. I feel my arms go still.

“Get to work, towel head!”

“Go to hell!”

“Die, you tranny whores!”

Debris begins to fly from every direction. The sounds of bullets whizzing through the air. My arms. My arms. They can’t move. I look at Bahadur, their grip loose on their rifle. Their arms are droopy, succumbing to the humiliation.

“REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN! REH! NOH! VAY! SHUN!”

Onstage, Beck appears on top of one of the speakers and hollers out a high-pitched call to the audience. I witness a slight pause. A split second. A fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a moment where he doubts himself. Wonders if he is doing the right thing. It is the slightest shade of shame for

betraying those like him. And then it lapses. He breathes in, he shakes his hands free, then, with the power of the flames he once set on that protest site years ago, he lights within himself the rage needed to let his voice be heard.

*“WHEN I DO NOT ACT, I AM COMPLICIT!”* Beck says while simultaneously raising his rifle above his head horizontally with an end in each hand. He takes a deep breath here, steps forward with a lunge and moves in a downward motion with his rifle. Another fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a moment where he wonders who will join him. Suddenly, I see dozens of other white folks taking a step forward, executing the same gestures, with or without weapons. Some are in the crowd. Some are in the audience of delegates. Some are Boots.

They continue in unison. Their words filling my heart. Liv joins in, Charles’s blood pooling at her feet.

*When I do not act, I am complicit!*

*When I know wrong is happening, I act!*

*When the oppressed tell me I am wrong, I open my heart and change!*

*When change is led by the oppressed, I move aside and uplift!*

Raise arms, step forward, lunge back, kneel. Finally, just as Hanna suggested, Beck leads the allies in covering their mouths, touching their hearts and pointing towards us like a spotlight, this gathering of Others. When their phrase of movement is over, the white allies move through the incredulous crowds and encircle us Others. They join hands to create a barricade. Firuzeh looks at me and nods. We move forward as planned, slowly, as a unified body. Allies on the outskirts. Others within, protecting each other. We slowly proceed toward Yonge Street in silence. Spectators angrily glare at us as we move past a sea of straw hats.

I abide by Beck’s instructions and prepare myself to begin saying our names. Prepare to say mine loud and clear so that the media will know we are real people who have survived a real genocide. My heart races, forming the words in my heart and allowing them to travel up my esophagus, piece by piece.

“Queen Kay.” I see the memory of you, my beautiful Evan, standing before me. Your image is pixelated by every word I have written in every

Whisper Letter I have sent. Standing at your side is your mother, who clasps hands with you and smiles at me in wonder.

“Look at me,” says Mrs. King, the blue of her cataracts flashing at me like a beacon. “Be as big as you want to be.”

I feel the words exit my lips, as planned. I hear my voice loud and proud, echoing off the storefronts, knowing that in every workhouse in the city, there are Others saying the same thing while evacuating the premises. Through the smoke, under falling brick, over barbed wire fences; from the Don Valley to Ward’s Island, from Scarborough to the Junction, people are saying their names. A declaration. We are kites, prayers flying in the sky, knowing freedom.

“MY NAME IS KAY! I AM THE SON OF GABBY NOPUENTE AND KEITH WATSON SMITH! AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!” I say it loud enough that the media scrum shifts its focus to me. Microphones. Flashing cameras.

Bahadur looks at me, tears welling in their eyes, then looks forward with bravery. “MY NAME IS BAHADUR TALEBI! I AM THE CHILD OF FATIMA TALEBI. AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

We continue north on Yonge Street. The media following us. The circle of allies unbreakable. The twins holding hands, crying. Each one of us calling out our names. Perhaps for the last time. Perhaps so that the world will know we existed. We call out our names.

“MY NAME IS ISABEL RODRIGUEZ! I AM THE DAUGHTER OF MARIA AND ISADORO RODRIGUEZ. AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS ALAN SCOTT! I AM THE CHILD OF VIRGINIA SCOTT. AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS FIRUZEH PASDAR!” Firuzeh’s voice shakes, overwhelmed with emotion. “I AM THE DAUGHTER OF AYESHA AND MOSTAFA PASDAR.” She swallows again. “AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS GRACE CARDINAL. I AM THE GRANDDAUGHTER OF ELEANOR THUNDERCLOUD. AND WE ALL DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS BENJAMIN HUXLEY! I AM THE GRANDSON OF TEDDY COOMBS. AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS MARTHA GREER! I AM THE MOTHER OF ANTHONY AND JESSICA GREER, WHEREVER THEY ARE. WE ALL

DESERVE TO LIVE!” Sobs.

“MY NAME IS ARTHUR YEBUGA! SON OF REGGIE AND SARAH YEBUGA. AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS GILBERT LEFRANCOIS! CHILD OF LOUIS AND MAUDE LEFRANCOIS! AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS ZAHRA MOHAMMED! MOTHER OF MY BABY ALI, WHEREVER HE IS. WE ALL DESERVE TO LIVE!”

“MY NAME IS CHASE KWAN! SON OF ELIZABETH AND RICKY KWAN. AND I DESERVE TO LIVE!”

We march to the horizon of asphalt, heat mirages snaking into the air, not knowing what awaits us. We march in our runaway clothes, our hiding clothes, our disappearing clothes, our working clothes. We march to the sound of our own names. We march for those who cannot march. Some of us without our families. All of us older. All of us surviving. We march north on Yonge Street calling out our names to the sky.

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I remember when I was first learning Diné Bizaad I had an especially difficult time learning the Navajo word for “thank you.” I feel like the language is all about breath control: when to let the air push through tongue and teeth and when to stop it dead in its tracks. In the time it took me to learn how to pronounce *ahe’hee* properly, I had learned the depth of that “thank you” and what it meant to be thankful in my new family. I am glad it took that long to learn the word because, as I know from my days in theatre, struggling through meaning is part of arriving at an understanding. Let me struggle through this thank-you. Let me try to express my thanks when all I want to do is cry and hold you all. We did this together.

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MY NAME IS CATHERINE HERNANDEZ. I AM THE MOTHER OF ARDEN MCNEILLY AND WIFE OF NAZBAH TOM. WE ALL DESERVE TO LIVE.

## About the Author

**CATHERINE HERNANDEZ** is a proud Queer woman of colour, a radical mother, a theatre practitioner, an award-winning author and the outgoing artistic director of b current performing arts. She is of Filipino, Spanish, Chinese and Indian heritage, and she is married into the Navajo Nation. Hernandez is the author of the novel *Scarborough*, which is soon to be a motion picture; won the Jim Wong-Chu Emerging Writers Award as an unpublished manuscript; was a finalist for the Toronto Book Award, the Forest of Reading Evergreen Award, the Edmund White Award and the Trillium Book Award; and was longlisted for Canada Reads. She has also written the plays *Singkil* and *Kilt Pins* and the children's books *M Is for Mustache: A Pride ABC Book* and *I Promise*. Hernandez lives in Toronto.

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