

BORN AWAY

By ELIZABETH HAN

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*The weather, like tomorrow, like your life,
is partially here, partially up in the air.
There is nothing that you can do.*

*The good life gives no warning.
It weathers the climates of despair
and appears, on foot, unrecognized, offering nothing,
and you are there.*

Excerpted from "The Good Life" – Mark Strand

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Abel bikes to work on New Year's Eve, a Friday. He has a sky-blue coaster, which means there are no handbrakes, initially rented from Bicycle Marc but who then gifted it to him as a token of brotherhood and welcome to the five streets that make up the town. Stopping on this bike occurs with the feet. He fitted the handlebar with a radio to listen to the news, the CBC, if so inclined every now and then.

His first time with the bike, after Marc dropped it off, he told Marc to stay a bit since Abel had not ridden one in ages and had not used a lock before in his life.

"Are you serious?" Marc said. "Okay. But in Tofino you don't really need to worry. This isn't Toronto or Vancouver. We know the bikes here. It's like taking a kid. If somebody steals your bike and then tries to ride it, everyone knows who did it, you get me?"

Marc's astonishment seems to be part of a generally blasé attitude towards locks of all types here. Both the guest and owner doors at most of the bed and breakfasts down the shore unlock using the same code, the house number. The combination to each Tof Cycle product is actually printed on the lock itself in black Sharpie, in Marc's indiscernible scrawl with nines that resemble lower-case gs and eights that look like hat-less snowmen.

"I left my house unlocked today," Marc said. "Every day, actually. One less step."

"Yes," Abel said. "To getting robbed."

"You're just too new," Marc said, shaking his head. "If you lock your bike, it's like a sign saying you're not going to be back any time soon. Pure invitation to steal. Also, another thing." He peered at Abel's courier bag slung across his torso. "Tofino men don't wear purses. Like, what the fuck is that, dude?"

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Even though Abel has his own parking space, he ties up his bike behind the outdoor goods store and walks the rest of the way to the hospital. A blue clapboard building, single-floor, dark-shingled, it points north towards Nanaimo. It is exactly two hundred and six kilometers due east from Tofino to Nanaimo via Port Alberni and Whiskey Creek, but he never thinks about this. When he goes to the hospital he rarely thinks about Nanaimo, or the east. He thinks about the ocean, what is west instead. Sometimes on the way he tries to come up with an exact word for the feeling of having known something very beautiful, very well, and for a very long time. Sometimes he thinks the word is "ocean" or "drown," especially after a

summer of stitching up tourists from their various surf, boating, fishing, whale-watching, and paddle-boarding accidents. But the closest he has come to a word so far is “mother,” his own, who he can never call anything but Mother, especially when she urges him on their twice-a-week phone calls for the millionth time to move back East. Just another in the long list of approximations he has been working on since beginning here as an attending three years ago.

As he walks, wrapped in an anorak, balancing a travel mug of steaming tea between tingling fingers, the January road feels slanted and steep under his feet. Even now, after a few holiday seasons here, he can sense it—January in town is an anxious, waiting time. The Christmas festivities are over; the children are back in school; he starts to recognize surnames. On Campbell Street, the hydro and telephone technicians ply their trade busily at all hours of the day and night, repairing lines brought down by fallen trees. Crowds thin out as his friends, married and single, retreat indoors like a tardy tide, waiting for easier weather, feeding the fires, watching for leaks and drips whenever the southeasterly gale blows. It is a different town entirely in the winter—he supposes he is lucky he has one of those jobs that only switches character in the winter, but does not exactly hibernate. He’s just Dr. Abel.

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The hospital rests in a crook of Neill Street. A breadth of bouncy, poorly-paved road leads into the lot, where some of the parking spaces lean back diagonally from the building in a hoary herringbone pattern. Abel's personal parking spot tucks pinches into the rear corner overlooking the narrows to the Sound, but when the tourists roll in between April and November and he actually feels the impulse to drive he gives it up and switches to the shoulder on Campbell Street. No sign or anything indicates that his space is his, but it is, and everyone in town recognizes his rusted 1979 Dodge Aries. Just like they recognize his coaster tied to his chosen rack, shaped like the Greek letter phi.

"Doc," says the nurse that morning. Her name is Sandra and she greets him at the formerly-sliding door that now swings and lets in too much cold air—*Il fait un froid de canard*, as Mother, half-French and half-Chinese, would say, before forcing him into layer upon layer of long-johns and a snowsuit. Mother had always been afraid of the cold and endured the wicked winters of Halifax for the superlative summers. Sandra, on the other hand, despite being a native of Port Alberni, dresses like it is always summer all year around. He knows she is wearing a matching fancy pair of bra and panties underneath her scrubs, as she says, "Here ya go," and pushes another Earl Grey in a paper cup at him. She deliberately flips her blonde hair over her shoulder like the tail of a lazy sea creature, one who has been waiting watchfully and finally spotted a reason for its deep dive fathoms and fathoms below.

As he takes it and dutifully eyes the motion of the strands, he wonders, briefly, if anyone knows that they have been sleeping together for five months now. On and off, mostly at her place—his brims with forgotten recycling. Her pride in the liaison resides in the corners of her mouth each day when they greet each other like this, somehow signaling a shared secret, as though they have pulled down a single XXL hood to encase both their heads from the Pacific rain and to block the smell of the sea reaching far inland. Starting something with a nurse seems so cliché, Abel thinks, yet she doesn't object to the cliché. Her place, near the Wickaninnish Inn, smells like cedars all the time. She bats the cheque away from him at restaurants. When they have sex she keeps the light on and makes performative moans, and a bracelet of blue jade rattles on her wrist over a tattoo that reads *deas gu cath*. He respectfully handles the stretch marks on her stomach with the precision of a Kelly clamp. Afterwards, she likes to smoke pot on the balcony and feed her giant slug, which ate her other slugs a few weeks before, yet she keeps around in a mason jar of pebbles and toadstools. She used to have a cat, she said, but it ran away and her LOST posters were never answered.

Abel and Sandra do this twice a week, taking turns choosing the day. And then at the hospital, when assigned to the same shift, they work as an efficient team. She reminds him to sanitize his hands all the time.

“It’s our code,” she said once. “The secret code.”

Abel's office resides at the end of the single hallway of the hospital, and Sandra walks there with him, handing him the clipboard. He reads it, shaking the breath of fog from his eyes. There are rounds, followed by two hours of appointments, and since it has been a while now he recognizes all of the names of patients and their most probable ailments and novel hypochondriac complaints. In the margins Sandra has added some helpful little notes in purple highlighter and a smiley face in the corner, which he carefully folds down with the pad of his thumb until just the edge of the circle peeks through.

1. Stomachache x three days, no vomiting or diarrhea, ate sushi on Monday.
2. “Broken back” x three months. He will tell the guy to wait until six months as back problems usually go away on their own by then.
3. Irregular periods x six months and oral contraceptive, the generic version of Alesse, before that, since age sixteen. Googled and terrified of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome. They always are. It never is.
4. Mental health. History of suicidal ideation, tried to OD on cyanide in cherry pits, but recently pretty stable with fair insight.
5. Mental health.
6. Mental health.
7. Mental health.

And so on. Mental health has subsumed all the other specialties like Sandra’s slugs, he thinks. With these cases, he takes extra care, tries to not over-prescribe like on the Lower Mainland, where they have been dispensing Trazodone and Seroquel for sleep when all the poor folks need, maybe, is some God. He is practiced and efficient. He generously gives everyone more than their allotted fifteen minutes and single complaint; they had called it *halfway-out-the-door syndrome* in med school, when the patient tells you, with their hand on the doorknob, the thing that changes the entire story, a kind of whiplash he despises but whose necessity he tolerates. Then, when it is finally six o’clock—Abel always stays an extra hour to finish paperwork—he jams the rest of the case reports into a beat-up courier bag—the stereotypical physician’s Gladstone has always seemed pretentious to him—sanitizes and hangs up his stethoscope on a hook beside the sink, and heads out into the lot again, back to the sporting store.

As Abel trudges, the courier bag rubs against his jacket and he finds himself using mittened fingers to readjust and hold it slightly outwards from his body. He never zips it up all the way. Out of the top he can just see the edge of the email forwarded by a colleague from school the day before. The emphasized Helvetica typeface abuses his eyes from their meaning, which he has been simultaneously mulling and avoiding. Jobs for physicians come in waves, and this is one is definitely a gnarly one. Nothing appeared all summer, but suddenly, calls for GPs in the Annapolis Valley, in Truro, back in Nova Scotia, in Eastern Cape Breton pack the grids with criteria and numbers, with a deadline to apply in a few weeks’ time. Lisa had forwarded the listings to him and he had printed them out, in spite of himself, without telling Mother. He does not know why he did it, only that he did. He should have deleted the emails or sent them to spam or replied with a simple, “No, thanks.” Yet a dozen times a day, in between patients, when he thinks about shredding the sheets in the machine, he holds off, uses the bathroom, grabs a paper cone of water and wets his teeth instead.

He wonders what Sandra would say, or Corrine, or Nate, Shawn, Theo, Bicycle Marc, any of them, if they knew. And Mother, who could probably calculate the time and distance from Halifax to any of these places in a flash of mental math.

If he does anything, and he highly doubts it, she will be the last to know.

On the other side of the Sound, a lank lanyard of pollution blindfolds the trees; the sky is the same color as the sea and a cloud of shorebirds fly overhead, resembling a wobbling wake left by a canoe or kayak. Their semaphore wings flash as hundreds of birds wheel in unison, in perfect supernatural coordination, seemingly little more than automatons programmed by intuition. Yet from some documentary Abel put on once while bringing clam chowder to a boil, he knows each of the bitsy bundles of organs that so resembles a small mechanical subunit of a larger machine has been on the leading edge of adventure, has fought with one another over the same small patch of sky on a day in the past. Each bird understands what the fictive frankness of the Pacific coast of North America looks like from five thousand metres, has adored and mated furiously over permafrost in the northwest Yukon, one of the only places in the country, seemingly, that he has yet to experience.

Abel squints at one of the fluffier outlier clouds and shades his eyes with his hand. The Environment Canada weather forecast had said it might sun slightly today, but the golden rays never materialized. And he has learned long ago not to allow the reports to disappoint him, meteorology being that least exact of all sciences. Even worse than psychiatry, which is saying something.

He throws his leg over the seat of the bicycle, pants rolled up and secured, and backs out, radio switched on, for home. Over the waves booms an ongoing interview series with some local author, and he recalls vaguely one with Margaret Atwood. She had said Americans think of Canada as the place where the weather comes from. Maybe this, for once, came from the other side. From the south, which, he supposes, is another option.

The paradox of choice. And perhaps, if he wants to play with words, a differential diagnosis of sorts.

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The power goes out an hour later.

Abel is standing in the kitchen digging at an overripe avocado when the bowl of ramen he is nuking in the microwave stops spinning. The lights flicker threateningly, then give out completely.

"Cookies on a cracker," says Abel, tossing the spoon across the counter, and he flinches from both its clatter and the sound of his own voice.

Where did he even learn that phrase in the first place? Except he knows, of course, and why. Like lumps of lead ballast, the words counteract one another in his head, defining his mental murk the way a bowl defines water: *Mother, ocean, drown. Mother, ocean, drown. Mother, ocean, drown.*

A new text in a blue rectangle appears on his phone, which always pings in at about this time, each evening, from her familiar number: *Son, where r u?*

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He does not have any candles in the kitchen so he has to grope around for a bit in the closet underneath the stairs. From outside the living room windows the sky flares lighter than inside, a kind of dissonance that always stings his eyes. Tawny tallgrass scrapes and scratches against the glass in a dislocated rhythm of complaint. He wastes three matches while lighting the candles and then wrestles the battery-powered radio onto the center island, tunes it to CHMZ.

Theo from the public library is guest hosting for Shawn this week and his thick francophone accent confirms the confusion. Abel thinks it must be a car down on the highway—after all, there is only a single power line that follows the single highway into town—but this is just a guess, not a diagnosis. Nobody knows what it is yet. Theo decides to play some *Come On Eileen* to cheer everyone up.

Abel thinks about calling Nate and Corrine, who live down the beach. They are prepared; everyone is always prepared when they live in a tsunami zone. Most of the time Abel tries to avoid thoughts of what the locals call "The Big One," a magnitude-nine mega-earthquake and its ensuing tsunami, one on a scale that, were it to occur, would not have been seen since the late 1940s in Courtenay, a town about two and a half hours drive northeast of Tofino along the BC-4 highway. He is successful in this more often times than not. He just wants to check if Nate and Corrine are okay, but it turns out they get to him first.

"Abe," Nate says.

Abel puts down the radio. Nate sounds panicked on the phone, not assuming his usual clotted Ian Curtis voice, for both singing and speaking, that he has always been obsessively proud of in all of the time they have known each other. This is his real voice.

"Nate?"

"It's Corrine," says Nate. He does not have to say anything else because Abel is already jumping up, the avocado with its deep spoon welts left wobbling like a top on the unwiped counter.

Corrine has been pregnant for what seems like ages, but she is not due for another four weeks. Abel saw her in the clinic only fourteen days before and, at the time, proclaimed everything fine and dandy, the blood pressure, sonogram, fundal height, four steps of palpating the abdomen, the fetal movements. A brief discussion that something like this, though unlikely, could happen, ensued, but it was like going through the motions, a checklist and pamphlet tucked into her purse and forgotten. He hesitates just long enough to grab his car keys and the courier bag before he is bumping down the gravel road in the Aries, and says, "Hey, don't hang up. I'll be right there."

Turning onto the highway in the dark, his cell still against his shoulder, he hears Nate's breathing in time with his own. He notices, distractedly, that the moon is full and a cursory cloud alters the shape anatomically, as though it, too, were carrying low.

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Three years before, one of the first things Abel learned about living in a small town is that everything does double-duty. It is never Bob's Kayaks. It is Bob's Kayaks and Snow Cones. The library doubles as a place for haircuts and perms, and every other Sunday at the legion, there is a dance party that shakes the parking lot all the way to the waterfront.

Abel met Corrine and Nate on his second day in town as the new attending doc, one day after meeting up again with Bicycle Marc to get another bike. He accidentally walked into the radio station looking for coffee—not a bad guess according to the aforementioned rule. Shawn, who had not yet grown out his goatee as he did every winter, was in summer mode, talking trash and spinning Brian Wilson until the needle probably needed replacement. Abel waited until he was sure there was no coffee and started to slide out the door, confused. But they made him stay and pick out a record from the massive wall arranged by genre and alphabet. Whatever he did, whatever he picked—was it Jeff Buckley's *Live À L'Olympia?*—must have worked because Nate solemnly shook his hand, said Abel had passed the test, and they would make sure he got his caffeinated beverage of choice at a clip that would put the Lower Mainland to shame.

A week later, all three showed up at Abel's cabin near MacKenzie Beach at two in the morning. A modest yet practical one-bedroom, he was renting it until he could afford to get something for himself, with a tiny closet and a bathroom with no window. Blinking, standing there in his striped pajamas, pillow marks still

on his cheeks, Abel wondered if this was it, the initiation rites into small towns he had heard of. And if this could possibly be worth four years of medical school and two years of residency to find out.

“Am I in trouble?” he said. They looked like a gang of soccer hooligans.

“We come bearing coffee and alcohol, and we’re going to welcome you proper to Tuff City,” they chorused.

“With a hangover?”

“You already know us too well,” said Corrine, waggling her eyebrows.

Nate, standing behind her, Abel later learned, was already two beers in and The Voice was out in full-force, as he half-boomed, half-sang, “Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of The Party!”

“Where’s that from again?” Shawn asked, bracing against Nate, zipping and unzipping his windbreaker manically and wide eyes blinking at the moths winging around the porchlight.

“Typing school. The quick brown fox jumps over...what is it again? Oh, fuck it—”

“—The lazy dog,” Shawn said, batting at a moth. “Nate’s mum was a typist.”

“In the seventies,” Nate amended.

“I...” Abel began, rubbing once again at the pillow marks. But Abel found himself allowing his arm to be dragged along and folding his long legs into the back of their car anyway. Their enthusiasm was infectious.

That night, they drank. They hooked arms and made merry. They drove right up to the coast and kept accidentally slipping from kelp-slick rocks and falling into the freezing water. The three of them let him choose the music on the way back, once again, and he picked The Pixies, *Surfer Rosa*, because he thought the word “surfer” might endear him to them.

He had had a good time. They were good people, he could tell. Corrine did kept books for a business in town and Nate was a web developer who could work from home. He did not know that it would not be long before he had his first mention on Shawn’s morning show, and a nickname too, all before he had stitched up his first surf accident.

Still, already, back then, in the borderlands of his mind, he had hugged his doubts closely to himself, unsure if he could make it stick here. Abel had graduated fourth in the class from medical school and had made a competent resident with whom no senior nor preceptor had ever had a problem. He had always been a good student, good at interviewing, passing OSCEs and board exams, even good at moving for school and work—an excellent and efficient packer and apartment-hunter and public-transit-navigator. It was the awkward spaces after the tick marks that caused the problems, when he felt novice and a little unsafe. Those first times, alone, in new geographies, of new elevators, staircases, bedrooms, and unslept mattresses, of fresh Formica countertops bereft of marks where one’s knife had slipped cutting into an apple, could paralyze him. For the next several weeks after moving to town, he would not even unpack his shirts and trousers fully from the three suitcases that held his entire life, half the hangers in the closet lying naked and huddled together to one side of the steel rod as though they feared textile interaction. Or him. Or both.

But then he would remember how Nate had made it easier, that night. His soon-to-be best friend turned around from the front passenger seat, as Corrine drove Abel back to his place, more than a bit soused,

and said, in that Ian Curtis voice, “If you dare leave...” and just let the sentence trail off into another few bottles of Hoyne and Tofino Blonde.

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Unlike Abel’s first shift, this time, driving to the hospital is different. There are no lights on, no birds on the water, but everyone on staff overnight is bustling, the nurses half-abandoning handover to the seven p.m. team in the excitement. Abel’s colleague, Ryan, or Dr. Teague, as competent as anyone he has ever worked with, will handle that until they are relieved in the morning.

Abel drives right past the co-op, then dockside, to the heli-landing pad downslope from the blue clapboard of the hospital building, which appears nearly indigo in the dark.

“Abe.” Sandra is already there, holding her hair down against the cloud of dust the chopper stirs up. Her voice is steady and practiced, handbook-ready. “Thirty-three weeks. She’s bleeding per vagina. Nanaimo knows about the outage. They’re waiting.”

He manages to shake the numb from his lips to ask, quickly, “Who’s on call?”

She spells it out, but the physician on call is a foreigner that Abel does not know. He thinks, *of course*— he should not have expected otherwise on New Year’s Eve, except back in the car it had seemed like a good idea to leave Corrine with the paramedics. Now he is not so sure. He meets her gaze and makes up his mind on the spot.

Corrine, who has completely soaked the leather of the seat in the back with variegated fluids, slits her eyes at him. “Are you getting on with me. I swear to God, Abel. Doctor or not, I will personally pour gasoline on all your surfboards if you don’t.”

“I’d listen to her,” says Sandra before she shoves something in the pocket of his white coat, nearly causing him to flinch, and then rests her other hand, feather-light, for a moment on his cheek.

“What’s this?” he asks.

“You’ll see.”

“Abel,” yells Corrine through gritted teeth as the medics carefully lay her out on a stretcher. “Get in, now.”

“Good luck, Doc,” says Sandra, shutting the door and rapping on it twice to signal the pilot.

Once safely tucked inside, he holds Corrine’s hand whose fingers and oval opalescent nails are vibrating in time with the transport, and the last sound he hears before getting on is the radio from Sandra’s car, its door opened and dial still tuned to CHMZ and Theo’s deep, dogged baritone.

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“Hey Tuff City—Theo here on Tuff Radio 90.1 FM in Tofino and 99.5 FM in Ucluelet, and as you may have noticed we’re all in the dark since about quarter to six this evening. We’re still waiting on reports but there was no scheduled outage from BC Hydro. It’s me and Rob in the booth right now and your guess is as good as ours, but we’ve got a pool going that it’s a car in the Sutton Pass. Hope y’all got your emergency flashlights and candles, and a lucky few may even have dinners. Any junior seismologists even having racing thoughts of The Big One? We kid, we kid. Don’t panic, people. We’ll be running on generator power and will keep you updated. Your Long Beach Surf Report coming up plus the weather,

and provincial news. Is the new Labour Minister in trouble already? And after the break, perhaps fittingly, *The Boss*, and *Dancing In The Dark...*”

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When Abel was four and he and Mother lived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in a small one-bedroom apartment overlooking the narrows of Bedford Harbour, Mother took him to the pool at the university where she was a cleaner, and put him in the wading pool. He was so surprised at the sudden cold that he sneezed thrice in succession, each sneeze more violent than the last. It was the first time he had ever done such a thing in his short life, at least according to Mother who has claimed in all the time she has known the phrase that she has a “photographic memory.” She covered his nose and mouth for him with her soft, puckered hand. She kept it there until he had to shake it away for a breath.

Mother said that in the country from where they had immigrated because of the icky politics, they had a saying about sneezes. They say that when you sneeze it is because someone is saying bad things about you. Moreover, she taught him the code: one sneeze—okay, don’t worry about it; two sneezes—definitely, people are running their mouths about you, neighbours, teachers, complete strangers on the opposite side of the world.

Abel, between shifting his small toes in the water—they looked merman-blue underneath the thin stalks of his calves—had asked, “What about three sneezes?”

Mother, pulling on the straps of her swimsuit, a size too big from Sears Outlet, had tsked at him as if he were a gnat or poorly-pruned neighbor-bushes and said, “Have you been wicked? Have you given reason for someone to hate you?”

And the problem with Mother was you could never tell if she were kidding or not. Abel did not learn how to swim until he was ten because every time he entered the water he kept thinking about that incident, concerned at being thought impure or unthorough. He supposes that was when he started to look at women—*girls*, though, they were called, at that age—as a distraction from his nervous anxiety. Their shapely shoulders and elegant necks clothed in their one and two-pieces, the iridescent streaks of their wet hair under the sprinkler pad just outside the gender-separated change rooms. Later, outside, dry, stocked like boxes of ripe fruit into minivans by their own parents. Even later, also dry, at school, after school, on television, through music videos, in laddish magazines.

And Mother had not needed sneezes to detect this; she seemed to have her own special nose like a rodent following the trail of Gruyere into the stockroom of a bodega. Abel could be reading under two layers of comforters on his bed with a flashlight, tented, and he would hear her say through the fabric as she stood leaning against the side of the bedroom they shared, “You’re thinking about girls. I know you are. You’re thinking bad things. Do you know what it’s like to have a child?” She would remind him all the time that when his father left them, it was two weeks before she had a Caesarean, when the hospitals were still doing them the old way, with a vertical incision instead of a horizontal. How she had split her flesh for him.

She would say, while rubbing her shirt over the firm, fibrous keloid, “I’m a woman and I’ve had a child. You’re a boy, you’re a boy, you’re a boy.”

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“Abel,” Corrine says as they lift off. He turns from the window to look at her. The chopper is small, barely enough room for the both of them, the medic, and the pilot, whose name is Geoff, and she curls on the stretcher like a smudged apostrophe that the typesetter gave up on, in a most uncomfortable-looking position for a woman about to give birth.

Abel reminds himself that this is the third one. His best friend's wife has done this twice before. She is a veteran compared to him, a fairly novice doctor in a tiny town he had never really heard of until moving here. But even knowing all these facts, he does not really know what to say, so he admits, "Cor," in the way that he thinks that Nate would say. Nate, who is at home still, Nate who was left behind to take care of the boys, who had been reluctantly roused from their beds and were playing a board game, Snakes and Ladders, he thinks, by candlelight when they left.

"How long?" she whispers.

It takes him a second to realize she means how long to Nanaimo. Then he turns towards the open cockpit and says, "Geoff, are we almost there?"

"It's going to be about twenty more minutes," Geoff yells back.

That's good, Abel thinks, and turns back to tell Corrine, except that she is asleep, her head lolled to the side.

He looks outside the window. It is too dark to see, really—the lights are out all the way down the highway, the constellations disconnected from their firmament, so he just holds her close against his belly and thinks again—*ocean, drown, mother*, in a languid loop while the chopper makes another heavy lean to the right.

His courier bag, still slightly unzipped, flops with the whomp of wingbeats against the medic's toolbox.

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Abel knows what the Sutton Pass looks like from two angles, from the air and from the road. He recounts from the latter when people ask how he came to be so far west: Toronto with its twenty-five municipalities and six million people came first—Mother could not say a word about his leaving the East Coast as it was the only school where he was accepted—and he has been crossing out cities ever since, steadily crawling towards the Pacific Ocean, one end of the country to the other.

When Abel was a medical student, the power went out in his dorm room at the University of Toronto's St. George Campus. Some prankster had cut the line. For an hour his entire building evacuated down the stairs and stood outside in the freshly-fallen December snow in frustrated, murmuring clumps of students and RAs. Although this was long before he ever saw a surfboard in real life, he still wore flip-flops, his toes freezing into ice-lollies on the blackened front stoop of the dorm across the street. It was likely around then that Abel decided he could not live one more day in Toronto, Ontario. He decided he had had enough. Wasn't this the city with which he always imagined he would fall in love, where everything was supposed to be happening in frenetic nightclubs and fancy Bay Street bistros with monstrously-beautiful women in man-eating heels? The big city, the T-Dot, though no one really called it that, especially not after Drake provided the infinitely-better option of the Six. Where was the new life he had been promised, the city of reciprocity, whose pavement longed for the weight of his feet? Toronto had its fragrance but had not made room in its smoggy air for his. And so he began applications, testing the weight of each locale like a marble in his hand. Dutifully, he performed away rotations, electives, and interviews at hospitals and little clinics all over the country. Then on Match Day, before the much-vaunted envelope-opening, the entire graduating class were plunged into the dark in nearly the same way as December, making the result the greatest relief of his life thus far: *University of British Columbia—Family Medicine*.

At his interview at the Point Grey campus, the panel had asked him if he would stay in BC after. He said *of course*, of course. There was only one right answer to these questions, like the so-called ethical scenarios they also presented to trip people up. YYZ to YVR it was then, and the two years passed at

UBC seemingly faster than the ferry ride from Tsawwassen or Horseshoe Bay. He stayed in student residence just for fun, at Thunderbird, but the rain depressed him beyond belief, and just as he was casting his tackle about again, Tofino with its five tiny streets came along. It was a one-off weekend vacation that turned into something else entirely when his friends wanted to go bussing from Victoria. They came to see the provincial capital and heard about the surfing which could not be beat.

Charming, he thought, on arrival. *Why the hell not*. And when a position as an attending opened on the team there he applied and got it.

Still, lately, more and more, he has been ruminating on the old tenderness, wondering whether it is time to move on once again.

Abel takes a daily multivitamin, juice, and peanut butter and banana sandwich for lunch, stands at the top of the park near the hospital and the Sound, looking at the slightly bobbing buoy on the water that says NO WAKE. He tears too-large hunks of the bread with his teeth. Perhaps it is really he who should *wake up*? Where else could he go? South to the States? He has taken the USMLE, both steps, so it's not a horrible stretch. North, following the Cascades up to Osoyoos? The Yukon?

When his mother calls, still with her 905 area code, she often says, "You're bored. I knew it." *Come back East*, the implication loud and clear.

"No. Not exactly," he would say.

"What would you say it was, then."

He never likes discussing important things with her—it is like staring into a portrait of the Virgin Mary with the crying eyes. They owned one when he was little and would turn it to face the wall, sometimes. Not for too long, though; he always eventually became afraid of what Mother would do if she saw and would turn it back before she arrived home.

"Why don't we just wait until next year and see," he would say.

Abel would recall that first bus ride in those moments. Before that, he had imagined a densely-populated Vancouver Island, with Victoria the crowning jewel with its potbellied bunnies and old rich White retirees on the eastern tip. Sitting on cracked hollowed-out leather seats a row behind his friends, assigned to babysitting their backpacks, he found the mountains lining the number four highway a surprise. Sure, there were mountains in Van, but these were different somehow, sheer monastic faces with a certain meanness about them, rising more than a kilometer above the ground, at first grey, then deluged with dairy-thick snow. He did not expect that. This odd, estranged landscape did not feel like south of the forty-ninth parallel when enclosed on each side by so much white, the windshield wipers beating tinny against the glass. The bus swerving dangerously, hugging each curve and skidding.

An hour into the ride, they picked up a guy in a toque carrying his skis who had been adventuring up in the trees for a few days. Thick epaulettes of snow cloaked the man's broad shoulders and his breath came out in rotund puffs as he clambered up the steps and thanked the driver. At another point rows and rows of hemlock appeared on the faces of the mountains like arrowheads in obsidian, all pointing straight up, as though to say—*one way only. Don't look down*.

Leaving his friends to argue about who was better, Oasis or Blur, and who the better frontman, Damon Albarn or Liam Gallagher, he tottered up to the seat right by the driver and spoken to him, in a way that he knows would be embarrassing now.

"Chesterman Road, are you going to Chesterman Road? Or Cox Bay? They're close together, right?"

“Sir, you have to sit down and get behind the yellow line.”

“Oh. Okay. But Chesterman?”

“Yeah, we’re going there. It’s not a stop, but I’ll let you guys off at the end of the road.”

“And how far is it to the city from there?”

“To town? Five, six, clicks. If you don’t have a car you’re going to need a bike, my friend,” said the driver, finally turning around to show his face.

And that was how Abel received the contact info of Marc, or as he is known to everyone else, Bicycle Marc, who made sure of a coaster for Abel to start getting around, so he could start becoming “Tuff” in the Tuff City. Though Marc never did get Abel to get rid of the man-purse-slash-courier-bag.

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“Bring her this way,” the charge nurse says to the medics.

Nanaimo truly is ready, like Geoff said. No sooner are they off the helijet than Corrine is wheeled on a gurney by the medics through a set of double-doors, past a greeter at emerg who says Abel can stay with her. The greeter disappears for a moment then returns to say Dr. Deverajan is in another delivery but she is going to see him soon.

Abel looks around to get his bearings. All hospitals have similar layouts and he recognizes the familiar signposts. He checks his phone: the wide white numbers show about nine-thirty. At that hour the Subway and Thai Express in the cafeteria are closed but a visored girl with violet bags under her eyes is still handing out double-doubles to a queue of staff at Tim Horton’s.

Abel, Corrine, and the medics take the elevator to five, where Labour and Delivery clamours with whining devices and rushing footsteps. The flat LCD screen at the nurse’s station lights up and flashes in colors according to the stage of labour, early or active, station, and cervical characteristics. One woman’s breech may result in a Caesarean in the wee hours, though they will try to perform an external version first manually. Women always go into labour at night, their soft cervixes taking all day to dilate and efface and ripen, the contractions ripping at the seams of their mouths, clammy hands leaving soggy sweat stains on the sheets.

As he did when he was a medical student, Abel finds himself hoping, distractedly, that really, really eye-popping toe-curlingly good sex caused this blinkering slate of beds. How else could it be worth such agony, such anguish and theatrics?

His phone lights up with Sandra’s name and her little nurse avatar as they admit Corrine to L&D.

“Have you eaten?” she says pointedly.

He looks down at his stomach as though it can answer him. His clothes from the day shift glower, wrinkled, back at him, a collared charcoal shirt with a brass pin etched with capital letters spelling Dr. A. Poitier.

“Don’t answer that. I’ve ordered from some place called Da Tang, pretty much anything with grease they’ve got. And I know you. You’re not going to want to eat when it gets there. But for me, do it.”

"I really have to go," he says. He does not mean it, but something about her voice unsettles him and a brief flash to the slugs shears through his mind. To her in her bra and panties, slightly pink teeth marks about her collarbones, standing on tip-toe and pouring a bit of food into the mason jar. Her pasty hair unravelling from a dishevelled dumpling-like bun.

"Tell me how it goes," she says. She sounds musty and far away.

"I will."

"Abel, *eat*," she says.

"I will," he says again. "When we've got this figured out, I will. I promise."

The only other notification on his phone is another new text from Mother: *Heard about outage. U ok? And he nearly relishes the excuse of Corrine to dismiss it without answering.*

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Abel has never forgotten, in all his thirty-six years, the birthday parties and the regifting sessions afterwards.

Mother had kept him back a year in school. She kept saying he wasn't ready, she could teach him on his own better anyway, borrowing Houghton Mifflin mathematics books from the public library, maxing out the renewal limit. A professor of English literature back in the country they had left, she possessed the skills and the patience, the knowledge of the canon of Western Literature and history and science and also where not to go too quickly. She taught him how to write through picture books, the Boy and Frog series by a local author. For each image she asked him to invent his own narrative: *the boy is feeding the frog; the boy lets the frog sit on his shoulder; the boy and the frog start an adventure*. "Adventure" became his favourite word, mostly because he was not permitted any.

"Don't worry about it. You'll have plenty when you're older," Mother said.

"Goody," he would reply. "Can't wait." He really couldn't.

Other children and classmates, when they arrived, were not kind to him. Teachers toddled between marking his journal entries fluid and empathetic and frowning at his inability to keep rhythm during singalong time. His first-grade teacher, Mrs. MacDonald, played the ukulele, and when they sang *Goin' Around the Mountain*, he rubbed the phalanges of his third finger and thumb together, for no one had taught him how to snap, and his yeahs and heys often aborted prematurely on his lips.

He made two or three friends; they invited him to their birthdays and Mother grew finally embarrassed enough to agree they had to host something in return. She was against parties in general, but she refused to give gifts without receiving something back. On a Saturday afternoon, she allowed a small cadre of pre-approved classmates into their apartment for two hours, a tiny one-tier cake, and paper cups full of orange soda. When he tentatively suggested an activity, she helped him produce a home-made version of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey, except his donkey had turned out more like a sheep. Mother gave him a wad of glued-together cotton balls to use as a tail.

"What is your word worth, Son?" Mother asked him, while sorting through his birthday presents, after the party. He was eight years old, in the third grade. She held up a package of pop rocks. "If I allow you these, just this one time, will you eat them all in a go?"

"I promise," he implored. "I like the sound they make exploding in my mouth. As least, I heard they do that. Can I open the package from Uncle Raymond?" Mother had one brother and he was the only other person permitted to mail him anything on his birthday.

"How violent. Also, *may*, not *can*. We've been over this. And no, you know the rules."

"We regift," Abel said. Anything non-perishable and of some value. Uncle Ray had told Mother it was a wooden train set, but he could not help but allow the hope to crystallize in his small brain. He crushed some tissue paper that the pop rocks had come in, slowly enough so as not to signal his disappointment.

Mother snatched up another cylindrical package that had been pushed in with the pop rocks before he could touch it. "That's enough candy," she said.

Abel looked out the open window of the living room where they sat on the floor, surrounded by the dregs of the wrapping and well-meaning cards, letting in the scalloping air from outside. An oblong of light formed an oculus on the vase of flowers atop the piano.

By then, Mother was doing well enough at a new job that they were able to afford to rent a slightly better apartment in a neighborhood with houses, not only other apartments. One of the doors of the two-car garage from the bungalow directly across from them lazily ratcheted up like a snake curling its tail. The smell of hot dogs, which he was not allowed either because of the preservatives drifted in on a draft. The sight of kids playing inside, a smattering of voices, reached him. The noise from across the street or even the next unit over always sounded better to Abel, whether the shriek of the clothing line pulling t-shirts and upside-down trousers towards the woods at the back of the house—and even their disagreements, when audible, seemed rational and honest. Whose turn it was at Monopoly. Who wasn't sharing their pop-tarts with their sister. Who was cheating on whom with whosever's co-worker, *oh, I'm sorry, your work-wife, I forgot that's what you call her, isn't it?*

Then, when Abel turned back with a sigh, that totem of his youth, the toy stethoscope, was just there—a plasticky slightly-portly letter Y with ju-jube like earpieces, which had been forgotten under another box. Now he cannot for the life of him who it had been from. He does not remember the names of anyone before undergrad, actually. Most likely another child with immigrant parents who probably bought a pair at the Toys R' Us, fully convinced in their covert connivance of future prowess and plaudits.

Mother held the instrument firmly up to his neck and shoulders, like trying on something in the Goodwill when the changerooms were full. They did not buy brand-new clothing either.

"What," he said, nervously.

He gripped the wishbone prongs of the Y with both his hands. Her eyes beckoned to him, remonstrating with him in their cool greyness, as though she needed help, her arms suddenly so small.

"Stay still," she said.

"Huh?"

"This," she said. "This you can keep."

"Why?"

"You're so handsome now," she said. "My son."

And with these words, Abel was overcome with the sensation, a hard rusting rivet in his throat, of wanting to spend all or most of his years with her, from now to the end of his life. Tucking the earpieces so they met behind his neck, he lunged for her and gathered her in, inhaling her scent, of vinegar and canola oil and a little bit of sweat, while her arms stayed at her sides. He felt her vitalness then, her sweet strength, and he was glad he did not understand. It was like one of those dreams he had of them together. He did not dream often as a child, but when he did Mother featured prominently in poses of assurance and assiduity, braced in a doorway, columned among crepuscular cloisters and the ruins of castles and cathedrals. He felt overcome by the rare instrument of their friendship. A gummy tendon which he believed could never snap, only extend and thin. He was able to see even Mother was a little taken in, in affection. She pressed one palm hard into the carpet, and when she lifted it, the marks were like tiny wax cells of a honeycomb. Each just enough recess. For what, he didn't have any lamplight or inkling, except to be laden and somehow, later, filled with something fatuously sweet and famous to itself.

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The placenta, Dr. Devarajan explains to Corrine, can be positioned in many ways. In the best-case scenario, the oxygen and nutrient-delivering organ is attached firmly to the wall of the uterus like a deep-rooted tree. "But yours," she says, "has shorn away a bit, causing the bleed."

"I've had a section before," Corrine says.

"At thirty-three weeks and five days, which you're at," the doctor continues. "The lungs are mature. The non-stress test and the fetal ultrasound give me a slight cause for concern, so I wouldn't risk watchful waiting. And, yes, your previous section, we need to do another one. We'll get the epidural in place. They're prepping the OR now."

Corrine's room overlooks the parkade to the hospital, one of the fancier, cleaner ones. A triplet of tracklights affixed to the ceiling give off a not-too-harsh warm glow.

Abel stands a few feet away from the bed. At first the blood and fluids alarmed him, but he is calmer now.

He had gone over each step in his head as he remembered from medical school, as it was performed by the overnight staff. He watched them start two large-bore IVs running normal saline at 125 cc/h to stabilize her hemodynamically, order a group and screen, Rhogam, and blood products ready in case of rapid decompensation. Corrine had brought the partially-soaked menstrual pad to prove the bleeding. She had fallen when the lights went out, down the stairs while rushing for candles, and angry-looking red rug burns blistered on both her knees. After a full history and physical exam, in addition to imaging to exclude an obstruction by the placenta at the vaginal opening, Dr. Devarajan explained to Corrine that immediate delivery by Caesarean was the best option. Corrine had had an abruption.

"Abel?" Corrine says sharply and looks at him from the bed as Dr. Devarajan also turns.

"Yes, you have to have a section," Abel says instantly. He would never directly contradict another doctor in a patient's presence, and anyway, he agrees: this is standard management.

"Call your husband," the doctor says and points to Corrine's phone, as Corrine mutters, reaching for it, "Thank God the towers are still up."

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Abel and Dr. Devarajan, whose first name is Mina, stand beside the circular table in the nurse's break room. The pulse in his wrist stutters, yet she is at ease, breezily hands him a coke, her fingers slightly wet with condensation.

“Who’s on over there? You just came ‘cos you’re friends? And oh, are you hungry, by the way? There’s some leftover pizza in the fridge from grand rounds. It’s only Hawaiian, but whatever, right?”

“I’ve an order on the way,” he says. “And she’s my best friend’s wife.”

“You know, it’s super funny, but last year, I was on call on Christmas Day, and the same thing happened—full previa from you guys and had to be sectioned overnight.”

Abel was not working that day last year. The hospital usually presented the choice to work either Christmas or New Year’s, one of life’s small mercies. He Skyped Mother and panned the phone over the stove, showing her what he was cooking, a bouillabaisse with white fish and a duck confit with cranberry sauce. She said she could tell he had put in too much salt just from looking. With a bottle of clear San Pelligrino, she toasted to his health and to his coming back East before next Christmas. He might even have agreed—to placate her temporarily. That was stupid of him.

“You bring them in,” Mina says, seemingly to herself. “And we bring them out. And you bring them back.” She takes another huge bite of the slice she has grabbed and rubs her stomach through her scrubs with a hand still holding her cell, in case one of the nurses texts.

Abel blinks at her.

“You sure you don’t want a piece? Last chance to say something. It’s like your babies are all being born here or something,” she laughs. When she does, her mouth opens too wide and she sounds like a rooster. With her head tipped back at almost forty-five degrees, her teeth are slanted and coffee-stained. It doesn’t seem that funny to him.

“I’m fine.”

Mina pulls out a chair to finish the rest of the pizza. “I’m new here in ‘Naimo. I guess you know that. How long you’ve been in Tofino?”

“Three years,” he says. Sometimes, it feels like one. Today, it feels like longer.

“The ‘Mo and the ‘No,” Mina says. “You like it?”

He has to think a moment before he answers. *Yes*, is easy to say, but feels simplistic given his recent doubts. Mother always said *let your yes be a simple yes, let your no be a simple no*, as the Bible instructed. He does not want to put the town down either.

“Well enough,” he says.

“It was a close call for me,” she says. “I’m from Winnipeg. When I was done, I suppose I could have stayed, but I’ve always wanted to see it out here. Those Emily Carr paintings. The trees. The *trees*, man.”

“They’re spectacular,” he agrees.

They still excite him, though he has stopped taking pictures. He knows their names: the spruces, the hemlock, the Douglas firs, sometimes pregnant with garlands after garlands of pinecones, much grander and more majestic than anything in Toronto or Halifax. A squiggly stand of giant Doug partially obscures the view of town from his living room window. Beginning around the middle of March, he awakes to the clicking sound of their pinecones opening up, seemingly scale by scale, and after a few days with an open breeze, their spicy limonene aroma permeates everything in his closet. He did not notice this detail

until Sandra, walking past him in the corridor of the clinic, pressed her nose against his collar and said so. After that he started noticing it all the time.

“Check this out.”

Suddenly, to Abel’s surprise, Mina, with a squeak of her chair dragging across the floor, shows him her phone screen, pulled up to the DrCareers.ca website. She scrolls all the way down. The call for dermatologists splashes front and centre, but right below it the long list of GP spots sprawls nearly off the screen. With practiced flicks she opens a bunch of links in new tabs and waves the phone around, her lips rubbing over each other greasily.

“Have you been out east? I feel like I could have gone that way too. Look at these new jobs.”

He feigns no recognition of the news at all and nods. The courier bag with its printouts sits in the corner of the room where he tossed it; his gaze flicks to it involuntarily.

“What about you?” he asks, then immediately regrets it because he is sure she is going to ask him back.

“Oh, I’m in thrall. Or is it enthralled? I’ve got a place overlooking the beach. We’re busy. I’m happy. My husband has a great job. He’s pretty stoked at all the new hikes. The kids have a good school to go to. Three.” She holds up three fingers.

“Three schools?”

“Kids, I mean. We’ve a Costco membership. The house has a widow’s walk and I’ve always wanted that in a house. I feel like a fisherman’s wife, sometimes.”

“You bought it outright?” Abel asks. Housing prices are crazy out here. It is also a feeble way to change the subject.

“Mortgage. And hubby is a lawyer.”

“Right.”

“He’s sort of afraid of The Big One, but whatever.”

Abel raises his eyebrows. “Do you mean you’re not? At all?”

“I tell him he should be more worried about his next fart. That’s The Big One, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Ah.”

He wracks his brain for something else to say. People love talking about their kids, right? And there are three of them so he can go through them one by one, their ages, hobbies, food allergies, school escapades. *The Big One*, he thinks. But with the storm on and the power out, the topic does not seem particularly enticing even while offering, inevitably, tons of runway for speculation.

Fortunately, he is saved when another nurse pops her head in the room and says, in a breathless voice, like she has just sprinted down the hall, “Mina? Eight is fully dilated.”

“Oh, shoot, eight? Gotta dash.” Mina lowers her voice conspiratorially, and says, “Eight’s got a hubby with a raging boner for blood and an iPad for documenting everything. What is with men these days?”

“Seriously,” the nurse says, shaking her head. “Men.”

He shrugs on behalf of his sex. “Sorry,” he says.

Mina pulls on her surgical cap, pink with little Spongebob Squarepants characters all over it that she had tossed on a chair. She pulls it over her dark hair, and then she and the nurse are both gone. “See you in a bit.”

“Bye,” he says to the empty room.

How strange, he thinks, the conversations he is always having with other doctors, which remind him of those at interview days and orientations, *what’s your name, where are you from, which specialty*. He has been through so many. They always get him wrong a little bit, like, *really, you sure, because you’ve got the face of a surgeon to me*. During residency, they had shifted slightly to questions about family plans, whether he had anyone or would be taking paternity leave, to their own aches and pains, to getting sciatica and stress fractures from standing up so long for one-in-four call minimum. Now, to replicants of this one, *what’s your house like and where are the jobs, employ me, damnit*.

He looks at the bag again, thinks of the postings, and feels ashamed in a way.

Mina is right. They are so lucky. The trees here look unreal, as though part of a Martian landscape. Some short and squat, others taller than some of the professional buildings in Toronto’s financial district. They remind him of kinetic sculptures he saw once in a gallery: powered by coastal winds, their tips ever rocking and rustling in the saline breeze. They look deep-rooted and wizened, ancient and suffused with knowledge. So if they are of any Martians, they are magnanimous, lofty, and king-like Martians, whose palatial civilization, though silent, must have been around a long, long time. The kind of Martians who did not hurry and did not measure time in the way that people do—and certainly the kind of Martians who did not have deadlines to apply to anything.

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He texts Nate, *C/S in a few hours. I’ll be there. Don’t worry about a thing*.

Have you eaten? Nate texts back.

Yes, Abel lies.

Mother’s text is still on his list, unanswered, along with a new one, *Call me. Talk soon*.

Sandra’s worried about you, the phone pings again from Nate.

I’ve got Chinese, Abel texts back, and brushes his hand through his hair. It comes away slightly damp, like he has been sweating, just a bit.

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When the boxes that Sandra ordered arrive, a boy with a red bicycle helmet and reflective jacket dumps them in the break room.

Sandra was right, of course. Abel wants nothing. For a moment he sits there sunk into the cushions which smell like stale pizza. Then, surrounded by boxes with the orange and white pagoda crest and handles made of shitty-quality wire, he splits the wooden chopsticks and rubs them against one another to shave off the splinters that go flying across the coffee table and lodge in the carpet.

His stomach growls again. And now he wishes he had sushi, some onigiri and salmon sashimi and a golden dragon roll arrayed like so many dominos. Something really fresh like the foodie fare in Vancouver, so accessible when he was still working at UBC—even something from one of the fancier places in Toronto could hit the spot. He has not had good sushi in what feels like forever.

Five years ago, it was during lunch at Kuni Sushi Ya on Baldwin Street that his friends, Lisa and Randy, a couple who had been together since first year and who had just finished all their interviews, discussed their rank list of residency programs with him.

Lisa rubbed her hands together, exclaiming, “It’s almost here! No more embryo, no more anatomy, just a couple more months of internal, and I’ll hang my stethoscope up for good. All talking from then on out.” She was gunning for psychiatry. She and Randy were doing the couples match and often thought out loud. “How psyched are you? No pun intended. Just two years for family. Two!”

“Very,” Abel agreed. “And you totally did that on purpose.”

The waiter brought Abel a deluxe bento box with gyoza dumplings on the side and extra wasabi, plus a bowl of miso soup. His own interview tour had passed like a whirlwind, as over and over again, he kept dressing and undressing himself in a suit and tie from Harry Rosen, the first he had ever picked out without Mother’s help, sitting at the end of the bed of a Holiday Inn Express or Airbnb, shuffling his index cards and mentally prepping the questions. *What kind of physician do you see yourself as in ten years? How would you approach running a code for the first time as a resident on-call overnight? Have you ever disagreed with your attending and what did you do about it?*

When it became too much, he would chew gum to keep his breath fresh and stand at the window looking out at the local flavour. He always chose something downtown, whether it was Halifax’s protected bay with its narrows that never froze over in the winter; Montreal and Ottawa on their rough-hewn rivers; Windsor, Winnipeg; the twins rivals of Edmonton and Calgary in Alberta. Each city seemed not to exist in reality, except as inventions of his memory of himself living there. With each departure the air seemed to move instantly to fill the space where his body had been, and later, when he went to look again, clacking the name of the city he had just left into Google Maps, it was like the landscape already adored the filled space better without him. He felt the invisible finger press on his back, its insistence that he get out of the way, until Vancouver was the only choice left.

He gulped his miso soup too fast and burned his tongue, which he bit at delicately with a molar. He did not want to say to his friends that he had not started his rank list yet, had not even opened the website to try.

“Hamilton,” Lisa said, scribbling on the back of a napkin a rectangle and dividing it with craggy blue lines, some representing windows and doors and walls. A soy sauce stain was already filling in half of the napkin with reddish brown, the edges creeping forward like the sluggish motion of a gastropod. “Was our favourite by far. We’re thinking of buying a house. But there’s so much to consider. We’ll need enough bedrooms, like, for all of the kids we’re going to have.”

Randy was in the restroom. He always took ages, the only one of them who took the thirty-second hand-washing protocol seriously, so Lisa often spoke her mind when he got up to wee.

“Randy say he wants a boy and a girl. I say who cares what sex they are. I just want four of them. I grew up with four. We might have to average at three.”

“How mean,” Abel says, absently. *Mean.* He likes puns. But what he means to say is, *how do you know you won’t fuck them up? Your kids?*

"You're just too picky," Lisa said. "You're not out banging eighteen-year-olds like those ortho douches, yet you're still single. Chrissakes, you're not ugly, Abe."

Abel reddened.

Randy came back, taking a swig from his pint of Guinness before he even sat down and rubbing at the shiny buckle of his belt. The head left some lacy foam on his upper lip, which he did not bother to swipe away. "We've got to get you a girl, Abel," he said, though there was no way he could have heard Lisa, not with the bathroom being all the way across the dining floor.

Abel did not want to say he never dated in med school because it did not seem worth it to have it crash and burn and have to see that person every day for four years. He poked at the scallions in his soup instead.

"So what are we talking about? What does she have me renovating now?" Randy asked.

"Extra bedrooms," Lisa repeated.

"Sure, I'm handy," Randy said, just as Lisa reached over to grope him through his jeans. "Hey! I'll need that, might I remind you, to procreate and fill those rooms. Abe, back me up here."

"I've got a call," Abel said.

Mother's special ringtone, which he had set to Chopin's Etude Op. 10 No. 3, also known as *Tristesse*, had gone off four times as he hovered his thumb over the Decline button. Then it stopped ringing and a text popped up to say: *Don't stay out 2 late. Take ur vitamin. Mother loves u.*

Abel ignored it. Until he felt too guilty and texted her back once he was home, while brushing his teeth and carefully tilting away from the mirror so as not to get toothpaste spots on it.

I'm a boy, I'm a boy, I'm a boy, he thought.

He used the squeegee to scrub at the reflection of his face, just a little bit too much like hers to be entirely comfortable.

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"Abel," Corrine says and reaches out to hold his hand. "It's going to be okay."

"Yes," he says.

"It's going to be okay," Corrine repeats to him. "Totally okay."

"I'm supposed to say that, dummy."

"Did you," she says. "Just call me dummy before I'm about to be cut open?"

"Yes."

"What happened to bedside manner?" she jokes.

"We're not," he says. "At the bedside. You're getting sectioned."

Abel walks alongside the gurney as it is pushed to the operating room, where the harsh overhead lights hurt his eyes. The red numbers of the digital clock all the wall show it is just past one in the morning. He masks and gowns, just in case, but with a med student on call too overnight they will not need him.

The med student, with starry eyes, checks Corrine's ID wristband and with the help of one of the scrub nurses, goes through the checklist. He stands behind the blue paper curtain that has been pulled across Corrine's midsection so that she cannot see the procedure.

"I wish Nate were here," she says for about the millionth time.

"I know," he says.

"I'm glad you are though, Abe," she says. "I swear to God, I really would have destroyed your boards. All of them. With glee. Dancing around the conflagration with a cowbell and a tambourine and whatever other horrible instrument I could find."

"I know," he says, squeezing her hand. For a moment, he can't believe that he considered not getting on the chopper. And that he is still thinking about those postings. "You're going to be fine, Cor."

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Abel's @UBC.ca inbox, summarized on January 1st, 2009:

Inbox (51)

Tags:

Mother (12)

 Job Postings (11)

 Reminders (1)

Grand Rounds: (3)

Journal Articles: (1)

Collaborations: (0)

Hiking Club (5)

Mother wanted him back on the weekends. She wanted him back, period.

Mother was persistent, he had to give her that much. She had this special touch; when she started with the postings, which began filling Abel's inbox from his first month of residency at Point Grey, her words always sounded like shouting, even without using all caps. She had despised his time at U of T enough. But his escaping to the other side of the country for residency had pushed her to procure the fastest fibre-optic network available in the Atlantic region, to access the frontiers of the internet in the pursuit of his return. She knew all the websites and mailing lists and worked them over until she had a full understanding of every opening from Dartmouth, across the way from Halifax, to anything along the St. Lawrence River, which she grumbled, was "at least a little closer."

With a one-in-four call schedule and colleagues constantly going on mat leave, Abel tried to stave her off.

"I'm happy," he said often. "And busy."

"Do you have a girl?"

"No, I don't have time for that," he said.

He created a habit of making up reasons. He was doing the Grouse Mountain Grind for the billionth circuit, trying to outdo his own best time, sketching the totems poles in Stanley Park, shopping at the T&T in Yaletown, volunteering with the homeless in East Vancouver, with the psych evals and the needle exchange program. If he really wanted to, he could make it seem like his altruism had no limits. But once in a while, when he fumbled back into his apartment, tried to reorient himself with some good vegetable juice while standing on the balcony, after another twenty-six hour shift—technically, the program was moving towards protecting the residents to keep it at twenty-four, but everyone knew you wouldn't get good references like that—his excuses desiccated as much as his body.

He would hold out his arm, palm up, and pan it one-eighty degrees over the view of False Creek and Charleston Park across the way and beckon the city forward.

Feed me, nourish me, make me adore you. He would set the phone on the ledge and contemplate pushing it off.

"You know how I feel about girls," she would tell him.

Abel rolled his eyes.

She began sending him articles too. A reportage from the CBC:

Due to B.C.'s proximity to Canada's most volatile fault line, British Columbians live under the threat of a possible 'megaquake' every day. The Juan de Fuca plate is currently being forced beneath the North America plate. This is the reason B.C. experiences such high seismic activity. When a plate is being pushed under another, geologists call this a "Subduction Zone". These subduction zones give rise to "megaquakes"; the planet's most powerful earthquakes. These earthquakes have magnitudes that exceed 9.0 on the Richter Scale.

She explained, as though he could not read for himself, that this meant he could not live there anymore because it was too dangerous.

"Mega. That means big," she said.

"I know what mega means," he said.

"Six zeros."

"Out of context, Mother. Your first was more accurate."

"Six!" she said again.

He started holding the phone away from his ear. Sometimes, it worked; sometimes, not so much.

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"Suction," Mina says to the med student. The med student scrambles to poke the instrument in just the right crevice, a noisy slurp confirming her success.

"Kelly," Mina says to the scrub nurse.

Abel watches the huddled figures in the OR, arranged like the famous Rembrandt tableau. Dr. Devarajan is five-foot-two and needs a stepstool to raise herself to the height she needs. She asks for a scalpel again, the nurse hovering over the metal tray of instruments just to the side. A Spotify playlist set to oldies

pipes out music through speakers in a corner, John Mellencamp singing something about *it hurts so good* with the little handclaps in the background.

His feet ache and Mother's texts keep coming in, one after the other. He long ago flipped the small toggle at the side of the phone to vibrate.

Son, answer me.

Power's out.

Need 2 know. U still up?

Abel envies Mina her confidence, watching her work in blue size-six gloves. With her muscular arms and broad shoulders, she looks like Mr. Clean, except with hair.

"Am I holding this okay?" the med student asks.

"You're doing fine. Stay frosty," Mina replies, sounding like her eyes are smiling.

Abel readjusts the strings of his mask where they are cutting into the alley between his head and ears. Without caffeine, his head is swimming; the noodles in his stomach sizzle heavily and do not make it any easier.

He left his bag in the break room, and like Marc said about the bikes, nobody will steal it, not from Labour and Delivery. He almost wishes someone would. Mina had embarrassed him. He is glad that the other doctor had not had the chance to ask him about the postings earlier in the break room. What would he have answered? What would his voice even have sounded like?

Before, as when with Lisa and Randy, it had seemed okay to be confused about what was next. But the further he went in training, the more everyone else seemed to harden into their lives. Now they seem so sure of their selections: his friends, of their houses and kids and weekend activities; his colleagues, of their specialties and towns and cities and partners; Sandra, of leaving Port Alberni and letting him undress her and permitting him all the way inside her body at least ten times a month. How do they do it?

All of these people trapped into their inevitable orbits, as an ellipse is defined by its foci, the mediastinum defined by the ribs, the lungs and heart defined by their pleura. The most dithering anyone seems to do is over which of the delicatessen of samples at Costco, on an occasional trip to Nanaimo or Langford, should they try without getting fat. Answer: they rotate food groups.

"Metz," Mina says and a pair of scissors is placed in her waiting palm.

Abel thinks there is something wrong with him. The fact that things have always been different for Dr. Poitier. He doesn't orbit. Instead, it is as though at the center of his body there is a pressurized core, as dense as that of the earth, with its own sort of pulling force, for some kind of extraterrestrial iron, only available on an unknown asteroid belt or nebula light years away. He wishes he has the words to explain the substance that he is looking for, that missing piece with which he is certain he could build. And build he does want, at least he thinks so. He never watches television or follows new movies. If he had more time, other than surfing and paddle-boarding, he wants to take up woodworking and carpentry, if only not to be fan-ish and to create.

Yet there is also the opposite impulse. And in moments like these, marinating in his own embarrassment, is when he senses it most acutely, the danger of being in thrall to the missing piece, how it has convinced

him so insidiously that perhaps it is not natural to feel content or satisfied. He both loves and hates this fragment, which seems to reject his search for it, and by its absence has made him even more fond.

He wonders if he is even really capable of colonizing a place. If that would be the worst thing that could happen. He doesn't want to gaze lovingly at a hole forever.

Abel uses his elbow to wipe off a sheen of sweat from his brow as Dr. Devarajan manipulates blunt forceps to dissect past the abdominal fascia. He scans around at the machines in the room, the anaesthesiologist thumbing through his phone, the only one who is sitting down, who is permitted a rolling stool in the OR.

Lisa used to joke that they should have all gone into anaesthesiology just for the chairs.

"Sometimes, I just want to put myself under," she once said as Randy shook his head, saying, "We don't even know how anaesthesia works, think about that. Just take some Midol or something, babe."

Nate said something similar, last winter, when he broke his pinky toe skiing and asked Abel for propofol. Abel had tossed him a beer instead and said, "You stay away from that stuff, you hear?" while Nate sang The Verve, accompanying himself on the guitar, "*Now the drugs don't work, they just make you worse, but I know I'll see your face again! Your ugly face, Abe, your beautiful, ugly face.*"

Rolling his feet and sore toes on the hard floor of the OR, Abel smiles to himself.

Nate is always like that. Nate, who isn't going to see the baby come out, but Abel will. Any second now.

"You okay there, Abe?" Mina calls to him, her voice muffled behind the mask.

"Dandy."

"You can change the music if you want," she says. But he shakes his head. He likes Mellencamp—*Married an L.A. doll and brought her to this small town; now she's small town just like me.*

The song switches to *Pink Houses* and noises pick up around the huddle and the tent of blue drapes.

"There we go," Mina says.

"Oh, wow," says the med student.

Corrine makes a small sound that Abel cannot describe, between a groan and an exhalation. Skin, adipose sheared, the layers of the uterus part like the flesh of a grapefruit—perimetrium, myometrium, endometrium—and, surrounded by the twin scoops of Mina's blue fingers, the baby emerges. First its head, impossibly large, then its neck and shoulders. Even for a preemie, it looks like too much of something and wretchedly clear, like boldface type on an unblemished white page. The med student switches to suctioning its nose and mouth. The trailing umbilical cord and its broad, bloated placenta follow shortly.

"Abel, you want to cut the cord?" Mina says. "Usually we offer to the dad, but..."

Corrine nods, like *yes, yes, do it, quickly, get it over with*. He does so with a snip that sounds too loud to his ears, and the baby separates from it, so easily, so practically.

Abel remembers that the *it* is a girl.

They put her on Corrine's chest for a brief moment, and then inside the warmer on the side, a glass aquarium for struggling limbs, the right number of fingers and toes. A tiny wrinkled face and an even tinier feline squall.

Mina is saying something about at least the dad isn't here with the tablet again and the med student knows that it is the right thing to do to laugh at all your preceptor's jokes. Someone is taking the APGAR score: heart rate, breathing, muscle tone, reflexes, and skin colour, marking them down on a clipboard. Thank God it is a ten out of ten. And then it's all over—these things always go faster than the lay person thinks.

Abel touches his face briefly and remembers his own APGAR had not been quite as perfect. A nine, maybe, something about his reflexes, just a touch off. Mother told Abel he was born at eleven in the morning in 1976, at term, a Fire Dragon, and that he took to the nipple very easily, without the services of a breastfeeding consultant. She told him he was lucky because he would have a great life, the life of a scholar. She told him he had to listen carefully and obey or the destiny could just as easily pass on to someone else.

He looks at the clock again. He knows she meant a great life close to her. But he also knows of other lives and other places now, terrifying and harsh and exciting and different.

When he looks back, Dr. Devarajan is patiently showing the med student how to use the staple gun to seal off the incision.

Corrine meets his eyes but they do not say anything.

He notices something metallic in his mouth and finds that he has been rabidly chomping on his tongue, becoming intimate with its taste.

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"*Tristesse*," Corrine said, the time when Abel first realized it—that though Mother was his emergency contact and Nate was his best friend—Corrine saw things others did not or would not.

"What?"

"Your mom calls a lot," she answered.

"How did you...?"

"Piano lessons for a couple of years."

He was a hosting a small get-together at his place and she came to see him in the kitchen where he stared at his phone, leaving everyone else to play Taboo and Catch Phrase in the living room, screaming, stomping on cushions, and swapping teams.

At his raised eyebrows, she shrugged and said, "I know my Polish Romantic composers. So what is it from Mama Poitier this time?"

"Uh." Abel was tongued-tied for a moment then pointed down to an object. "She wants to know if I opened the care package."

"Another one?" Corrine was there when the UPS guy dropped off the last.

“Another one.”

“Fuck me.”

He knew what she was thinking: Mother sent him Puma socks in six-packs, bottles of fancy olive oil, plasticky ribboned gift sets of Ferrero Rocher, and other prosaic things that he could get for himself at Costco. It didn't make any sense.

“Do you want some olive oil?” he asked, scratching his head, while kicking once more at the box leaning against the baseboard, sawed open at the flaps which had been duct-taped.

“Sure, could use it to anoint one of the kids,” she said, turning to sift through the cabinets, her hands moving jars and containers to the side.

“As what? And what are you looking for? I can get it.”

“King of Israel. Or Judah. Is that a thing, still? Anointing?”

“That's Old Testament stuff. But if it is, I nominate Laird.”

“Oh, for sure, Laird. When it messes his hair, he'll freak that the girls won't like it. E is less vain than his brother. Much less. Oodles, actually.”

“You call Ethan, E?” Abel laughed. “How did I not know this?”

“No clue 'cos we do all the time.”

“What if he finds out about drugs this way?”

“From Google or are you going to tell him all about it?” she asked. “Whatever, I'm making a kir. You want?” From a hidden shelf Corrine produced some crème de cassis with about a third of the bottle left and poured a quarter-ounce into a champagne glass. She topped it off with white wine.

He shook his head. He had already had a half-pint of cider while he cooked. He was still half in disbelief that she even knew where he kept all of his alcohol, probably could find his diary and cigarettes if he smoked.

“Laird likes little girls?” he asked instead, then blushed. “Sorry, that came out wrong.”

“You're forgiven. Sure, he says he even has a girlfriend. Or five. I can't keep track.”

“Wow.”

Corrine grinned and rotated the neck of the bottle so as to minimize spillage. “Why so shocked, Abe? Mother didn't let you like anyone at six years old?”

“Mother,” he said. “Would rather not let anything happen, to anyone, anywhere, at any age.”

She playfully hit him on the wrist, but as he ducked, he caught her serious expression. “I'm talking about you, of course.”

“Yeah, what about me.”

“Maybe care a little less what she thinks. *Tristesse* is even making *me* a bit Pavlovian, so I can’t imagine what it’s doing to you,” she said, taking a deep inhale of the bouquet and gulping at the same time.

He understood what she meant. He was often torn between letting the melody play longer to avoid the call and cutting off the first few bars as soon as possible with a swipe.

“Maybe I’ll change it to something else. Do you like Debussy?” he asked.

“Not the point completely and you know it,” she said.

“What’s the rest of it then.”

Despite his earlier refusal, she handed him a second glass of kir, in which bubbles were lifting in limpid lines like seagrass, and he took it by the stem, before even realizing he had.

She looked at him right through the red liquid in her own glass.

“Abel,” she said. “Stay here with us forever. Forget your mom. Drink this. Drink more later.”

He sipped. It was good. She was good at and knew so many things about everyone.

She turned around and dragged him by the arm towards the living room. “Now come back to your party and live a little. It’s your turn, you’re on my team, and I swear I’ll die before I lose Taboo to fucking *Bicycle Marc*.”

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Abel stands at the window, where the blind, a long semi-transparent sheet with a weighted bar at its base, slides up and down with the toggle of a button on the wall. The rain falls steadily. He can tell from the grainy resolution beneath the streetlamps along the road leading to the main parkade. A stand of taxis is visible on the right side; an elderly woman is helped out of a wheelchair while a paramedic, watching over her slow, tentative, steps, holds an oversized yellow umbrella over her cap of silver hair. He presses his hand against the glass briefly and watches its outline in fog form and disappear again.

“She loves you, you know,” Corrine says abruptly. And here it comes. The truth bombs again and he can almost taste the kir.

An ache beginning in his head, he turns and accidentally grates his elbow against the glass of the window, and uses his other hand to rub at it, while staring at her. The baby’s body covers the side of Corrine’s left breast, the gown and a sheet caressing the other. She scrubs her hand through the baby’s soft brown hair, but keeps her eyes fixated on his.

“Sandy,” Corrine says, at the same time as he says, rather lamely, “Who does?”

“What?” he says as again they talk over each other, Corrine saying, “Oh, come on, Abe. Don’t be stupid.”

Abel takes a few strides towards the overbed table. Not knowing how to answer, he looks at the cardboard cord blood kit box again resting on it, empty now, the zip-sealed blood collection bag with Corrine’s hospital label and the accompanying forms long shipped to the blood bank on Bowen Road. The meticulous staff there would only accept the sample if it arrived within thirty-six hours from the time of collection, when the cells were still viable and able to be stored.

He imagines it on its way, bumping against the other bags, snaking along the road.

Corrine waves her hand in his direction. "Abe. I said—"

"I heard you," he says.

"She does," Corrine says.

"How," he says. "Do you know that?"

Corrine rolls her eyes. "She gave you her Lifesavers."

Abel blinks. "What are those?"

"You mean..." Corrine shifts and blankets fall and it takes him a few seconds to realize she is beckoning him over.

As soon as he is close enough to the bed, she presses a button to decrease the angle of the recliner so she sits more forward, reaches into his white coat to the pocket on the left side and retrieves something about the size of a bar of soap, wrapped in a Kleenex. She sets it on the table and the corners of the tissue fall away. The object inside is a cylindrical, slightly lumpy roll decorated with rings of rainbow color and small illustrations of pineapple, watermelon, raspberry, cherry and orange at each end. White patches show where the wrapper has worn away from being carried all day, the lettering difficult to make out.

"Lifesavers," she says again, matter-of-fact.

"I don't know what this is. A battery?"

"Jesus H. Did you grow up under a rock? Ever look by the tabloids at the cashier's? It's candy, Abe."

Abel blushes. "No, Mother didn't allow candy in the house. I mean, I may have gotten some as a gift..."

"Here," Corrine says, interrupting him. She takes her free hand and tears the small package open, the wrapper spiralling away to reveal a gritty-looking series of cheerios.

"What do I do—"

He watches Corrine pop one into her mouth and feels himself lunge slightly forward. "Wait, you're not supposed to be—"

"Oh, shhhh," she says. And she pushes a second one against his lips until he involuntarily opens them and allows it past his teeth. It's blue. Hers is green. Maybe. He can't remember. "Don't tell," she says.

He does not know whether to suck, the life preserver shape seems to swell his tongue, and with it in place, he cannot really say anything either. A little sweet, a little sour. Sweetness is sensed at the tip and sour at the sides, he thinks, taste from the front two-thirds of the tongue carried by the glossopharyngeal nerve, cranial nerve number nine, to the brain.

Corrine says, "Sandy's brother brought her these every year when he was in the army. Man, I miss him. There are people who are cool and there are those who are truly *cool*, you know. He was one of those. He had a tattoo on his right forearm, from being with the Scots—*ready for the fray*."

Abel mumbles around the candy, "She has a brother?"

The disciplinary expression Corrine corners him with is exceptional.

“Had. Accidental discharge in Kuwait.”

“Um,” he tries to backtrack. *Also, she’s Scottish?*

“Oh, I forgot,” she says, rolling her eyes. “You two just fuck.”

He runs his hand back and forth against the contour of the table and picks up the pen she has been using to record what she wants to tell Nate later. He clicks it till the tip retracts, clicks it again, and sets it down.

“Abel,” Corrine says. “Do you love her? Jeez, I hope you’re at least being safe.”

He reddens even more, feeling teenage and chastised. Then again, this is perhaps a conversation he has felt coming for a long time, just not knowing when and from which quarter.

Corrine is the most reasonable answer. Of course she is. She knows everything.

Accidental discharge in Kuwait.

Abel sees the reports sometimes, on the news, the photographs and uniforms and dignified mournful families. Flags.

The tips of his ears fill with blood.

Had she said? Were there photographs at her place? Maybe there were more “shoulds” involved. He should have asked. He should have known.

It comes to him now, a series of images blinking through his head like the photoburst function on his iPhone.

Every Thursday, when she is not on shift, Sandra goes into the woods and shoots at tin cans, and sometimes even drives up to the gun range at Port Alberni. They don’t have sex until nine p.m. or later on those days. Once, when her purse fell open and upended its contents, he had glimpsed her gun license and on it, her full name, Sandra Amelia MacGillivray. She keeps it in her Kate Spade wallet, wedged between her BC Services and Sephora points cards, and she told him she hated that photo of her because they made her separate her bangs from her face and she had forgotten her eyeliner that day.

He had just thought the gun thing was a quirk. Only it is not at all.

She is military, Abel understands now. Her brother. Maybe even her father. Or cousins. Or uncles. Maybe even the women.

That is why she has a similar tattoo on the inner curve of her wrist, beneath that silly jade bracelet—*deas gu cath*—the one that kept rattling while he was fitting his fingers into the notches of her spine, dimpling the rounded, ample curve of her ass.

“He was in the Scottish Canadian Regiment,” Corrine says. “The Princess Mary’s.”

Sandra might have actually said, if he had listened, if he had given more than periwinkles and not folded over her purple smilies on the morning list of patients.

If he had questioned her wrists instead of pinning them back.

He presses his palms together, preparing to answer. But at the same moment, the door clicks and Dr. Devarajan comes bumping back, a student nurse in tow. Splashes of fresh blood like tomato juice drip from her Dansko clogs. The student nearly trips over her feet on the way to the cabinet to grab another package of size six gloves and tears them open so the doctor can glove herself, and then hovers to ensure the ties on the Mina's gown are secure.

"How are we doing?" she asks Corrine, and they begin to converse.

Relieved, he steps back. Abel holds the lifesaver in his mouth, and allows the crystalline taste to suffuse his entire body and attempt to cover the shame.

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AN INCOMPLETE LIST of things banned by Mother (in no particular order):

- MSG
- Dairy
- Caffeine
- Cigarettes, alcohol, pot, drugs (obvs)
- Pets (except for periwinkles)
- Rap music (both coasts)
- Staying up past ten pm on a school night
- Staying up past eleven pm on a weekend
- Tying up the phone line
- Modern and expressionist art
- Talking to Jehovah's Witnesses
- Answering the door in general
- Aerosol sprays
- Aluminum cans
- Dreamcatchers
- Downtown, anywhere (too crowded)
- Public transit (too dirty)
- Riding in cars with young women
- Riding in cars with older women

Sandra was digging in a drawer in Abel's bathroom, searching for one of her blonde bobby pins she had left behind, one of two times he let her stay over at his place, when she discovered a scrap of paper tucked beneath a spare pair of glasses. He had written the list as a teenager as another reminder to himself. Since Mother was always adding and subtracting to it according to her mood, Abel had produced many, on post-its, loose-leaf, taped to his mirror, his locker. He had written one in the back of his school agenda in case a friend ever offered something to eat or something to do and he had to check before giving an answer one way or another.

"Why except for periwinkles?" Sandra asked, using her front teeth to pry a bobby pin apart, before sliding it behind one of the soft pieces of hair caressing her ear.

He tried to take the paper from her but she held it just out of his reach. He supposed he could have lunged, but using force on Sandra did not seem right. He had just come, with her encouragement, inside her. She was wearing a soft sweater of angora rabbit fur. She had knit it herself from hand-spun yarn, citing rabbit wool was seven to eight times warmer and more insulating than sheep's wool, so it was almost the softest and coziest fiber around. She had not bothered to put her thong back on.

He gave up and sat back on his elbows, lying on the bed. "I dunno," he said reluctantly. He rarely talked about Mother with anyone, especially from work. He also sort of hated that Mother had bought the sheets they had just fucked on.

"Aren't those like, sea snails?" she asks. "Periwinkles?"

"Sure."

"Did you have many?" she asks. "As pets?"

"No," he said without thinking. "We mostly ate them."

"What?" she asked and met his eye in the mirror over the dresser. "How? Now you have to tell me. Is this an East Coast thing? Seriously? Eating snails?"

He regretted saying anything. Stupid, stupid, the brain fighting, as usual to catch up with his dick.

Yet, realizing the subject at that point was unavoidable, Abel taught Sandra, in words, what Mother had taught him in action.

"Come here," he said. "Okay, fine, you know in the shallows..."

It had been another one of his and Mother's things. Every summer, up until he was seventeen and moved to Toronto, Mother and Abel used to look up the tide report in the newspaper or call the Environment Canada hotline. If favourable they would go to the shore, usually Rainbow Haven or Crystal Crescent Beach to pick, the way some people did strawberries and apples in the Annapolis Valley. They would abandon their shoes and socks on the dock, roll their pant legs up to the knee and splash in, willowy silhouettes cast over the shallows.

They had never really had bad days. The tide would recede gently in front of them, baring the rocks with their kelp wigs to their curious fingers. They would find families of three or five whorled shells in the dark crevices. They would always pluck the largest first, in case they accidentally swept the rest in the water. The suction of the periwinkles' fleshy feet made a pop every time they were pulled from a rock. These were often the only sounds between Mother and him for hours on end.

After bringing up bag after bag of shells onto the boardwalk, each tied with neat boy-scout calibre knots and dripping with wet sand, they would load the bags into the car. At home in a large wok on maximum flame, Mother would fry the periwinkles simply in vinegar and scallions, lightly salted, serving them up in a huge glass punch bowl.

"Did you like it?" Sandra asked.

He had enjoyed watching Mother use a needle as a skewer, bravely towing each piece of meat out of the shell and popping it directly in her mouth. He had enjoyed watching the pile of shells grow on the placemat in front of her, like a miniature version of a pyramid of skulls in an adventure movie, a picaresque memento mori.

"I did keep one as a pet, I think," Abel said to Sandra. "But it disappeared after a few days from the jar."

"What do you mean disappeared? Did your mom...?"

"I never asked," he said, reddening.

He realized suddenly that it was sort of a strange thing to have been so comfortable about—a disappeared pet. But it was the truth. It had seemed so normal to him to wake up, lift his head from the pillow, and see the jar of straw-colored seawater empty on his bedside dresser, Mother stewing oatmeal, loading laundry, and opening drapes downstairs.

Sandra cocked her head to the side and squinted at him.

He felt like apologizing for some reason and coughed to cover the impulse, plucking at the pills on the quilt with this thumb and forefinger, placing them in a small pile in the middle of a square embroidered with a blue cottage house with tiny red windows.

“Do you miss it?” she asked him.

“What? The periwinkle?” he asked.

“No, Halifax.” Now she was the one plucking at the small fibers of her sweater. She refused to meet his eye. Her hand pulled at another drawer. “Back home.”

Home. That word, again. Good word. Bad timing. Not his favourite subject.

His chest tightened as he schooled his features to remain neutral. She sat at the foot of the bed and looked at him, with pellucid blue eyes. He knew what she was asking, the elegant ellipsis, the pinioned question. *What are we doing here? Where is this going? And am I even allowed to ask?*

They were practiced at this now. When she moved up and down on him, or back and forth, her body bent over his in the oily dance of ingress, egress. He knew how she liked to be touched, could reach deeply under the folds of her skirt as she traced along the spines on his crappy IKEA bookshelf—which he had to get specially shipped from Vancouver—and get her there in an instant. He knew her middle name and that she had wanted to get the heck out of Port Alberni after high school, but not too away, and ended up here. The reasonableness of it all was so apparent to him, and yet, Abel did not want to answer.

Instead, he had risked reaching with his arm out to pull her back down and horizontal, relieved at his success when it caused her to laugh. He crawled on top of her.

He covered her mouth with his, and murmured, “Let’s go back to bed.”

For a moment, he feared she wouldn’t follow. But then she herself pulled the pin out once again from her hair, tossing it in the direction of the mirror, where it struck and bounced off, where they looked and saw both of their bodies twisted together in the perversity of a knot of kelp.

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From her hospital bed, Corrine looks at him as if he is crazy. As though she knows that he didn’t know Sandra was Scottish.

If Abel is in love in Sandra, he has never allowed himself to think about it until now.

If Abel is in love with Sandra, he wonders if he is honour-bound to say something.

If loving a person is sort of like loving a place.

In that he can hardly stand to admit either.

The tiniest bit of mirth begins to bubble inside of him, like the relief of being called-out.

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When one drives into Tofino from the highway, Tonquin Beach is at the very back end of town. If one stands on the temporary isthmus connecting Frank Island to the twin sinks of Chesterman Beach at low tide you can just see the edge of it on the far left. To actually access the beach from town, where the cross streets are numbered one to five starting from the Pacific Ocean, the typical route is to turn onto Neill Street, parallel to Campbell, walk down Arnet Road, past the hospital, heliport, and playground, finally forking into the aptly named Tonquin Park Road. It is a dead-end road with the trailhead beginning on the left, which splits in two, then splits again and again. Some paths anastomose like blood vessels and snake into coves and lookouts with signs that explain the local vegetation in both official languages.

The summer is the best time to go and there are illegal raves and bonfires all the time. In the winter, the ground sags with brown undifferentiated sludge. Abel has good waterproof Tretorns and he likes to be alone. So it was in November the day he found what was his, the miniature mesa, a hiding place in Tofino that he likes to think no one knows about.

It was his day off. He used to stick to paths, but had followed a rabbit off-trail between a tangle of bushes.

Abel wore a forest-green Gore-Tex parka. The rabbit hopped stutteringly, the challenge of keeping up with it startlingly equivalent to his wobbling blood alcohol level. He took loud sloppy sips from a girly drink as his wellies formed prints on the forest floor. He had patronized the BC Liquor Store just before, seizing a Bartenura Moscato, his secret favourite, an Italian fruity wine so feminine that it came in a Santorini-blue bottle with a Santorini-blue taffeta ribbon around the neck and its own glitzy Santorini-blue bag.

He let the branches whip past him at shoulder level. Perforated scratches of blood skimmed his cheeks, but he did not mind. The still grey sky overhead circled the trees with composure, until he came to a clearing with a ridge, which he climbed, and further past a few more ridges. Each ridge forced him to go down before he could crest again to emerge onto a moss-covered tableland half the size of a tennis court.

He sat atop a rock on the mesa, conveniently only slightly damp. A protective ring of hemlock and western cedar screened the water from view, except for a tiny valley-shaped opening to the west.

He stood up.

He sat down.

He stood up again and screamed at the ocean, "Why don't you have a damned IKEA!" He didn't have enough furniture yet and was looking at local estate sales, instead of the shipping from Vancouver. The Island didn't have a Uniqlo or MUJI either. Where was he going to get his Heattech and puffy vests and minimalist stationary and serviceable gel pens?

But the fog lifted his voice away, and the ocean, the Pacific, peaceably purred in the distance. He stayed there a good two hours as his phone buzzed and buzzed, bumping and skittering over the rock, until it fell onto the moss, which muffled the sound.

No one knew he had logged in to an account on MDWork and set up a draft CV that morning. He had uploaded his references, all his electives, a PDF scan of his diploma with the scarlet seal of the University of Toronto.

No one knows he did not send it. He went for the walk instead.

When he went back to town and ordered an Earl Grey from Tuff Beans, the barista said there had been a small tremor that day. Not The Big One, but something all the same. The highball glasses on the shelf had rattled, while he had been so busy with screaming and loving he had not even felt it. Not a single bit.

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"The husband is on the phone," the charge nurse tells him when he wanders back to the station, still with the faint smear of shame on his face. "No, for you," she says, when he points to Corrine's room. "He says to call him back."

And so, taking one flight of stairs down to the empty renal wing, Abel finds a quiet corridor, leans against the wall, and dials Nate on his phone screen smudged by fingerprints. There is a click before he hears Nate's voice.

He imagines Nate's wide face and hears sources of the noises in the background, of the boys bickering and playing with the strings on a guitar. He can almost see the creases around Nate's eyes as isorithms sprouting centrally from each canthus and the way they might pull downwards on his thick eyebrows.

"Abe," Nate says, and it's his real voice again. "I'm fucking terrified."

Abel thinks of disaster, an argument, a candlestick toppled in the dark, flames snaking up drapes, an entire cabin engulfed.

He asks, "What happened? Are the boys okay? When are you going to come up? Are they working on the power?"

What he wants to say is, *Your wife just told me the truth and I can't handle it because what if it turns out that I can handle it. Truth is truth.*

"You would think," Nate says. "That I would be good at this by now. After Ethan and Laird. But each time it's different."

Abel allows his shoulders to come down away from his ears. He pushes his legs out and leans harder into the wall.

"I never knew I there were so many different ways to be scared," Nate says, quietly.

Abel presses his other hand against the wall, so clammy that it sticks rather than slides.

"I'm scared, Abel."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, we had Ethan when I was twenty-two," Nate says. "I was a young dad. That's what I always wanted, to be able to play with my kids while I was young."

"You do," Abel says. He doesn't know anyone who spends more time with his kids than Nate.

"But will I get to be an old dad?" Nate asks. "I started thinking about that today. What if something happens. To me. Or to them. Or if I fuck them up."

Abel waits. A vending machine in the hallway, which only seems to dispense diet cokes, gives off a faraway hum like a swarm of insects. He is very thirsty; he has not had any water in hours, but there is an ice machine upstairs and a stack of paper cups of which he will need to avail himself. He forces himself to listen.

“Or nothing happens and we don’t talk. So it’s like I’m not their dad at all.”

The sound of more shuffling and shaking trespasses on the line and Abel thinks Nate is finding a more comfortable position, maybe on the floor next to the fireplace. When they left, Nate was wearing a woolly-looking cable-knit sweater and loose drawstring sweatpants with what looked to be a fresh mustard stain, and slippers which did not match. He looked like he had gotten dressed in the dark. Which was funny, in a way.

“I think I want another kid,” Nate says. “Three isn’t enough. Not for me.”

“Enough,” Abel repeats, stretching out the two syllables. “What a word.”

“I know, right. I thought it after two. But here I am again. And it isn’t. I don’t know how many would be.”

“You’re allowed to change your mind, Nate.”

“Still.”

Abel takes one of his hands and holds it tightly in the other. He feels the pulse of blood through his hand, sweat gathering between the skin of his fingers. In his head, Nate appears grinning helplessly back at him, as though transfixed by his hypotheticals. Abel adjusts his grip on the compacted bevels of the phone and backs harder into the wall.

He wants to comfort, but also to resist the urge to comfort because this—all of this—is suddenly too much. He feels something grinding and gathering inside of him, pushing its way out like a creature from its membranes, its amniotic sac rending and discarding.

Nate had thought he knew how many and when.

Abel thought Corrine would have a normal vaginal delivery.

He thought he knew what Sandra was doing in the woods and every time she drove down to the Alberni Fish and Game Club.

The baby, maybe, thought it had a few more weeks left in its warm, wet chamber before having to suffer the corporeal calamity of breath.

Abel covers his mouth with his fist. A thin current of hilarity comes surging through him, and he does not know why. He’s so stupid sometimes, he wants to laugh.

Enough. Like thinking salt water can suffice against thirst, the seawall against the infinite sea, new closets against old pain. *Enough, enough, enough.*

There is a small window at the end of the corridor and the stoplight at the intersection far below is visible, a tiny grid of houses, the lacey trees, and beyond that more mountains.

“The babies aren’t being born here anymore,” Abel says out loud, more to himself, remembering what Mina said about last year, while he had been sucking up to Mother over Skype.

He thinks maybe he has to explain, but Nate seems to know, instinctively, what he means.

“Did you know that the kids’ hockey team is even moving to Ucluelet next year? The boys are really broken up about it,” Nate says. “We’ll probably have to set up a carpool. They think some of their friends won’t want to play anymore if they have to go to Ukie.”

“Where was Laird born?” Abel asks. He doesn’t know how he doesn’t know, why he’s never asked.

“In town,” Nate says. “But Ethan was in the car on the way to Alberni. We’re lucky it was forty weeks and everything.”

“Very lucky.”

“And what if the Big Ones comes?” Nate asks. “The earthquake. The tsunami. Everything washed away.”

“You know,” Abel says. He’s starting to smile, desperately. “I was just thinking about that.”

“And?”

“I’m not a seismologist, Nate.”

“Then why’d you bring it up?” Nate asks.

This is a good question. He doesn’t like to think about The Big One. Like for Mina, it had always seemed counterproductive; this was where they lived and practiced. What good would it do?

And yet now, it is a possibility that Abel finally allows to overtake him, the entire terrible over-wrought image, now that it seems to be happening to him anyway, a kind of convulsive, inundating desperation of silliness.

If the 1940s in Courtenay seemed too removed from reality, last year, in Japan, the Great Sendai Earthquake was different; Sendai and Fukushima had provided all the visuals they needed to imagine the Tuff City undergoing the complete Atlantis treatment, the torture of drowning and never filling one’s lungs with oxygen again.

“I don’t know. Well, no. I guess I do know,” Abel says.

In Tofino, at the hospital, they had watched the news on television and the updates come in minute by minute on Twitter. Abel remembers where he was on 9/11 and he remembers he was writing a prescription for ranitidine when Sendai occurred. He heard the gossip of people gathering on the beach to see if it could be felt and remembers thinking it was like the famous bridge gathering in Pripyat after the blast that incinerated Chernobyl.

He knows the facts as well as anyone. On the eleventh of March, just before three in the morning, a magnitude-nine earthquake off of Honshu had piled up all the water in the Pacific seemingly against the city of Sendai, including its airport and the surrounding countryside. As the tsunami raced outwards from its epicentre, attenuated waves struck the flanks of Hawaii and then the West Coast of North America, and eighteen hours later, part of the Sulzberger Ice Shelf broke off from the continent of Antarctica.

The ice shelf thing was what had always excited the kids, seven-year-old Ethan especially.

"It just broke up. Like the Titanic!" he exclaimed when Abel was over that evening for dinner and they were setting out the plates in the dining room.

"Not quite, babes," Corrine said. "This was a very small piece."

"Still. I wonder if a polar bear fell into the sea!"

"What? Can that happen? I don't want a bear to die." Laird poked at Abel, eyes wide, as Corrine patted his hand and said, "Let's hope not."

She stuck her tongue out at Abel, who did the same in return.

By December, Japanese water bottles and lumber with Japanese export stamps on them, as well as socks and toothbrushes had made their way across the breadth of the Pacific and lodged among the driftwood and seagrasses at Chesterman Beach, pecked at by gulls and shorebirds.

One of Abel's regular patients, an old woman, had brought in something with foreign characters on it to show him, her eyes shining, for her father had fought in the Pacific Campaign in the Second World War, at Okinawa and Iwo Jima. The following year, just before Christmas, a motorbike washed up on the shore in a wooden crate and the old woman came back specially to tell him all about it.

"Some boys in town are going to fix it up right good and send it back to the owner in Japan," she had said, while showing him her swollen finger joints, ravaged by rheumatoid arthritis.

"Are they?" he asked.

Unable to picture how an entire bike could toss its way over in a crate, Abel had paused his own fingers over the computer keys, hovering.

"Good boys," she said. "Good with their hands."

"It must take a long time to cross the ocean. Months and months. I wonder if the owner has a new motorcycle now or if he or she's forgotten about it," Abel said.

"A motorcycle's hard to forget, Doctor Poitier."

"I don't know if I could ever love a thing so much, but I've never owned a motorcycle either," he said.

Now, with the phone against his ear and Nate's breathing coming across just a bit too loudly, Abel imagines the same sort of destruction in town, if something like that really happened there. All the rich beds and breakfasts on Chesterman Beach destroyed, glass and Dwell magazine and mid-century modern pieces mixed in with toppled trees, people's precious SUVs and trucks covered while still in their driveways, families carrying their cats, dogs, guinea pigs, and children to safety at the peakiest peak, the Community Hall at the top of the hill.

The tsunami warning sirens going off all the way along the water. *Sound travels faster underwater*, his high school physics teacher had drummed into their heads. What would the sirens sound like if they were covered by the sea, finally?

So much destruction.

And yet.

Here they are now, so trusting, so endeared to their town, just living and dawdling in the cocooning silence of days. Nate growing fat and old and balding and still playing the guitar, *Champagne Supernova*, talking about all the lonely people. Corrine sewing tea cozies and slinging spreadsheets and Shawn at the radio station and Marc leaving his house unlocked and shepherding tourists on bike tours, raucous bonfire-bound beer-bingeing teenagers queueing for a good London Fog all the way onto the wooden patio of Tuff Beans.

But what is so wrong with that? Where is the need to interfere with it? He has a good job and he has a best friend and his best friend's wife sees into him. The summers are warm and full of beautiful people from Europe and the Lower Mainland living out their fantasies and falling fearlessly into the waves, and the winters are private, cozy affairs with the people he loves most. And he even has his own little tabletop mesa in the middle of nowhere. His hiding place.

Why would he leave that? Where would he ever find anything else that comes close?

His heart wobbles woodenly within its ribcage.

And Sandra. Sandra and her slugs. Shooting at cans among the spruces and giant Doug and sleeping with someone who she has been trying to know, repeatedly, while trying to hold back expectations which are in no way beyond the pale. Sandra, whose feelings he has been so careless of.

What loneliness it could be, to pre-empt.

"We're bracing for it," Abel says. "But to brace for it is..."

Weak, he finishes in his head.

He has probably read about this before, the futility of reading or watching more than ten minutes of bad news a day. The Bible, saying one day's grace at a time. But he has never really understood it until now.

It was his fear, in the silence between moving into new places, in the moment of success and getting the right match and placement and job, the fear that he would never find the one place which would hold him back and cling and say stop. And so, he kept lunging for another street, another shore, searching for the feeling of safety, if only for as long as he kept applying and getting accepted.

"That's a great word," Nate says. "Brace. Maybe I'll write a song. It rhymes with grace. I was thinking about naming her Grace, before."

The slight rise in Nate's voice at the end of this sentence makes Abel think Nate must be wearing a curious expression, before allowing himself a nervous smile which tilts slightly the corners of his mouth up.

Abel does not know what to say to Nate. How to stay on topic, with his head finally above water, having exhaled its long hold.

"But it wasn't right. We've got something better now."

But somehow, it's not necessary. It seems that Abel has said just what Nate needed to hear. Abel feels the relief envelope him, like he has just managed to escape the rapid riptide, paddling parallel to the long, looming landmass.

"Olivia," he hears Nate say. "We're calling her Olivia."

Nate's lost his real voice. The affected voice is back, all *Love Will Tear Us Apart* and *She's Lost Control* and *Disorder* and *Unknown Pleasures*.

"You have an Olivia now," Abel says, tried it out on his lips. "You can call her Liv."

"Liv, Livia, or Livvie. Olivia. I will let her choose. It would be fucked up if I didn't."

And what if I fuck them up? Nate said earlier, the very sentiment Abel had been afraid to express to Lisa and Randy all those years ago.

With conviction, Abel says, "*You're not going to fuck Olivia up, Nate.*"

There is silence on the line. Abel hears the boys arguing some more and the crackle of a poker being stuck among the logs in the woodstove as Nate interjects, "Stop it, give your brother the—"

But Nate seems to have heard him, and again, seems to have been waiting, hands opened, to consume this comfort. His voice starts to get animated, more and more lyrical, clicking and expanding like the pinecones spreading open for Abel outside his window, for all the people in all the apartment units and houses down the shore.

"Yes, of course, you're right. Olivia's going to be great," Nate enthuses.

"Like Ethan," Abel says. "Like Laird."

"I didn't," Nate says. "Give them a party."

"A party?"

"Olivia. She's getting a party."

"A Christening?"

"No, an honest-to-God party."

Abel laughs. "Baptism by keg? Do you remember, what you said to me, on the day of the...you know, all the beers and *Surfer Rosa*?"

"No. I was drunk as fuck that night and I fell and I think I gave myself a concussion."

"Now is the—" Abel begins.

"Oh," Nate says. "I remember now. Yes."

"The time for—" Abel tries again. *Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of The Party.*

"Now is the time for all good men," Nate says, "To come to the party."

"That's not how it goes," Abel says, shaking his head.

"You sure about that?" Nate asks. "'Cos I for one know that when we get back we're going to have a party. An Olivia party. We'll get dressed up. We'll hire a band. We'll get a tub of profiteroles from Costco. You can help me book the band. You're Godfather, after all."

“Am I? When did you decide that?”

“Just now,” Nate says.

Abel finally lets out the laugh, the one that has been building inside of him like a scrolling upswell, a much better one than Sendai, and the thinking about it almost makes the flavour of Lifesaver coat once more the inside of his mouth and throat.

“Why are you laughing?” Nate says. “But yeah, that’s the spirit. It’ll be a rollicking time. Bring a date. Bring Sandra.”

Abel thinks about the fact that he is now Godfather to this child with the wrinkly face and flattish head and feline squall and nods even though Nate cannot see him.

He is sometimes a good man.

And sometimes he goes to a party.

“Yeah, alright,” he says.

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When Mother calls, he is lying on the cot in a call room, awake but with his eyes shut.

The piano notes of *Tristesse* begin. He rolls over and looks at the bluish screen of the phone for a moment, before making the thumb motion to answer.

“You’ve been busy,” she says.

“It’s been a long night,” he replies, rubbing his nose. “Sorry about not getting back—”

“Are you going to apply?” she interrupts. “Deadline’s coming up.”

“How did you—?” he says.

Then Abel sits up fully and squeezes his knees together.

How strange, he thinks. He imagined he would be angry, or at least frustrated. As though that were to be the natural and organic culmination of the wandering wildness that had been shirring threads within him for months.

He momentarily shuts his eyes once more. Mother probably sits in her customary straight-back cushionless chair by the phone in his childhood kitchen, her tone gospel-like, the venetian blinds configuring her face in channels. The small grey hairs beginning to sprout weedishly at her temples.

All this time, with the postings cowering in his bag, his gladness at her not knowing, or if she knew, not arguing with him about them, seemed to lean simultaneously against the tensile thought of this hour.

Of course she knew. She was just watching him. She knows that part of him, the part that still looks and prints and thinks about everything too much. He knows that part of her that knows him. He has been expecting this.

“Right,” he says.

“Right, what?” she asks.

He had imagined that he would recoil at her words. Or at least feel familiarly sickened. He had imagined a bodily reaction of fluids and reflux and sphincters.

But he’s not. His forehead remains perfectly smooth, eyebrows contracted. The calmness is a buoy in his belly, the fact of its floatation so objective.

As such, it is with a similarly descriptive voice, as though he were still sitting on that mesa at Tonquin Bay, that Abel says, “You’re still looking. You’re always looking, Mother.”

“Of course. Did you get my email?”

He pulls up the Gmail application and sees a bright white block of unread emails forwarded from her address.

Using the Mercalli Intensity Scale, we are able to measure intensity of earthquakes dependent on their magnitude. The last massive earthquake that shook the south coast of British Columbia took place in 1700, 314 years ago. Scientists were able to determine this date through sediment samples taken from the sea floor off the coast of Vancouver Island. These sediments indicated the coast’s seismic past. Audrey Dallimore, of the School of Environment and Sustainability at Royal Roads University, was also able to outline that earthquakes occur every 500 to 1,000 years. “What that means is we’re due for another subduction zone earthquake either tomorrow — or 700 years from now,” “[It] may happen within our lifetimes and will certainly happen at some time over the life of our communities and our infrastructures”

Our lifetimes. Our communities. Our infrastructures. He likes the word “our.”

“Can we talk about this later?” he says.

“No.”

“Mother.”

“This won’t come along again, Abel. The hiring. You can’t keep stalling.”

It’s may, not can, he remembers. How he had nodded so furiously then, his curly brown hair shaking with the effort of pleasing her.

Again, the tiny leap of levity. And then it is as if all he wants to do is giggle and giggle. And send her a postcard to Halifax, something cheesy with *Wish You Were Here* and too many stamps for the necessary postage, confusing both the mailman and her on the doorstep.

“Well?” she asks.

“Olivia,” he says, his voice quiet. “Her name is Olivia. She’s six pounds even and her APGAR is perfect. She’s perfect, Mother.”

“No one’s perfect.”

“Olivia is.”

“Read the other ones,” she urges. “Apply tomorrow. The deadline is—”

“Mom,” he says, cutting her off. He is standing up from the bed; the sheets tumble to the floor. “They’re paging me now.”

They’re not. The matchbox of his pager sits silent on the dresser, the black digital numbers blending in with the grey rectangular background.

She realizes this too. “They’re not. It’s not even your hospital.”

“Mom,” he says. It’s about eight in the morning in Halifax. “Enjoy your breakfast.”

Then he hangs up and puts her on mute. He deletes all the emails. He goes to the bag and removes the postings, leaves them on the bed, grabs the rest of his stuff, and locks the door with the softest, gentlest click.

Outside, in the hallway, he sends her another text: *I love you. No matter what. I love you.*

He sends her one more: *Eat.*

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“Hey—did you hear? Power’s back on in Tofino.”

The news comes at the nursing station from the custodian while Abel is sanitizing his hands, using his elbow to dispense from the pump of Purel and catching the swirl in his other palm.

Earlier in the restroom, he noticed a bar of soap left on the counter of one of the sinks, while doing the same thing. It has been ages since he has seen a bar of soap and not liquid or foam; the soap was shaped like a turtle with an emerald-green shell, a little pointed tail, and a pair of flippers front and back, though the ridges had long worn away from rubbing. Someone, maybe a child, must have forgotten it there.

For a moment he considered using it, had always liked washing his hands with bar soap. A long, long time ago, the drawers in his clothes chest had smelled like classic Dove, Mother putting bars, unwrapped, between folds of t-shirts and underwear. And for many years he did the same thing, just because he missed the smell.

The flattish turtle now rubbed around in his pocket beside the half-consumed tube of Sandra’s Lifesavers.

“Oh, really?” he says to the custodian, who continues mopping past.

That was fast, so it must not have been too bad, whatever happened in the Pass; they have cleared it. Nate will be able to go up soon.

“Great. Thanks for letting me know,” he says to the man, now disappeared around a corner.

“You getting a ride, Abe?” Dr. Devarajan, standing by a rolling computer station, and looking up from a chart she’s scribbling in, asks him. “One of the medics is going back. He can take you.”

Abel nods. He removes his phone from his pocket, checks the black screen in which he can momentarily see his reflection, at his sideburns which need a trim, the face that could do with tea. He will queue for an Orange Pekoe, two milks, one sugar, at Tim Horton’s before he leaves.

More vibrations go off in his hand. All Mother. All blue boxes. Dismissed.

Then, keying in the passcode, he composes a new text. He hesitates but only for a moment. *What if she doesn't...* His kidneys rock slightly behind his peritoneum.

He scrolls to Most Dialed and it completes before he's done typing the letter S.

Tomorrow. Can you meet me at the beach? Ten-ish. You're off, right?

There's only a moment before the three dots of her typing appear and then a pause.

Yes and yes.

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The next morning, he gets there early to Chesterman Beach. He takes the car, leaves the bike. He has a feeling he will need it.

He is early. He hears the livid language of the waves from the parking space. The ocean is up, has not lost any sleep over him, not when he was in his house in Tofino, not when he was in Nanaimo, Vancouver, Toronto—never has, never will.

Picking his way along the path, his windbreaker sleeves rustling, he imagines he will have it to himself for at least a few moments.

But surprise, surprise—she is already there. And for a moment, he watches her from behind a dune, just letting the tallgrass conceal him up to the thigh, without letting on that he knows.

Sandra Amelia MacGillvary is out of scrubs and wearing a simple dress, black with sunflowers on it and green leaves. The flowers are the big bright perfect kind and somehow the manufacturers got the design exactly right at the side seams and neckline, so no pinwheeled petals are cut off or overlap with one another.

She stands by a tidepool, barefoot. Dishwater-grey lichen provide a turf and friction to the rocks.

He watches her pull out her phone and take a picture of the water, the whaletail sandbar to Frank Island that famously divides it, one half from the other, Cox Bay to the southeast and the grand palace of the Wickaninnish Inn at the other end, the choppy churn of the worked-up waters seething in and sucking out again smooth between her toes.

When the tide comes in, Frank Island cuts off, its own little pebble on the blue.

Her sandals, red, saltwater ones braided at the front, which will not fade in the brine, cache among clumps of wormwood and red fescue. One upside-down, the other turned on its side, the buckle twinkling in the bright sunshine.

"I see you," she says, without turning around.

"Oh," he says. "Then why didn't you say?" He steps forward and pulls down his baseball cap.

She gives him a sly smile. "Come here."

He does. The windbreaker rustles as she pokes at him with one finger. The bracelet on her wrist falls down her forearm.

Deas gu cath.

He swallows.

“How was it? Corrine is okay?”

Now he knows that she knows this. She is just making conversation. Playing. He nods.

“You okay?”

“I’m...”

“Here,” she says and closes another gap between them, at the chest, goes up on her toes and adjusts the cap on his head. “Did you wear sunscreen?”

“It’s the winter,” he says, but he smiles. “I’m fine. Good, actually. Really good.”

“Glad to hear it, Doc,” she says. “Tide’s coming in.”

“Certainly is.”

Tonquin Beach is still visible from where they stand and his hiding place is still there—it must be, just a little wetter or drier, but always there.

He thinks he might share it with her soon. The rocks will hide them. Maybe they will make love there. Maybe a few times. He won’t count.

“So, Skip, what did you want to do? Hold me?” she jokes.

“Yes.”

For a moment, a blush spreads across her cheeks, like *Really?*

Yes, really.

Before he knows it, he is already embracing the outline of her body. He can see the base of her manubrium close-up, that surface anatomy marker of the second rib, the fairest hint of fabric-covered breasts brushing up against his chest. She momentarily stills and then settles forward into it, her hands hooking over his shoulders. Their heads, his dark, hers light, turn against the cursive of the waves.

She sticks her hands into the back pockets of his jeans. Pulling him forward. The kiss does not come, surprisingly.

He gazes at her collarbones, the coral pinna of her ear. He wants to fence the two of them together, make it holy somehow and crowned with rest. He wants to say thanks for the Lifesavers. *Thanks for—*

“Hey Sandy,” he says, using the diminutive of her name for the first time, rolling it over his mouth, test-driving the syllables, like the softest smear of rice on onigiri. “Do you like children?”

And there is a hitch in the apertures between syllables that defies cowardice, for the very first time.

There is the sky and there is the ground and they are both inventing something to say, about the birth, the outage, and the possible earthquakes and tsunamis that may never arrive. The skin covering his chest burns hot like a second lava-like skin beneath gathers to it; his ribcage throbs, and something in the wrist, the hard navicular bone, swings like a boat shifting with the weight of its tonnage, its expansion and contraction against its keel.

Again, the ache for the missing part, but this time, it approximates itself.

He realizes he can hardly wait for her to say something.

In thirty minutes, he will make a phone call. In thirty minutes, he will call Nate, who drove up a few hours before, and ask after Corrine and the baby. And Corrine will pipe in from the background and ask after him, and Sandra will ask after them three. And the baby will ask for its breast, which it knows belongs to its hunger, its satiety entirely owned.

The baby could be many things. It may be clever like Corrine, and may sing like Nate, and a life will unfold as origami once ensconced in its own paper, the translucency of flesh and a cranium still soft in the back.

Though it's the couple's third, out of habit, Abel knows that he has to remember to tell them about the checklist at one, three, six months. The necessity of tummy time.

He is part of this.

Sandra stands in front of him. The hem of her dress spins around her.

He notices, lazily, he is wearing the wrong shoes. The sand will get stuck in the seams of the sneakers. Later, he will sponge them off and try not to destroy the new suede. But it doesn't matter.

Her hair whips across her face and she scrubs at it, laughing, her tiny sharp teeth so very white and wild with warrior imperfections, stacked like two rows of well-used dice at the end of a long night of play. She's dealing in truths. She never falsifies.

She doesn't answer him, but does something with her fingertips deep in his pockets against the twin tumblers of his ischial tuberosities. The soft flesh beneath, he feels it pliant and yielding, fingertip by fingertip, something like lunging, inwards but outwards.

He nods.

"I couldn't hear you," she says. "What did you say?"

Kids, he thinks. *Enough bedrooms*.

He says, "So do I."

"Let's go in," she says. "Give me a lift, Doc."

And he does. She's so light.

END