



CHARLOTTE GILL

LADYKILLER

"A killer debut."
— *The Globe and Mail*

STORIES




CHARLOTTE GILL was born in London, England and raised in the United States and Canada. She is a graduate of the MFA program in creative writing at the University of British Columbia. Her work has appeared in many Canadian magazines, *Best Canadian Stories*, *The Journey Prize Stories*, and has been broadcast on CBC Radio. *Ladykiller* was a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award. It won the Danuta Gleed Award and the B.C. Book Prize for fiction. Charlotte Gill lives in Vancouver.



Books of Merit

LADYKILLER



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CHARLOTTE GILL

stories

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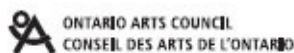
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YOU DRIVE

What could happen next besides gravity, besides the falling? The windshield smashed. Glass shattered, grains of glass hung suspended in confused air. Seconds elongated. Their guts compressed as if they were submerging in fluid, a cosmic miasma of uncertainty. The airbags inflated in great slamming puffs against their chests. They gulped the sudden rush of cold air. Life ripped open, as by a sharp metal hook, and suddenly all things became possible.

The seat belt, the very device that was supposed to save her, ripped at the bowl of her pelvis. She thought she heard his breath amidst all the crushing noise, or perhaps it was her own.

His brand-new truck buckled in all around them, so light for all its heaviness. Metal groaned. Inside the truck plastic twisted and snapped in a spray of snow and ice. The ends of her hair whipped around her mouth. Something hard and sharp struck the back of her head. The truck tumbled with the bodies inside, so slowly and easily that it felt like a cosmic joke. His arm slapped her body as the motion ground down to a shuddering stasis. This was the only sensation that hurt.

After an eternity of jangling motion the truck came to rest right side up, nose-down at a hideous angle. The crumpled hood obscured her view of the slope in front of them. What had stopped the fall? They teetered for several long minutes until it seemed the teetering had always been so.

He heard the clicks and hissing of the ruptured engine. Snow powdered the air. He couldn't turn his head. He made a question of her name.

"I'm okay," she heard herself say as simply as if they were lying next to one another in bed.

Visuals gathered. The airbags deflated in their laps. The front end of the vehicle had compacted like the flimsy metal of a tin can. The dashboard pinioned their legs. She could no longer see their feet, and it made her want to cry. Her face was wet. She touched her own cheek and found blood trickling through her hair from the back of her head. She turned her head to see the steering wheel rammed up against his chest.

She gasped.

"It doesn't hurt." He meant it. He felt etherized, drunk on the absence of pain.

She discovered she could move her arms without much struggle. She touched his parts. Cracked ribs? A punctured lung? She was no doctor. These were the crude diagnostics of an ape-wife, mere guesses at wounds unseen.

He couldn't stop thinking. He huddled away from his body inside the cozy caverns of the mind. In the pit of his belly sat a crystalline feeling, a feathering of cold.

A dull ache spread up from her knees. She shivered into the realization of cold. They lay pinned like fractured insects. The carpet of snow thickened around them without so much as a breath of wind. How long before a passing motorist took note of their lonely tire tracks above, the vanishing hollow in the snow? Small waves of panic cascaded through her body. How long would it take for the

rescuers to come? Minutes or hours? They weren't built for this, their soft torsos weren't made to survive this kind of trauma. Was this how one died, without knowing it?

She kept touching him, disrupting the work of his thoughts. Blood screamed through his vessels. Red cells raced like fire trucks to put out his body's fires. But nothing hurt, nothing. His blood was in a frenzy of hemoglobin. He had never felt so high.

He was a botanist, of sorts. In his basement he nurtured a plantation. His crops were fed by a complicated array of tubes that dripped perfect ratios of liquid nutrient. Thousands of lumens fed his thriving plants. Timers ran their circadian rhythms. He loved the sappy smell. He loved the constant, subterranean summer. He liked to wander between the rows and hear the leaves rustle. The hum of things growing.

Time unfolded as a marathon of seconds. More reality crept in. She caught herself thinking about their blood and how to get it out in the laundry. Look at the mess they were in. She raged with impatience. How long would all of this take?

He laughed out loud. "If we blow up, the whole province will get high." He could hear his ribs creak.

"We're not going to blow up," she said. That only happened in movies.

They feared and hated the police. Their prayers for the arrival of the authorities were new and ironic. They nudged each other from the temptations of unconsciousness. *Are you awake? Don't fall asleep.* They related the storylines of films they'd seen, faking the plot when they couldn't remember. When they ran out of movies, there were the domestic scenarios, the beauty of the life they could have. Someone would have to learn how to cook. They could fill his house with things and more things. She could make feasts and their friends would come by. She could learn how to sew and sew hats at the local fairs. Babies, jars with dried foods in them, explosions of wrapping paper for Christmas. No more lonesome pot pies eaten off the arm of a chair. No more rides from strangers at the far fringes of destiny.

Out of a distant universe came the blessed wail of sirens. They heard them arrive, the rescuers who tumbled down the bank with their headlamps and their radios and their rubber gloves like an army of curious aliens. Now the cops had come to make arrests, to peel them apart.

He asked, "Will you be my wife?"

"You're in shock," she said.

"How do you know?" he said.

She didn't know a single thing. They had gone over the falls like two people in a barrel – perfectly fused with the moment, completely conjoined with each other. Now they drifted in the spume and the mist of the aftermath. Every single second took them farther away. They should have been moaning in agony. They were damaged. They were amazing. Made of soft flesh and yet look how indestructible.

The rear wheels fishtailed here and there and she could see how it pleased him, the tautness, the veering towards and away from danger. His driving terrified her. It made her angry and brave. She twisted in her seat to face him. "Are you trying to kill us both?" she asked, wanting to push it all over from *doing* to *done*.

He jabbed at the stereo's volume button. The interior went quiet except for the engine, the purr of the tires on snow.

She wiped a circle of fog off the window and stared out at the winding road. Her thoughts were rotten. She wouldn't say any more.

Around the broad sweep of a curve, the tires slipped a little underneath them. More, then a little

too much.

~~She dug her elbow into the armrest, rising up and back against the seat. From the blur of whitened evergreens, it seemed they were sliding sideways. She looked to him, to the strange orientation of his shoulders, and the sensation was confirmed.~~

The truck slid out like a secret. It glided obliquely, wider around the bend. He pawed at the wheel hand over hand as the world outside slurred centrifugally. Of course he would correct this avalanche of motion, negotiate them back from danger to safety. When everything stopped, when their breath returned, she would ask, *What if? Can you imagine?* He was an expert. Nearly everything had happened to him before.

He knew better but braked anyway. The wheels locked. The tires floated over the ice and snow as if treadless. They careened. Sideways, backwards. He turned to her and said plainly, without any trace of panic, as if such events occurred every day of his life: "Hold on."

The rain rolled over them in a spattering torrent. The wipers could barely keep up. They climbed up and up into the next ridge of mountains. The temperature dropped. The road turned slushy with snow.

His truck clipped along through a nondescript channel of forest. In the back of his truck were many pounds of prime-grade hydroponically cultivated marijuana of a strain he himself had derived and gardened to fruition. He had packed it lovingly in garbage bags and Rubbermaid bins. Now he couldn't wait to liquidate it. Now his nose played tricks on him. He could smell money everywhere. He drove hard. He drove to meet a guy named Maurice, who lived in the outer suburban flats of Vancouver. A guy who paid in U.S. cash, who sat far away from tables with a suicidal glint in his eyes.

He drove aggressively. He felt like pushing things to the brink and then bringing them back to safety. The stereo crunched out his music. As a passenger, his last girlfriend never complained. She never got mad. She indulged him in everything. Together they sped, they passed. His last girlfriend bored him to the verge of dementia.

"Could you pull over?" she asked him. "I think I need to pee."

He swerved onto the shoulder. She fell meekly out. In the side mirror he watched her squat in the margin between the shoulder and the ditch, and he thought about driving away.

Snowflakes stung the back of her neck and the fronts of her thighs. She wore a mere patch of skin. She wondered about her own proclivities, always sexy over sensible.

She came back with snow in her hair. It melted before his eyes.

"What would you do if I left you right here?" he asked.

She looked up and down the highway. Not a single car in sight. She stretched her sleeves down over her hands and let her chin tremble. With men, things went so predictably, cataclysmically wrong. She nudged herself into these endings, as if they were pre-written, and in a peculiar way it satisfied.

He looked out over the steering wheel at the white, wet road. "Get in," he growled.

Why did he bother? Crisis. Complaints. Misery. Maintenance. He had a problem. He ran into women like telephone poles for the pain, the intensity, the continual drama. He knew exactly why. They distracted him from a disease of too much quiet. The sad secrecy of life as a criminal. Which, he reminded himself, was exactly what he was.

She shrunk down in her seat and faced straight ahead. From the folds of her clothing she produced two metal balls and sat them atop the dashboard's smooth gutter. He pointed his eyes at the road. The balls clinked together and rolled apart with each movement of his hand on the wheel. They chimed and clacked, chimed and clacked. On the armrest between them he stretched his fingers wide, then balled them into a fist. Three of his knuckles cracked. He lowered his window and the cab filled with chill.

wind. He hurled the metal orbs, first one, then the other, out into the open air.

~~She drew her knees to her chest and tugged at the roots of her hair. She said, "I am sorry. What makes me do what I do?"~~

He was relatively clean cut and relatively clean shaven. But look close. Check out the grime under his fingernails. Look at his unwashed hair. Everything about him was dirty, in constant need of laundering. Her dirt was on the inside. She'd like to make them clean with dreams. With lightheartedness. With love.

The truck climbed up over the freezing point. Everything went frigid and drastic and wintry white. The arms of the trees were clotted with snow. The world looked unreal, like the inside of a snow globe.

Clouds roiled and raced. There was no avoiding the bad weather. It was either coming or going, but she couldn't tell.

He sat in his truck and waited for what seemed an inappropriately long time. She strode back to the gas bar, with purpose, head down, on the balls of her feet, like a woman in imaginary stilettos. She climbed back into the truck and her body parts arranged themselves into a sly and uncharacteristic quietude. She clicked the tongue of her seat belt into place, and then he was truly suspicious.

A kid in a red shirt – knock kneed, pear shaped – stalked towards them along the same path she had taken. The loaf of fat above his waistband jiggled with every step. The furious pace was a result of something she had done or failed to do. He could tell. He looked at her accusingly. Next he turned the key in the ignition, and the engine purred up. The kid walked the strip of pavement and stopped with his hips aimed at the truck's grille. She kept her attention fixed on the boy, slid her fingers up to the ceiling and through the loop of the handhold.

The clerk approached her window and leaned a forearm against the glass. She looked at the hand and the whitened oblong of skin and thought of a mollusc stuck to the inside of a fish tank. She watched the clerk's eyes dart all over the inside of the truck. They fell on the leather interior and the CDs strewn in the foot well and the stainless steel cup in its holder. The flat of her lap and her flaming cheek. Until she was tired of his gaze all over everything. Tired of his teenaged lust, shot through with contempt. Men found her sexy and freakish and low-life all at one time. Which she was, underneath all, as well as on the surface.

The boy rapped on the glass with his knuckle. She buzzed her window down an inch and no more.

"What do you want?" she hissed. This, she knew, was the secret to lying. She made big preemptive shows of indignation. She made others feel foolish for thinking their thoughts.

The clerk put his mouth to the space above the window. "You stole," he said. He was a lumbering, insecure hick who spoke with a gummy mouth. She was a woman with a keen sense of her own survival. She thought this proudly, and for a second she felt bad for the boy, who might later be whipped for her crimes.

The moment cascaded into a thousand constituent fragments. She shook her head and waggled her finger at the boy. She wondered how life had crept through her, how she crept through life and arrived into right now. The boy's arm fell away from the truck. She turned to her companion and wondered who he was and how she had come to know him. "Drive," she said.

He rammed the truck into gear. He let the clutch out, and the truck rolled. In the rearview the kid's shoulders hung in bewilderment. In the rearview the red shirt shrank and shrank.

He stomped on the gas, and they zoomed past particleboard houses and animals at the end of the chains. Next to him, she arranged herself cross-legged on the seat. She leaned forward towards the

windshield and stared out at the road as his dog often did. Sadly, as if rueful about the pavement yet pass under the tires. They left the town in their wake like they left all unsavoury experience. She tried to shove it in mental receptacles for events not worth remembering.

From her sleeves she produced the things she had stolen. They rested on each of her palms. She gazed at him expectantly, as if they were a gift.

The hairs stood up on the back of his neck. Blood chugged through his ears. He turned violet corners. The air smelled to him like metal. It charged him up, exposed his nerves, rendered him alive. "Do you have any idea?" he snarled. "Do you think about anything at all?"

There was a dead deer splayed across the pavement. He swerved to avoid the corpse.

"Oh," she gasped, covering her eyes.

Her contradictions astounded him, the hard and the soft. She was the kind of woman who carried spiders out to the grass and pretended elves lived in the cupboard. But she whacked his pet and dangled mice from the pantry by their tails. He thought about love and he thought about lust and how easily the two were confused.

She pulled over on a depressing strip of highway with a Petrocan and a gift shop and a pub with a sign that was lettered in rope.

He opened his eyes, and they fell on her as if she were a stranger.

She shut the truck down and dangled his keys. "I'm done with driving," she said. "You just fall asleep."

He made a squiggle with his finger all around her face. "I wish you'd get rid of that shit." She wore beads in her hair. Glass beads and dreads. "It looks bad," he said. "It makes you look like a poor farmer's girlfriend."

"Am I not?" she asked.

He didn't reply.

He said sexy things and hurtful things, and the trouble was that she lived and died by what fell out of his mouth. She felt tears jet up out of her ducts, and she whipped herself out of the truck before they could overflow.

Her foot flashed. He saw the upturned edge of her skirt. She left him to pump the gas and pay for it. She hadn't had money since the first day they met.

She crossed the parking lot and took in the sad backwater tableau – the mobile homes and little kids on rollerblades right on the fringes of the highway. She trod through some dying grass toward the gift shop with its screen door and hanging flower baskets and its promise of feminine refuge.

It occurred to her to worry that he'd drive away without her. And if that happened she'd be left without a single cent on her person. She would have to sleep in a room above the tavern until she met some gum-chewing jerk with manure on his boots. Then she'd get married, become a Jehovah's Witness, squeeze out litters of children and by some trick of human adaptation learn to call that happiness. Who would save her from such unfortunate contingencies? She looked back at her man pumping gas with his eyes hidden behind the reflective lenses of his sunglasses. She needed him more than he needed her, but she was working on ways to make that not quite so true.

She stepped into the store. The clerk was a teenaged boy with zits and hair gooped with gel. He slumped over a magazine with his face against his fist. His eyes travelled up and down her body, stopping at her forehead and again at her feet.

She cruised the aisles of geodes and wind chimes and wooden tulips. Her fingers skimmed a set of Chinese meditation balls, and she picked one up and held it to her ear. The buffed steel, the tumbling

inner chimes. She studied her stretched, fish-eyed face on the surface of the ball. The bulbous reflection of the store behind her. The stupid useless wood, the trinkets all around.

She left the shelves and paused in front of the counter. The clerk lifted his cheek from his hand. She ran him clean through with her gaze. She tightened her eyes and kissed the air between them, but it couldn't stop him leering, nor thinking his thoughts. She banged the door open and flew from the store in a funk. A funky, tear-streaked whirl.

A highway patrol car came around the bend. It lurked towards them like a white shark. He fixed his eyes on the headlights. As the two vehicles neared each other he felt his truck sway towards the yellow line as if drawn by the gravity, the pull of self-destruction. He flexed his fingers back against the wheel. The two vehicles passed. In the rearview the cop's tail lights lit up. His pulse leapt up in his throat. His face burned. Then the lights went out and the cruiser sailed around a fringe of trees continuing on its vigilant way.

After that he said, "You drive. I'm tired."

They stopped to exchange seats. She got in behind the wheel and adjusted the mirrors to suit herself. She did bad, grinding things with the clutch, and this he tolerated in the name of a nap.

She drove like someone who had never owned a car. She veered messily around the fat parts of corners instead of hugging the insides. She drove with both hands on the wheel like a girl who followed the rules. He didn't trust her at all. So he closed his eyes. He folded his arms over his vital organs and pretended to fall asleep.

His body slumped. She looked at him in disgust.

He owned a wonderful house, and she couldn't let herself forget it. It was a tumbledown shack half-wrapped in Tyvek. But inside, the floors were heated, tiled with slate. He lived like a spy, kept his wealth to himself. In the kitchen a stainless steel fridge contained beer and coffee, drinks he consumed in quantity at each end of the day. The biggest, flattest TV she'd ever seen sat in the living room like a time machine. You crossed the room in front of it and let it swallow you up.

The morning air had lost its chill. He pulled off at a rest stop. It was empty. Nevertheless he parked in a clump of trees far from the toilets and the sign-posted map of southern routes. He didn't need to look at any map. He knew exactly where he was.

He led her by the hand over a knoll landscaped with kinnikinnick. He was a botanist, a farmer, and his cargo was his life. Just carrying it around made him feel zingy and endangered. He left the truck unlocked. He felt like acting reckless just to see if the universe was with him.

She carried a rolled-up towel under an arm as if it were a picnic blanket. She threw her shoulder back like she had every right in the world. And there they were, about to spread out the towel and screw in the dappled grass barely out of sight of the highway. They knew one another medium-well though not through time and vicissitudes.

They were experienced and did an acceptable job pleasing each other. They had easy, separate orgasms. His pants were bunched around his ankles. The back of her skirt was smeared with dandelion pollen. They laughed at the sweet stupidity of their whims and of their mutual need.

They swung their hands all the way back to the truck. Their hands came apart. "We should go to Cuba," she said over the gleaming hood.

"Sure," he said carefully, sliding behind his sunglasses. "Okay."

They climbed back into the truck. She folded her arms and turned away to the window. They had had sex, and now she felt like he owed her something. It was an old-fashioned way to think but it cre

up on her anyway.

He turned the key.

“We are the most amazing lovers in the universe,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “Indeed.”

His valley was a narrow north–south furrow. The sun rose late and set early behind mountains. burned hotly in the summer, when the hills grew thick with vegetation. But the mountains had been logged many years before, and in winter they still looked bereft.

He looked out the truck windows first at the larch trees and the mountainsides patched with clear cuts. He was a soft-hearted farmer. He couldn't go anywhere without looking at the way plants grew without thinking about the angle of the light. They were driving to meet a man named Maurice whom he visited each year, whose address was etched in his mind.

He ate malt balls. He shook them in his fist and threw them into his mouth one at a time. His jaw clenched and unclenched. The sun came out. He put on dark glasses. He felt the deep need to be alone to crawl inside his brain. He was going to leave her in Vancouver, only she didn't know it yet. She had wacky moods. She didn't believe in reading the newspaper. She'd screw his best friend if he failed to keep her happy, and he wasn't sure he could stomach it.

He settled in for the long drive and prepared for his mood to worsen. He plucked the first of four joints from a Curiously Strong Altoids box on the dash. They drove. Up. They held hands. Over the pass. The air became lighter. The sky grew wide. They smelled dead skunk. They didn't talk at all.

His pot fetish tired her out. She wondered how long it would take him to smoke all four joints and then ask her to roll another. She gazed at the drooping telephone wires and considered just how far they stretched.

Just the sound of the flame, the crackling of cellulose and crystallized resin – it soothed him instantaneously. He skimmed his hand down her bare thigh and whistled. “I love you in that skirt.”

And then she was changing her mind. She could be so in love at the drop of a hat, and nothing annoyed her more.

They left the house after omelettes and bacon. They left the plates smeared with grease, the pots piled high with the handles sticking out of the sink. They closed the door on the mess they had made.

They got into his truck. Its slick paint looked like India ink. He slid a disc into the slot of the stereo. The drive nipped it smoothly from his fingers like the soft mouth of a digital bovine. It pleased him. He had been a poor farm boy once.

She sat next to him in her hemp skirt with a paper bag of apple rings on her lap. She felt virtuous and anachronistic and as close to a wife as she ever had.

Only he wasn't her type. For a start, he had a taste for synthetics. He liked music from cold urban plains. He wore expensive shirts made out of polypropylene as if he were a mountaineer or professional athlete. He was a farmer with a soft belly, but he owned a wonderful house.

He felt racked with the anxiety that he'd left something vital behind. He looked at his house and wondered if he had remembered to do everything. Had he rolled up the hose? Tightened the taps? He wondered if she'd locked the windows as he'd asked. His house stood empty, shut up like a fortress.

They backed down the winding gravel. She played with the idea that she would never return to her beautiful, isolated, enchanted place with the orchard and the unkempt rock gardens and the privacy of the tall grass. None of it was hers, though she thought perhaps one day it might be. She gazed at the roof as if they were embarking on a long and fantastic adventure. The terror was titillating. Li

churned like a stomach. Everything turning over.

As they rolled away down the driveway his dog froze, mortally betrayed. Its tail swished between its flanks.

Love. And they weren't even young.

She grew up in Ontario. Her dad was a welder. Her mother cooked meat every single day. Her parents were alive with nothing left to do. They never quarrelled, and they watched too much TV.

His house was the house he grew up in. His last name was Russian because his parents were Doukhobors. They had taught him how to garden and prune fruit trees. But now they were dead.

His town had eight corners and two stoplights. She busked in front of the liquor store. She couldn't quite play and she couldn't quite sing. But she wore a halter top that made him want to ruthlessly scratch an itch. It was no good, this feeling. He looked himself over and saw few things for a woman to like. He threw a red bill down on the purple fur that lined her guitar case.

She winked.

"Come over to my house," he said.

She glanced down at his money. "Later," she teased. "When I'm not so busy."

The house was clean and disused, like it was waiting for somebody. Or mourning someone who had gone. He didn't cook. Neither could she.

"Stay," he said. And she did.

HUSH

Brian loves Patty in a quiet, sublime sort of a way, always has. He feels lucky, exempt from the marital cycles of jagged passion and boredom. But lately? He hears her shoes on the steps and his ass clenches. Since his *accident*, as he likes to think of it, or perhaps even before, there's been something new. He listens to the long, belaboured pause between the key and the door and her arrival, like nothing in the world is easy. He struggles off the couch, slaps the TV off on the way to the hall, where he greets her with a kiss on the forehead. He makes a feeble play for the grocery bag, dangling at her wrists. She wears the trench coat and the Reeboks – a uniform that makes him lose track of the days.

For dinner they are going to have steamed organic spinach with roasted sesame seeds and strands of seaweed that look like little black shoelaces. Patty expresses her mood in some snippy chopping and peeling of vegetables. They are going to eat marinated slabs of tofu, baked on a cookie sheet. Puréed organic parsnips.

At the table he asks, "Is there butter?"

"Butter's full of toxins." She passes him chopsticks. "But you can have applesauce for dessert."

Brian can handle the wacky diet. They have a nice life. They have no children and no plans for children, which is all right since neither one of them can see the point of the constant, low-level chaos. He can handle the tired sighs and the miserable tilt to her eyebrows and the things she almost says but doesn't.

They eat in silence. It passes for appreciation.

After dinner, they do what they always do. She washes, he dries.

"Look," he says. He nudges her with his elbow and points to the window.

Patty's hands leave the sink covered with foam. She steals his dishtowel away.

They huddle at the window together. A snotty evening rain runs down the glass, obscuring the view of a little round woman trundling up the driveway. She carries a blanketed bundle in one arm and holds her jacket over her head with the other.

"That's the wife," Brian murmurs.

"Look who's been spying." The dishtowel is like a tongue between Patty's folded arms.

"With a baby."

"Uh-oh," she says.

"So far the husband's a putz."

"If we're going to peep," says Patty, "shouldn't we turn off the light?"

Brian watches dating shows back-to-back, the California bozos with capped teeth and the pretty girls with their superior tits. Patty is too pure for all this. But she knits by his side – another Christmas present, another non-surprise he'll try not to wear beyond the driveway. She creeps off her armchair

when he's not looking. He notices her absence, slides off the couch and meanders around the house in search.

He finds her hiding behind the bathroom door, already deep into stage one of the complicated oral hygiene regimen that doubles as a means of keeping him – and sex – at bay. By the time she's finished he'll be down on the pillow, turning out the lights in his mind. So he barges in. He watches her spread antibacterial goop on each of her front teeth, then go at the molars with a miniature gumline brush. She looks at him and scrubs harder. Brian plucks the toothbrush from her mouth.

"How are you feeling?" he asks.

"Terrible," she says. Her mouth is full of suds. "But it has nothing to do with you."

When they get into bed, Patty flips from her side to her front, cramming and prodding the pillow underneath her until it's satisfactorily positioned. Brian lies flat on his back.

The doors get locked. The cars in the neighbourhood get parked in their slots. His body winds down. He falls asleep. She falls asleep. The world relaxes. But not tonight. There's something underneath the deep rumble of the furnace and the sigh of their breath. Downstairs the baby is crying. "Oh," Patty groans. She buries her head under the duvet. "Here we go."

The alarm clock goes off like an air horn, slicing through Patty's half-sleep. She drags herself from the blankets, stands on the rug watching Brian, his face collapsed in sleep. For a second she thinks about stuffing his open mouth with the corner of her pillow. She showers and dresses. She feeds herself breakfast and hauls herself down to the car like a great burlap sack of salt with a hole torn at the bottom.

The sky is a big grey pancake with pink light sizzling at its distant edges. She gets into her Honda. She lets it take her to the exit and onto the tapeworm of highway that feeds itself over the bridge. When it comes time to signal and nudge her way into the guts of downtown, she could just keep driving into the mountains. Too bad there's nothing out there but antipodal cravings, nothing in between but deer and red-necks.

The office is deserted. It has the feeling of a surprise party that no one's remembered. She secludes herself in the corner cubicle where she earns a non-union wage as a tertiary assistant in the tertiary world of HR. On the middle of her desk blotter rests a mussed tower of paper and files. It's hackled with Post-its.

"Go to hell, Wanda," says Patty to the stack.

The phone twitters and she jumps. These days any little thing makes her start. Her hand trembles out to answer it. "Hello?" she says.

"Robin?" It's the man with the creamy, intelligent voice. "Robin Brothers?"

"Didn't you phone me yesterday?" Patty asks.

"No," he says.

"Are you sure? Very, very sure?"

"Totally," he says.

"Well," she sighs. "I'm still not Robin."

"Wrong number," he says and hangs up.

The other girls begin to arrive. *Hello*, they sing to one another. They change their shoes. *Good morning*.

Patty has a recurring daydream of an anonymous man who makes love to her in a nice hotel room with open windows and white curtains while men shout foreign curses in the street below. Who is the man, her nameless, faceless, perfect mate? The weatherman? The man with the intelligent voice?

doesn't matter. She looks for him wherever she goes.

Such thoughts are a horrible waste of time, Patty admits. Perhaps what she needs is a *real* affair. So she can lie like a chromosome, her X to a strange Y on a strange bed with sheets that smell of bleach. So she can wonder who else has screwed furtively or jerked off to porn or perhaps died on the mattress that holds her in its overused trough. Maybe what she needs is something that ends badly.

Patty shoves away from her desk and stands up. Her coworkers sit at their stations, a coven typing and clicking. Patty stalks down to Wanda's door. She knocks and enters, finds Wanda at her desk surrounded by symmetrical document piles. At her elbow, a giant Starbucks cup with lipstick smeared on the lid.

"I'm not feeling well," says Patty.

Wanda squints at her. "You're kidding. These binders have to go out by three." Wanda is a lean triathlete bitch with smart angular glasses and an angular body that performs like an infallibly well-tuned machine.

"I'm feeling awful," says Patty, "and I'd hate to spread it around."

A week ago, on his rounds, he emptied an ATM in a convenience store. One of the neighbourhood street freaks decided to hook him in the nuts, for no reason at all, with a full bottle of Sprite. Until yesterday he could barely walk. The doctor called it acute contusion and prescribed medication for the pain. But pills do nothing for his pride. They don't stop his Brinks buddies from calling to hassle him. "She gotcha good, didn't she?"

"To tell the truth," Brian says, "I couldn't tell if it was a she or a he."

For now he's laid up at home, dribbling water into the houseplants according to Patty's detailed instructions. The kitchen window looks out onto the back yard, the driveway and the lane, and he watches a gang of guys budge a huge sectional out of a cube van. They'll try to squeak it through the basement door into the suite downstairs. They'll fail, he can see that right now. Someone will come up and knock. Someone who doesn't speak English. They'll want to heave it through Brian's upstairs apartment and go down through the laundry room. Brian will have to agree to watch them ding the drywall and shuffle along on the clean carpet in their dirty boots. Or maybe he'll just say no. The couch belongs to their new downstairs neighbours, who are foreigners.

The former tenant was an old unmarried carpenter from when the neighbourhood was German. He lived off a pension and odd jobs. He didn't smoke or flush at night or run his tools in the house. He didn't have girlfriends. He fixed things that needed fixing. But then he died, and that was the end of a very good thing.

The waiting room is lavishly perfumed with lavender, a scent associated in her mind with her doctor who wears no lab coat and asks that her patients call her Yasmin. Her inner office is unlike any other doctor's office. There are ferns, fig plants and a wandering Jew. The walls are the colour of sand. There are ambient nature sounds to choose from: Surf, Breeze or Babbling Brook.

"I'm always awake." Patty lies back on the table, which is more like a couch than a table. "Even when I'm asleep."

"I know," says Yasmin, who doctors with a firm, clean hand. "You've said." She begins by probing the arch of Patty's left foot with an electronic pen that reads the state of her insides. Patty stares at the ceiling, nervous about her liver. The machine bleats.

"What does that mean?" Patty wants to know.

"It means you can't tolerate caffeine. Caffeine is full of toxins."

“But I don’t drink coffee.”

“Then it must be something else.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry,” says Yasmin. “We’ll find out.”

After the session Yasmin escorts Patty to the waiting room, where she jots things down for the receptionist. She invites the next clients in – a thin, pimply boy and his mother. How vigorous and healthy Yasmin looks by comparison, what perfect skin. Patty wants that skin.

The receptionist fetches two brown dropper bottles from the refrigerator and slides them over the counter along with a sheet of paper, still warm from the printer. Patty’s eyes skim over the numbers and columns to the bottom right-hand corner – the total registers like a dizzying height. She presses her hand to her breastbone. “Is this right?” she asks. The receptionist nods and brandishes a pen. Patty takes out her cheques. She signs her wavy name on the straight line and rips the cheque out of the book.

Ever since moving in, the guy downstairs comes out of his apartment between ten and noon with a white plastic grocery bag full of garbage. He dangles it at arm’s length by the rabbit-eared handles as if he’s not well acquainted with trash. He walks out to the lane and drops it into the garbage can. The guy – Brian has learned he goes by Joe (too Anglo, it’s suspicious) though they have not yet met – scans up the alley and down the alley from under the duck bill of his ball cap. Then he goes inside.

Today there is no garbage, but two of Joe’s buddies roll up in a red Mustang convertible. The driver wears a silver down jacket, though the day is unseasonably warm. The other, a Grizzlies sweatshirt with a hood and cut-off sleeves. Both wear sunglasses and shitty little goatees. They honk the horn and Joe saunters out in Nike shoes worth two hundred bucks, a cell phone pressed to his ear. The guy in the front passenger seat gets out and leaps over the door into the back. Joe gets in next to the driver. The muffler farts out clouds of white smoke. The driver leans forward to retrieve something from the glovebox, obscuring Brian’s view of Joe. Then whatever is happening has happened. Joe gets out and heads back to his apartment. The Mustang rumbles away, the muffler like the roll of a big fat snare. Brian writes the licence plate number on the back of his hand.

Drugs, drive-by shootings, B & Es. Brian concerns himself with these things. He has worked security since he was seventeen. He has worked. He’s put in his sweat and his toil. Now he’s more than twice seventeen, and his neighbourhood is evolving for the worse. He’s not surprised. Entropy is the rule of the cosmos. Events begin well with a few surmountable complications. A taken-for-granted cresting. Then there’s the inevitable downhill slide before everything begins to decay. He can think of nothing in life that’s exempt from this pattern except for cockroaches and plastic. Nothing important anyway. Neighbourhoods. Governments, empires, alliances. Buildings and other edifices. Everything goes to shit. Species with no natural predators. Polar ice caps. Bones and teeth and skin. Snowmelt. Beauty. Rock bands. Marriage. Love.

Patty walks in. She’s early, unexpected. She takes a look at him on the bed and asks, “How’s your acute contusion?”

Who puts the cogs back in the universe once all the springs have sprung?

Brian steps down off the bed and lands with a thud on the carpet.

“What else do you get up to when I’m gone?” she wants to know. Patty is a Capricorn, all business about feelings until they’re her own. She’s still in her coat holding a fistful of keys.

“I keep on top of the highlights,” he says darkly.

“What else?”

“Is this a quiz?”

Patty sighs. She brushes her bangs aside, then lets her arm slap down against her handbag. She inserts one of her keys into the niche in the door jamb. She digs around, and sawdust falls to the carpet like dandruff.

“Why are you doing that?” he asks.

She stops. “Did you go down and mention the crying?”

“I went down,” he lies. “But there was nobody home.”

She pinches her lips to one side. She holds up the end of her scarf, looks at it intently, folds it in half, then in half again.

Patty hustles down the stairs. With each step she charts out what she will say and not say to the neighbours. The baby is not yet crying, but it will, later, when she’s in bed, because that’s what babies do. Babies need to be wiped and cleaned. They scream and insist. They undo their mothers in public. All that tyrannical, reflexive want packaged up inside something so small and deceptively cute. But it’s not the baby she can’t stand. It’s dependency, helplessness. It’s Brian.

She knocks. The door is flung open and Joe appears, looking like a big, neckless bouncer. Patty takes a hesitant step back. “I’m wondering –,” she begins, but Joe has disappeared. Patty is left gazing at a pile of big shoes and little shoes on the square of linoleum that separates the laundry room from their neighbours’ low-ceilinged zone. Inside the apartment there’s a cascade of syllables she can’t understand. The smell of onions frying in butter. Where have all these shoes come from? It could be anywhere between Turkey and Bangladesh for all she knows.

Patty hears the swish of legs, nylon against nylon. The wife appears in bare feet, a navy blue G-string T-shirt and warm-up pants. There’s a palm-print of flour under the A and the P on her shirt.

She has it all lined up in her mind. She’s going to convey her complaint monosyllabically and with few gestures. But Patty finds herself forgetting her purpose. She’s struck by how young and pretty and round the wife is. She says her own name again and pats herself on the chest.

“Karam,” says the wife.

“Karam,” Patty repeats. From now on she will want to get it mixed up with *karma*. “Your baby,” Patty begins. Despite her intentions, these words leak out sounding accusatory or portentous. Karam’s brow furrows. She squares herself in preparation for bad news or complaint. She looks used to bad news and complaints.

It’s going to be tougher than Patty thought, this fine line between simplicity and condescension when you don’t speak each other’s language, everyone ends up feeling stupider. Patty makes a cradle of her arms. Karam smiles edgily, revealing white, white teeth that have never seen coffee or tea. Before Patty can say more, Karam, too, slips from sight, leaving Patty to wait on the step again.

Karam returns, the nylon rustling softly this time, with the baby in a yellow sleeper. She holds it up for Patty as a testament to its inarguable cuteness. Only the baby isn’t pretty.

“Oh,” says Patty. She leans in closer. It has a big lolling tongue and pointed lips. Shiny, purplish eyelids. It looks like a little brown turtle with no shell.

Patty had things organized in her mind. She was going to explain that she is a very light sleeper. That she can’t do without sleep. That sleep is the most fundamental aspect of good health. But all that fight has drained out of her. “Oh, my,” says Patty, touching its sharp fingernails. Fingernails the size of crumbs. Is it sick? Is it deformed? She’s forgotten all her lines.

Brian eases bare chested into sheets as crisp and knife edged and as comfortable as parchment.

Patty flips the clasps on her jewellery. "There's something wrong with that baby."

"Well, there's nothing wrong with its lungs."

"It doesn't look *right*." Now she peels off the turtleneck. Underneath it is the familiar beige-toned bra with the wide straps and the mysterious closure.

"Well, what?"

She shrugs.

Brian watches Patty in the final stages of undress. With habitual coyness, she turns away as she's got a kind of virginity left to keep from him, something not yet seen. She thinks her inner thighs are starting to sag. As if he doesn't already know about her thighs or the pouch of flab around her navel. "Did you mention the thinness of our floors?"

The hem of the nightie flutters down past her shoulders and hips. "I never got that far."

"You lost your nerve."

She flashes on him. "Why are you bugging me?"

"I'm not."

"I had a language barrier to contend with."

"So you point at the baby and cover your ears."

"Why don't *you* point and cover your ears."

This used to be his favourite part of the day. He used to watch Patty shuck off her clothes and he'd sit there day and think: This woman is my mate. I want to impregnate this person. I want to be worth a million bucks. I want to crawl inside her as if she were a cupboard and taste everything inside.

They stopped sleeping naked after Patty read a book by a doctor from Colorado. According to the book, shoes were a bad idea and bras were a good idea. Sleeping naked was also bad because it disrupted your circadian cycle. For years she'd been turning over, waking herself up with blasts of cold air.

"So sleep closer," Brian said.

When she climbs into bed he fields her like a giant baseball mitt. She fidgets in his embrace. She used to Brian on night shift, used to sleeping in the middle of the bed. Does she really want to feel the coarse hair on his thigh? Does he really want to feel her cold ass at his hip? Sleeping naked is for other people, couples still fascinated with each other's bodies, for those who can overlook the ingrown hairs, the stubble and the midnight farts.

She's no fan of the human body, it's true. There are too many ways to get sick. There's a certain type of micro-organism that dwells only on her eyelashes. A zillion kinds of bacteria in her gut. Every day all the earth's fungal spores rain down on her body. Sometimes she hates her own skin. Sometimes she can't scrub hard enough.

"I don't hear anything," she says. "Do you?"

He grunts, disgustingly half-asleep.

"You're too hot," she says, shoving off from him.

She lies awake staring at the darkness, listening to his breath descend into the deep, familiar rasp of a snore. No one ever died because of lack of sleep? She's read experiments on sleep deprivation in rats. After three days with no sleep they claw and tear at each other's fur. After a week they burrow into their corners and lie there inert.

A few streets away, a siren Dopplers by and her whole body tenses. It's not the crying baby itself but the *idea* of a crying baby, the proximity of stress and discomfort, the *waiting* that shreds the quiet in her mind. Brian sleeps, oblivious. The siren sets the rotten dog howling behind the fence next door.

Patty holds her breath. When the crying begins, it's no surprise. It travels up from the basement, up the stairwell and through the rooms of their apartment and into her ear canals. The wailing begins light and faint, then blossoms into waves of shrieking and gasping. Her mind follows the cadence, a lump of anger rising up in her throat. She pounces up on all fours. Brian turns onto his side and reaches for her shoulder.

"Don't." She quivers on the verge of tears. "Don't even touch me."

The horizon pukes sherbety light on another gorgeous morning. Patty storms out of bed, throws her clothes on the bed and stomps around on her heels over every square foot of the apartment. She feels like a stretched length of yarn, like something dangled from a rooftop. Brian appears, puffy eyed. His big goofy hands scratch around in the pockets of his robe.

"What's up?" he asks.

"I'm going to *work*." She looks at him through eye slits, on the verge of some dangerous honesty. She fumes into the hall and snatches her coat off its hook. Brian's slippers scuff along the floor. *Pick up your goddamn feet*, she thinks.

"Look," says Brian at the door to the basement, which is ajar. On the floor between the door and the jamb rests a palm-sized lump, wrapped in coloured cellophane. He nudges it with his toe, then picks it up. "This must be for you."

"How do you know?"

"It's pink, for a start."

She takes it out of his hands and yanks at the corkscrew of ribbon. The plastic comes apart. Inside are four white cakes, cut into the shapes of diamonds. She holds one to her nose and the smell is nearly indescribable, like rose petals, crushed and wet, but also something creamy and edible. It reminds her of something she can't quite place. Something lovely. From childhood.

"Is that soap?" Brian asks. "It looks like soap."

She peeks through the open door into the unlit stairwell and catches a whiff of another smell that isn't hers or Brian's, a smell that's decisively *theirs*. Without thinking, Patty lifts one to her mouth and nibbles a corner. A milky sweetness floods over her tongue. Her eyes water – she hasn't had sugar in years. "It's not soap," she says. Though she'd rather it was.

Brian wanders from room to room, forgetting his purpose. Perhaps all that's needed is a little artificial locomotion. He pokes his head through the neck hole of the Harvard sweatshirt – a gift from his mother, who trots off to all parts since the death of his father – as yet unworn. He slides his arms into it but then takes it off because only morons advertise the fact of their non-education. He's very happy and mostly optimistic, but the world has its lucent truths.

The weather's fine. Sun-dappled sidewalks, a moist breeze. He begins at a careful stroll, assessing the status of his injury. All is fine. The rhododendrons bloom. The aroma of flowers is everywhere.

He proceeds to the park without deciding to. At the gates an old guy hurries a Yorkie down the asphalt path. "Come on, Rippy." Rippy sniffs and pees on the underbrush. "Rippy, let's go." The guy becomes resentful, yanks Rippy along in his harness. It's his wife's dog, obviously.

Brian quickens his pace to a vigorous walk. But three-quarters of the way around the path a knifing pain shoots through what he's sure must be his prostate.

He hobbles around the circuit in the requisite direction, perturbed by the pedestrian traffic. Suddenly everyone's annoying. The skateboard punks, the old dames, slow as ducks. *Get a job*, he wants to say to everyone he passes. Even the chatty girls with the high ponytails and the nice calves.

and the pompoms at the heels of their socks.

Brian limps back to the house. He finds Patty, back again early from work, cross-legged on the couch, staring at the sky beyond the window. No guy likes to see his wife in a meltdown – after all it's probably his fault – but this is terrible. Patty's face leaks tears and mucus. His nuts throb with vicious ache. He thinks of this pain as laden with meaning, there to punish or humble him in some medicinal, necessary way. Her hand clutches out at his, her fingers chilled and moist.

“Can't you hear it?” she asks.

The next thought that darts through his mind startles him: *What if she's gone crazy?* “I don't hear a thing.” He crafts the sentence with his least inoffensive tone.

“Smell that,” she says. “Do you smell that?” Patty has burst into the room where Brian wipes polio onto his work boots in slow, deliberate strokes.

He sniffs and shrugs.

“It's electrical.” Her nose works the air like a marsupial's. “Like hot metal.” Her eyes land on the blackened rag between his fingers, the boot between his knees. She gasps and rolls her eyes as if he's the most obtuse human being she's ever known. She whirls and flees the scene.

“That hurts,” he says to the wall.

When the smoke detector starts to blare downstairs, she collides with him in the hallway. “Fire,” she says, clutching him by the buttons and the chest hair. “They're trying to burn the house down.” He disentangles her fingers but lets her drag him by the forearm down the basement steps to the laundry where their downstairs neighbours have spread out an assortment of belongings. Brian and Patty wade the narrow path of clean floor past the washing machine. Patty nudges things out of the way with the side of her foot and the back of her hand – satin blankets and underwear strung on clotheslines and garbage bags full of extra whatever.

Patty pounds on the door. Brian can see her thinking what she's already told him dozens of times. These are people who never throw things out. Who will never teach their child not to shriek for attention. Who believe in nylon and polyester and disposable diapers. Who sweep the floor but not the corners. They're those kind of people.

The door opens. The smoke detector blasts out at them like an auditory wind – a noise so loud a tuft of Brian's body hair stands up. Joe emerges in a black Gold's Gym T-shirt, yacking urgently into a cordless phone over the sound.

Brian sees they are exactly the same height. He can look Joe straight in the eye.

“Where is the fire?” Patty demands. The urgent authority in her voice makes Joe step aside in the doorway. Patty attempts to dart past him into the house, but he stops her by the forearm and points down at her feet. “Oh, give me a break,” says Patty, kicking off her shoes in an exasperated rush.

In his socks Brian steps into the apartment, which is different from what he remembers. Long tubes of fluorescent light and commercial-grade low-pile carpet, stone grey, the same as in the office where his supervisor and the dispatch girls work. Good for high traffic, stain resistance, rug burns.

A stratum of thin blue smoke hovers a foot from the ceiling. Patty zips instinctively into the kitchen. Brian follows her. Joe follows Brian. Patty scans the stove dials and pulls at the oven door. The door won't open.

“What's in here?” she yells at Joe. Joe shrugs. He's off the phone now but holds it in his hand. “What do you mean you don't know? Where the hell is your wife?” He pulls at his lower lip, guilty and bewildered. She points to a knob. “Do you know what you did? You put your pizza on self-clean. The door won't open until the cycle's done.” She touches the stove with her finger, then withdraws

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