To Follow an Elephant's Footprint

by

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Abstract

The MA thesis, *To Follow an Elephant's Footprint,* is a short story cycle covering four interlinked female generations in King's County, New Brunswick. The stories examine female identity, maternal influence, and the psychological links and emotional bonds between mothers and daughters. They employ a realist voice, alternating from third person to first, and work backward from 2021 to 1934, highlighting a defining moment in the lives of each of the four main characters. Aspects of domestic abuse, women's political and reproductive rights, intergenerational trauma, parenting, and bilingual tensions are explored through a female, white settler, anglophone, and Maritime lens. As the narrative looks forward and back, these female characters and their relationships are contrasted and complicated to critically illuminate the social ideologies surrounding women and gender and the traditionalist and patriarchal systems present in and dependent upon family and community life in the Maritimes, then and now.

Dedication

For Tamera, Tracey, and Rosemary.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Following Easter dinner in 2022, the women of my family collected in the kitchen as we always do, and I was asked to read them my thesis proposal. As I sifted through files on my laptop, my aunt turned to me and said, *You're going to write about us, aren't you?* I told her it was inspired by them. *It's fiction*, I explained, *but I thought I should start by writing what I know.*

What I know is that I come from a family of strong Maritime women. I was raised by my mother and did not meet my father or the paternal side of my family until I was eight years old. My mother had me when she was twenty-three, and when I was toddler, she put herself through nursing school. We never had much money, but there was always an abundance of love.

My grandparents got divorced when my mother was twelve, and my Nannie remarried before I was born. I lived with both my Nannie and my aunt on separate occasions over the course of my childhood and adolescence, and though my mother's relationships with her mother and sister were often strained, I considered them mother figures.

The women in my family would not be considered exceptional based on the contrived ideas and societal expectations of what makes a successful person. None of them are particularly wealthy, powerful, or highly educated, and I suspect that many people would see them as everyday, hard-done-by women, who turned out good despite going through some difficult life circumstances. Nonetheless, the women who raised me—the matriline that I come from—are exceptional to *me*.

Art is often used to explore and contextualize the everyday, telling the stories that don't make it into the history books. Fiction has the power to illuminate the dark, unseen, and unexplored spaces, not only of history, but of the human mind, identity, and experience. As children, our family stories are often our first exposure to history and its subsequent ripple effect. The women in my family are survivors, and they carry the generations of women who came before them, as heavy and burdensome as that load may be to bear. Their lives, and the lives of the women before them, are important and worth exploration, and stories that speak to their experiences should be told because story telling works to reveal so much more about this mysterious and complicated thing we call life, as it has done for millennia.

Matrilineality, Inheritance and Identity

Danielle Fuller writes in chapter two of *Writing the Everyday: Women's Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, "Writing Home: A Regional Business," that "contemporary women's writing from the Atlantic provinces creates a sense of place through a mapping of social relations. This mapping frequently begins with the family, the most intimate space in which social difference, especially gender difference, is experienced" (30). In this way, my writing is following in the footsteps[1] of the Atlantic women writers who came before me. My thesis is simply adding to the matrilineality[2] of

[1] In Latin, *mater* translates to "mother," and *linea* means "thread" or "line," therefore, "matrilineality" refers to the female bonds created through the organization of a 'family' being built out of the female line. Ironically, when I write "matrilineality" into Microsoft Word, it underlines it in red, and Word suggests I change it to "patrilineality," its male counterpart.

[2] "Maternal inheritance also gave rise to the idea that there exists a "Mitochondrial Eve," a woman from whom all living humans inherited their mitochondrial DNA. If all women carry the same mitochondrial

Maritime literature. However, I do think it's important to point out that I'm doing so through a female, cis-gendered, white settler, and anglophone lens. I cannot and will not speak for anyone else; however, my hope is that since mothers and daughters are universal, there will be some aspects of my thesis that can be shared and understood by every mother and daughter.

As I grew up and became aware of the complicated dynamics of my matrilineage, I started to realize that it played a large role in my own identity, and ever since I've been drawn to detect and evaluate mother-daughter relationships in everything I see, experience, and consume. I believe that what we inherit from our mothers can tell us a lot about the past, present, and future, which is why it was important for me to write stories that focus on matrilineality, especially with women and families in the Maritime region.

The first question I asked myself when writing this thesis was: what exactly do we *inherit* from our mothers? Science, psychology, and literature suggest to me that maternal inheritance and influence is not just physical, mental, and emotional; it's boundless. In 2016, Stephen Yin wrote an article for *The New York Times* called, "Why Do We Inherit Mitochondria from Our Mothers?" He writes that, "it's well known that the transfer of mitochondrial DNA from mother to offspring…occurs in humans and most multicellular organisms. Maternal inheritance is what allows genetic testing services like 23andMe to trace our maternal ancestries. You inherited your mitochondrial DNA from your mother,

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DNA, then that would imply that to some degree we are all each other's genetic mothers and daughters. (Yin)

who inherited hers from her mother and so forth" (Yin). This concept, and the significance of a mother's mitochondrial DNA, aligns with the theories of Carl Gustav Jung, the father of analytic psychology, who maintained that "every mother contains her daughter in herself, and every daughter her mother, and every mother extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter" (162). Literature seems to continually echo this connection between mothers, daughters, and inheritance. For example, WU Wenyan concludes in her critical research paper on the mother-daughter relationship in Celeste Ng's fictional novel *Everything I Never Told You*, that, "for a woman, the inner bond with the mother can be a source both of strength and of frustration. Keeping mirroring themselves in each other, mothers and daughters are always ambivalently attached to one another, and the interacting and influence will be transferred to subsequent generations" (40-41). Wenyan's suggestion that women, or more specifically women in fiction, are inherently attached to their mothers (birth mothers/mother-figures) through their inner bonds, and that every woman contains the mother-daughter bonds that came before her, mirrors that of Yin's findings on the inheritance of maternal mitochondrial DNA and Jung's mother-daughter psychological theory. The idea that daughters can never entirely separate themselves from their mothers, and vice-versa, has greatly informed my writing and thinking. Whether humans have free-will or not, if mothers and daughters inherit all the mothers and daughters that came before them, then the presence and influence of matrilines cannot and should not be ignored whether we are analyzing and exploring science, psychology, or literature.

When it came to the second question I had when writing this thesis, the answer was less clear: what does our maternal inheritance have to do with our sense of identity?

In the paper, "On Female Identity and Writing by Women," Judith Kegan Gardiner eloquently explains why, as a writer, my pursuit to explore and better understand female identity, and its connections to matrilineality, maternal influence, and the psychological links and emotional bonds between mothers and daughters, was best done by the act of writing the stories:

> Female identity is a process, and writing by women engages us in this process as the female self seeks to define itself in the experience of creating art. "The hero is her author's daughter": bonds between women structure the deepest layers of female personality and establish the patterns to which literary identifications are analogous. Contemporary women's literature promises that a sense of full, valued, and congruent female identity may form in the continuing process of give and take that re-creates both self and other in a supportive community of women. This creation of a valid and communicable female experience through art is a collective enterprise. And we are its collaborative critics (361).

In line with Gardiner's thoughts, I used the experience of creating art in the form of this thesis to discover more about female identity and how bonds between women affect and inform the female self. As it was suggested, my experience was layered, and I not only learned a great deal about the connection between mothers and daughters, and how that's carried along generationally, but I enhanced my own sense of self and discovered more about how my identity was informed and influenced by the women in my life. I agree with Gardiner's sentiment that identity is a process. As daughters, we can follow in the footsteps of our mothers or we can stray from those paths, and both can be consciously or unconsciously done. The more we know about the women we come from, the more we

know about ourselves, and the more power we have to offer, facilitate, and reinforce positive change. The saying, "the hero is her author's daughter," suggests that with every new generation of daughters comes new and better opportunities than that of her mother.

Going into this project, I knew I was a Maritimer, a writer, and my mother's daughter, but I didn't know exactly what that *meant*. Through the writing of this thesis, I've found that it means I have both power and potential. As a woman, the more emphasis and effort I put into learning from, understanding, sympathizing, and empathizing with the women and mothers around me, the more autonomy I have, thereby raising the likelihood that I will be a better member of the community of women that I am a part of and have a positive influence on present and future generations. Literature can inform women of the power they have to put an end to harmful cycles by embracing their maternal inheritance, by processing and working through generational trauma, and by pushing back against systemic gender bias and sexism and the patriarchal structures that have boxed in women and their matrilines for generations.

The Stories

In all four of my short stories, the daughter has inherited a small pewter elephant figurine from her mother. Elephants have always been significant to my family, and we give them to each other to signify important milestones. Elephants also happen to be one of several matriarchally organized mammals. In elephant herds, the eldest female acts as a leader to ensure her family's survival. She makes the decisions. While male elephants leave the herd following adolescence, female elephants remain with their mothers and grandmothers for the entirety of their lives, which is represented both literally and figuratively in my stories with the use of the short story cycle and narrative layering, as

well as through literary devices such as symbolism, imagery, flashbacks, foreshadowing/backshadowing, and allegory. I also utilized memory, reflection, nostalgia, and ongoing conflict—sometimes, but not always, offering resolution—that carried on through the stories, affecting and sometimes dictating events and relationships in the past, present, and future, regardless of a character's physical presence. The ceremony of inheritance through the pewter elephant represents both the mother-daughter bond being explored, as well as the act of a mother passing down the torch of her past, and everything that encompasses, hence the title of my project, *To Follow an Elephant's Footprint.*

The title of each short story refers to the familial roles and titles these women end up holding in present day: "Daughter," "Mother," "Grandmother," and "Great-Grandmother." My goal was to complicate our perceptions of what these titles represent. Women are often defined by their domestic and familial role, when there is a whole person and life behind it, which I tried to emphasize within my stories. A woman's role and title also reserve a certain level of respect, while simultaneously implying expectations and responsibilities, as well as traditions that these women are expected to uphold, lending additional pressure to the universally accepted terms.

The stories are not told linearly, instead, they move backwards in time. The first story is titled "Daughter," and it takes place in the fall of 2021, following thirty-year-old Isabelle, or "Izzy" Murray. The second story, "Mother," is set at the beginning of the January 1998 North American ice storm. The protagonist, Anna Murray, is thirty years old and single mother to Izzy. The third story is "Grandmother," and it takes place in 1959, following Anna's mother, Nellie, at twenty-four years old. The last story starts at

the end of 1934, entitled, “Great-Grandmother.” It follows Nellie’s mother, Charlotte or “Lottie” MacCallum, at seventeen years old.

In “Daughter,” at her grandfather’s request, Izzy has travelled from her current home in Moncton to her childhood home in Saint John. Since the pandemic has taken place, she’s been dealing with anxiety, not only about the state of the world, but how she fits in it. Throughout Izzy’s story, she’s prompted to reflect on her past, the complicated relationships she has with her family, her identity, and her fears and anxieties surrounding womanhood. As the first story in the cycle, “Daughter” is told in close third person or limited third person, allowing for more access to Izzy’s inner thoughts and emotional state. I wanted the reader to be *with* Izzy, joining her on this unexpected journey through time, place, and memory. My thesis supervisor, Dr. David Huebert, said that he enjoyed “the process of having the whole thing unfolding backwards, a Russian doll of memories and stories.” “Daughter” was the first story I wrote, and I did so because I wanted to start by writing from a familiar and similar perspective to my own. I originally planned to tell the stories linearly, but I was inspired after reading David’s comment, and wanted the “Russian doll” quality to come through the entire project and speak to my goal of showing how a mother can live inside her daughter rather than the other way around. Izzy is the youngest of the matriline, and I think that by working backward, myself and the reader have a unique opportunity to analyze Izzy, discovering how she came to be by pulling back layers. I feel that the act of opening the Russian doll in this way allows the reader to analyze Izzy, Anna, Nellie, and Lottie as individuals, as a continuous cycle, and as pieces of a larger, more complex, puzzle.

In “Mother,” Anna and Izzy live in Saint John, where Anna works as a hairdresser. She has a strong bond with Izzy but shows signs of being codependent. Anna’s relationships with her divorced parents are often strenuous and volatile, stemming from her unstable childhood in Hampton, NB, which exposed her to intimate partner violence and emotional abuse. Currently, Anna is reliant on her mother, Nellie, for childcare, and this puts additional strain on their relationship. The story begins with Anna arriving at the Saint John Regional hospital to meet with Nellie who is waiting in the ER. Unlike “Daughter,” “Mother,” is written in first person. I think this offers a less reliable narrative, as it follows one perspective, and this adds some contrast and additional conflict since Anna’s emotionally driven viewpoint differs from and sometimes contrasts with Izzy and Nellie’s stories. Additionally, since first-person narratives are voice-driven, this allowed me to showcase the contemporary Maritime vernacular and colloquialisms through Anna’s speech.

Born and raised in Saint John, Nellie MacCallum continues to live and work there in “Grandmother,” renting a room in a boarding house and working as a salesclerk at the perfume counter of the Manchester, Robertson, and Allison department store. Nellie deals with panic attacks that began in childhood at the beginning of the Second World War. Her story is structured as a braided narrative, weaving Nellie’s current troubles—an affair with a married man and her subsequent unwanted pregnancy—with her childhood at the Adelaide Street Apartments, and her budding friendship with an Acadian woman named Vivien. The plot hinges on a fateful decision regarding the life of the child. The possibilities of abortion and adoption are explored, but readers of the collection will be aware of Nellie’s final choice to give up the baby, creating narrative tension between the

sections and emphasizing that the lives children take for granted often hang in the balance of their parents' choices, or lack thereof. Like "Daughter," "Grandmother" is told in third person, and allows for a broader view of Nellie's life and environment.

Finally, in "Great-Grandmother," Charlotte or "Lottie" MacCallum finds herself pregnant and unwed, being shipped off from her home in Hampton to work as a housekeeper for the wealthy Wallace family in Saint John. Lottie's story is told in first person and uses an epistolary structure. Comprised of two letters that recount the events prior to her pregnancy, and following it, Lottie addresses her unborn child directly. I utilized this literary structure because I felt it was important to have a woman speak freely and honestly about her life prior to motherhood, while also having the autonomy to tell her story in her own words to her own child without the burden of fear or judgement. The letters are vulnerable and confessional in nature, and introduce Lottie's life, ambitions, and family, as well as the child's recently deceased father and his family. Beginning on New Year's Eve of 1935, the story literally and figuratively highlights the start of a new chapter for Lottie and her baby, and though there is hope that the letters will someday be read and understood by Nellie, there is also doubt.

The use of a short story cycle to tell these mother-daughter stories made it easier for me, and hopefully the reader, to follow and examine the matrilinality of the family, and the generational changes that take place within their shared setting of Kings County, New Brunswick. The short story cycle enabled me to move back and forth through time, which meant I could focus on and link together characters, settings, scenes, and conflicts, while giving the characters individual voices. It also highlighted women's progression and decline in the region, prompting the reader to notice and compare the women's

historical contexts, their reactions, choices, and decisions, and the different elements of conflict that are at play at any given moment across all four stories. This structure also caters to the use of symbolism, since a symbol can carry meaning across one or all the stories, thereby layering and linking the women even further and exposing many of the deep and understated entanglements that make up a family.

Key Themes

There's a long and complicated history of teen and early pregnancy in my family. My Nannie had a child out of wedlock when she was nineteen. The baby boy was adopted but reunited with the family for a time when he was in his teens. My aunt gave birth to her son when she was seventeen years old and raised him with the help of my Nannie and mother. When I turned sixteen, my mother revealed that she had given birth to a baby at my age. She wanted to keep and raise my sister but was pressured into giving her up. My half-sister was adopted by my mother's High School social worker. These situations caused immeasurable trauma for my family. It was imperative that I explore women's reproductive rights in my thesis, as well as the complexity of the burden of reproduction and sexual activity, and the intersecting concerns of wealth and economic status in a time and cultural milieu where such topics were considered taboo. Within the backdrop and context of New Brunswick, I used my stories to explore the ways reproduction-related-trauma can ripple through families and generations, especially those that are matriarchically organized.

All four of my stories deal with the theme of women's political and reproductive rights in New Brunswick, being heavily inspired by my own family's experiences. When it comes to women's reproductive rights, specifically access to abortion, Racheal

Johnstone writes in her book, *After Morgentaler: Politics of Abortion in Canada*, that "New Brunswick has long been one of worst provinces in Canada in terms of…access," going on to explain that the provincial government consistently imposed restrictions on access to abortion and resisted the improvement of its policies (83). In "Grandmother," I explore all the options available for women with unwanted pregnancies in 1959, focussing on what would have been available in Saint John, NB. Even though in 1969, Canada changed the law that prohibited abortions to permit them under certain circumstances, such as the life or health of the woman, New Brunswick still resisted, and many women had to travel to larger cities in Canada, such as Quebec to access safe abortion services. UNB's website dedicated to the history of crime and punishment in New Brunswick explains that since abortion was illegal prior to 1969, there were several different options for women with unwanted pregnancies in Saint John, the first being "traditional methods, as well as abortifacient medicines advertised in the newspapers and sold in local drug stores." For unwed women or teens, adoption (public or private), infanticide, or illegal abortion were the only options outside of raising the child. Johnstone explains that a woman's right to both equality and "access [to] safe and legal medical services," in New Brunswick have been a long-running battle, and that "discussion of their significance has been virtually absent in the provincial courts and legislature" (90). One of the things I was interested in doing with my thesis was exposing some of this legal history through the understated narratives of women like those in my family. It was important that I show how the lack of rights for women in New Brunswick affected women of every background and every social and economic class, and that though we can point out and follow significant changes that have taken place over the

past century, a lack of women's bodily autonomy remains and is continually at threat to this day, both socially and politically.

In the article, "Teenage Pregnancy in Canada, 1975-1987," Surinder Wadhera and John Silins reveal that the Atlantic provinces statistics for teen pregnancy are not entirely reliable due to the lack of abortion services there, which forced women to seek abortions in other provinces. They write that,

> If it were possible to include those abortions obtained either outside of Canada or in Quebec clinics in calculations of abortion rates for the women's province of residence, the rates for the eastern provinces would be higher than those published by Statistics Canada. The high fertility rates in the Atlantic provinces, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta, may be partially explained by the social and religious composition of the population in those provinces. (Silins)

This is another instance where women's sexual and reproduction related issues in the Maritimes have been ignored or silenced through a lack of political and social reform in the region, and I was determined to express and explore this generationally through a female lens in my thesis.

Another prominent and important theme in my stories is domestic abuse and violence. I wanted to understand how domestic abuse would realistically work within the cycle of mother-daughter relationships and matrilines. According to the Government of New Brunswick, New Brunswick has the highest rate of Intimate Partner Violence victims and women murdered by their partners in the Atlantic provinces. NB has the most family-related murder-suicides in Canada, as well, and 85% of spousal homicide victims

are women (Love Shouldn't Hurt). Carolyn A. Smith et al.'s research paper, "Intergenerational Continuities and Discontinuities in Intimate Partner Violence: A Two-Generational Prospective Study," suggests that intimate partner violence has intergenerational continuity, and that those exposed to parental violence, or Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), in childhood and adolescence are at an increased risk of experiencing IPV in early adulthood (3740). Similarly, Smith et al. reported that many children in homes where IPV occurs are likely to be exposed to this violence both directly and indirectly, however, it's suggested that only a small proportion of these children enter violent relationships later in life (3723). Reading these kinds of findings and statistics is overwhelming and can do more to lesson our compassion than ignite it. As humans, we tend to feel numb and indifferent to injustice, trauma, and tragedy when it's presented in large numbers that lack specificity or the need to provoke deep human connection and reflection. It is easier to understand and empathize with one individual's story, as we often become desensitized to the harder aspects of life when they do not affect us directly, therefore, some of these issues are better explored and understood through dramatization in the form of fiction. I believe using fictional narratives that reflect reality to explore issues like IPV and domestic violence in New Brunswick can bring more awareness to them and the people it can and will affect.

The last thing I want to touch on is the language and cultural tensions found in my stories. I chose to focus on Francophone and Anglophone tensions, specifically between the English-speaking people and Acadians in New Brunswick. The Canadian Historical Association's booklet, *The Acadians*, written by Caroline-Isabelle Caron, gives a thorough history of Acadians' experience in the Maritimes, starting in the seventeenth

century when Acadians began settling in the region. Acadians and the British tolerated each other for a time, but the British wanted the Acadians' land and were willing to take it from them by force. The British would expel the Acadians after destroying their fortress, Louisbourg. Ten years later, in 1760, the British allowed some of the Acadians to come back, but by that time the British had destroyed their farms and homes and gave their land to "The Planters," which were colonists from New England. The Acadians who did come back to the Maritimes "were forced to take an oath of allegiance to the British authorities in Halifax (Nova Scotia) and to settle in small groups away from their former homelands now reserved for Anglo-American immigrants" (Acadie). From then on, tensions between Anglophones and Francophones in the Maritimes solidified, and the minority, the Acadians, were continually oppressed by the English-run government. For example, the Maritime government went after the French language, prohibiting it from being taught in schools, as well as Catholic education, since Acadians practiced Catholicism. This meant that Acadians had little to no access to education, meaning it was difficult for them to find work, and they were often poor: "the Acadians were a marginalized people not solely because of discriminatory laws, but because they did not have the cultural means to defend themselves" (Caron 16). This carried on into the early twentieth century. Still, as the Acadian population grew, and some of the wealthier and more influential Acadians started entering politics and printing French-language newspapers, they started to take back some autonomy within the Maritimes. By the 1960s, things were finally looking up for them, but this didn't mean that the English didn't still discriminate against them, causing tensions between the French and English to continue and persist into the present day. The topic of language and English-Acadian relations is mainly explored in "Great-Grandmother" and "Grandmother."

An aspect of the Acadian culture that I find fascinating is their oral traditions and folklore. Caron writes that "oral tradition and folklore have long constituted the better part of the Acadian cultural heritage. According to several studies conducted in the twentieth century, the weak alphabetization rates explain the importance of storytelling and songs" (22). Researching some of these stories, poems, and songs to include in my work was extremely interesting, and seeing how I come from New Brunswick, it struck me as completely ridiculous that I had not recognized before now how culturally rich Acadians were. I felt it necessary to represent these tensions because I think they are somewhat unique to this region. Since New Brunswick is Canada's only officially bilingual province, it's interesting and worth exploring why is it that these tensions persist.

The linguistic tensions are of course further complicated by settler-colonialism and the suppression of the Mi'kmaq and Wolastoqiyik languages, which work to expose and represent the white supremacy that is ongoing and inextricably tied to life in this region. Though I acknowledge the important history surrounding the language and cultural tensions between settler-colonialists and the Indigenous peoples in the Maritimes, and the settler-colonial battle for Indigenous lands and the subsequent genocide, exile, prejudice, and racism faced by the Indigenous at the hands of settlers, I did not focus in on it, feeling that I was unable to give it the time and care it required. I did not want to have such important issues and stories simply 'tacked on' to my narratives. I did not feel comfortable putting words in an Indigenous character's mouth—I am not interested in creating caricature—but I do feel that what's unsaid in my stories speaks volumes. The women in my short stories are settlers, and they move through their lives and the world with white privilege. They often perpetuate the harmful prejudices against, and erasure of anyone perceived as different than them, such as the Indigenous,

sometimes by simply staying silent and ignorant to their role in their injustices. The history between settler-colonialists and the Indigenous in Canada and the Maritimes cannot be divided from the New Brunswick region, and its impact on the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts and environment are linked to every person that has and will call this place home.

Historical Research

Much of the research behind subjects like domestic violence, linguistic tensions, and women's political and reproductive rights were conducted through traditional means, in which I started by going into a library database and searching key words, however, the overall research process for *To Follow an Elephant's Footprint* was different to anything I've ever done before. When researching for a fictional piece of this length that covers a century and relies on both historical accuracies, and specificities of the Maritime region and Kings County setting, my research became somewhat fragmented, and was often done as I was writing. As I wrote the stories and began creating the details and atmosphere, my research methods changed. Sometimes, I had to leave a blank space and come back to it later with the details, such as a street name or a shop location that might have changed between 1934 and 1998. When I had to write a scene involving a character getting from one place to another, I then had to familiarize myself with local forms of transportation, and what options were available to people of varying economic status travelling from Sussex to Saint John in the 1940s. I needed to cross-reference and conduct additional research on almost everything before I could trust that something was accurate. After completing a story, part of the drafting process was going over it as much as possible for historical details, inaccuracies, or missing links.

Dr. David Creelman explains in his introduction for *Setting in the East: Maritime Realist Fiction*, that "until I left the Maritimes, I did not appreciate how deeply immersed I was in the region's rhythms and assumptions. And not until I had lived outside the region for a few years did I realize how little I actually knew about the history and literature of the place I increasingly thought of as my home" (3). Similarly, it was important for me, not only when writing this thesis, but also because I do consider the Maritimes to be my home, to know and understand its history.

I was fortunate enough to take two courses that were integral to my foundational understanding of the history of the Maritime region, helping me to contextualize it in my stories: one with Dr. Edith Snook that covered literature of the early modern Atlantic world, and a course with Creelman that examined Maritime Fiction in the Twentieth Century. Creelman's course also helped me gain knowledge on Maritime writers, both creative and academic, which informed a lot of that on-the-spot research I often had to do as I was writing. Knowing the names of experts in Maritime history and literature meant that when I saw a name like Gwendolyn Davies, E.R. Forbes, Rachel Bryant, Donna E. Smyth, or David Creelman I felt I could trust the article.

It was important when writing these stories that I understand the demographic and economic shifts that took place in the Maritimes over the course of a century since they played a pivotal role in the changing agency of my female protagonists. The decline of industries before World War I, such as shipbuilding and agriculture, significantly contributed to outmigration, as many moved from rural to urban settings. Then came The Great Depression, and in the 1930s the fishing and lumber industries were hit hard, causing many to be out of work. This coincided with an increase in population, making it even more difficult for families to bounce back financially when the economy eventually stabilized. The Maritimes' concerns with their economy had already given way to its

political conservatism and traditional values. Still, the Depression reinforced it and left Maritimers feeling even more marginalized. World War II brought some relief, but the economic disparity between East and Central Canada had become even more evident. With the 1960s came technological developments and a push for equal rights and opportunities among Maritimers; however, this did not bring the Maritimes the influence and partnership it had hoped to accomplish within the Confederation, and it continued to carry its 'poor relation' status within Canada.

Kings County, New Brunswick

Found on the southern side of New Brunswick, Kings County was the most influential setting of my upbringing. I have always considered that area to be my *home*. My mother grew up in Hampton, as did my Nannie, and her mother grew up in Golden Grove, a rural area between Saint John and Rothesay. During my childhood, my mother and I moved between Saint John and Moncton five times. We went wherever we had support. As an adult, my husband and I lived in Saint John for a year.

I left New Brunswick in 2017 for my undergrad and moved back in 2021 for grad school. Before I started writing about this region, Kings County in particular, I felt it was important that I re-acquaint myself with it. I decided to travel throughout the area, researching and becoming more familiar with the landscape, and overall setting. It was important to me that the stories felt real, lived in, and both physically and historically accurate to anyone from the Kings County area. It was also imperative that the locations and descriptions be easily imagined for those who might not know the places to which I was referring.

I visited Saint John several times, exploring uptown, central, and the north, south, and east ends. I looked out at the Bay of Fundy and the Reversing Falls. I walked through Market Square, and along the old streets, many of which are spoken of in “Daughter” and “Grandmother.” I walked through parks like King’s Square, and Queen Square, and stopped along the way to look at the homes I lived, visited, and played in as a child.

I drove to the small neighborhood of Milledgeville, found on the northern edge of the city, and visited the Saint John Regional Hospital, which is the primary setting for “Mother.” I drove through Rothsay and Quispamsis, a similar drive to one that’s described in “Daughter.” There, I walked along the Kennebacasis River, and visited many locations I wrote about, such as the Tim Hortons and the houses along Gondola Point Rd. During one of my trips, I took the ferry over to the Kingston Peninsula, driving left and turning around at the McKay’s Apple Orchard, then driving straight through Kingston to Hampton. I took a trip from Fredericton to Sussex, proceeding from Sussex to Hampton. Once I reached Sussex, I took the old highway through Norton and Central Norton, following along the Kennebacasis river, and driving past many rural farms and agriculturally rich areas that are mentioned in “Great-Grandmother.” Once I’d arrived in Hampton, I drove past historic sites, and the homes of current and past relatives’, and I visited the Kings County History Museum.

While touring and taking notes in the Museum, I learned that they curate most of their items through donation. One such donation was a racoon fur coat, which was donated by the daughter of Roland King, a man who grew up on a farm on the bank of the Kennebacasis river, about a mile above Norton. In his teens, Roland started catching the train to Sussex to play and attend hockey games, and would later skate home on the

Kennebacasis River, wearing the fur coat. This concept inspired a scene in "Great Grandmother," where several characters attend a hockey game in Sussex and ice-skate home to Hampton. I think this lends an authentic quality to this aspect of the story, and it's a lovely and sort of whimsical thought. The scene works to display rural life in New Brunswick, representing and symbolizing the geographical environment and the importance of the rivers and waterways, not just agriculturally, but as a form of transportation. I think the scene also speaks to the hobbies, interests, and lifestyles of the people living in Hampton at the time, which are not far off from those that exist today.

Many men in Kings County joined the First and Second World War, and I was able to look at war-time artifacts at the museum, such as a Death Penny, a memorial plaque given to the families of deceased soldiers, as well as the handwritten note from King George that went with it. I wrote about and referred to several of the war items I encountered at the museum in "Daughter," and "Great-Grandmother." The World Wars were always going to be a crucial aspect of my stories because of their timeframes, and how impactful the wars were on the men who fought in them, the twentieth century in general, and the role of women in society. Carole Gerson explains in "The Literary Culture of Atlantic Women Between the Wars" that during the interwar period, English-Language Canadian women, "achieved the vote nationally and in most provinces, and within just over a decade would be declared persons" (62). In "Great-Grandmother," the character of Auntie Wallace, who is mentioned in "Mother," and "Grandmother," is expanded upon. The reader learns how Mrs. Wallace came to be a mother-figure to Lottie, and then to Nellie, and how her maternal influence, experiences during the Second

World War, and her affiliation with women's suffrage and women's political movements in New Brunswick was pivotal in Lottie's life and subsequent matriline.

Another influential aspect of the museum was their textile displays, including period-accurate clothing, and a large, framed quilt made by Kings County resident, Frances (Snider) Parlee. It was called, "The Confederation Quilt," and Fannie made it in 1864 "from remnants of the fine fabrics used to make the ballgowns worn by the ladies at the Charlottetown conference in September of that year" (Kings County Museum). This was really inspiring and had me looking into the practice of hand-hooked rugs, which Maritime Author Donna E. Smyth specifies were made with a burlap backing and "have been made in the Maritimes for well over a century. This populist rural art began as a functional craft and quickly evolved into cultural "texts" created by women from the scraps and rags of their everyday lives," (Introduction 6). Laura McLauchlan and Joan Young wrote in their paper, "Reading the Rugs of Shelburne County: The Art of Scraps," that "we read the rugs of this community as part of the cultural expressions of women who lived here before us and who live here now: women who may otherwise remain, not only individually anonymous, but collectively uncelebrated, invisible outside the recognized economies of capitalism and art" (428). The idea that reading rugs was another way of giving voice to the unheard women of the Maritimes inspired me to include one of these rugs in "Great-Grandmother." I loved the idea that left over scraps of fabric, old sheets, dish towels, and rags—the everyday items in women's lives—could be stitched together ceremoniously to make one large piece of art, and furthermore, tell one large story. This echoes Judith Kegan Gardiner's suggestion that the female self is defined through "the experience of creating art," and that, "this creation of a valid and

communicable female experience through art is a collective enterprise" (361). These women told stories through their work, and they did it together, whether they utilized a blanket they used to wrap their baby in, or an old dress they wore to church, or the beautiful and extravagant gowns worn during the conference that initiated Confederation, these cultural texts symbolized the strength and unity found and created through communities built and sustained by women and helped to solidify their place in the Maritimes. I was also compelled to include references to quilt making in "Great-Grandmother," where I write that Lottie's mother is part of a Quilting Bee, which is a group of people who gather socially to make quilts. Quilting Bees were also common practice in the Maritimes in the early to mid-twentieth century and represented smaller communities of women who physically worked together to create something useful and unified, and to make an impact in society.

Books by local historians and writers were available at the Kings County History Museum and I was able to purchase some rich and insightful material on the County that was useful to my writing, and integral to my understanding of the people, culture, and landscape of that area during the early and mid-twentieth century.

Roy Fletcher's *Life in Rural Kings County, New Brunswick in the Early and Mid-Twentieth Century* offered up a personal and detailed look into rural life in Kings County. Along with his own memories, Fletcher relies on reflections from his mother and sister on their life in Corn Hill and Upham, small communities found in rural Kings County. I relied on Fletchers accounts when writing "Great-Grandmother," as the father of Lottie's child grows up on a rural farm.

Historic Sussex, by Elaine Ingalls Hogg, *Reflections: The Story of Hampton NB* by David G. Keirstead, and *Historic Saint John Streets* by David Goss and Harold E. Wright included photographs and detailed descriptions of people, streets, businesses, churches, houses, schools and education, sports, entertainment, clubs and organizations, dairy and agriculture, and available transportation found and utilized by folks living in Sussex, Hampton, and Saint John during the early and mid-twentieth century. These texts immersed me in the time period and contextualized a lot of the important details I utilized in my writing. For instance, Keirstead's overview of Hampton includes a detailed list of its local organizations and clubs, past and present, which became important when writing "Great-Grandmother." Much of Lottie's first letter to her unborn child consists of her describing her family's personalities, interests, and everyday life in 1934. One of the organizations that I ended up using in my story was the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire. This is a conservative organization in line with Lottie's mother's suggested resistance to change, and it aligns with her consistent call to volunteer in her community. Interestingly, Lorraine Coops argues in her article, "'Strength in Union': Patterns of Continuity and Change within the Sir Robert Borden Chapter of The Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire 1915-1965," that the IODE inspired positive change for women in the Maritimes, writing that, "through their involvement in organizations such as the IODE, Maritime women, like their sisters in other parts of Canada, adapted the traditional roles, expectations and aspirations to the changing vision of the twentieth century, truly creating a place of their own" (78). I think this is especially interesting when considering the ending of "Great-Grandmother," since it inspires hope in Lottie's mother's ability to change for the better.

Keirstead also provided information regarding nineteenth century Indigenous[3], Acadian[4], and Loyalist histories in Hampton, which were helpful as I tried to navigate some of the historical details surrounding language and cultural tensions in New Brunswick, which became important elements of "Grandmother," and "Great-Grandmother."

Lastly, the book *Railways of New Brunswick: A History* by Dan Soucoup, explains the history and development of the railway in New Brunswick, including a timeline of events and some notable facts and dates. This text gave me better idea of how transportation worked and changed in the early to mid-twentieth century. Soucoup includes photographs of all the railways stations found in New Brunswick, including Kings County, which came in handy when writing scenes train scenes in "Great-Grandmother."

Creative Research

In Gwendolyn Davies introduction to *Fiction Treasures by Maritime Writers: Best Selling Novelists from Canada's Maritime provinces: 1860-1950*, she suggests that what we read and consume changes the way we think about everything, including how we read other texts. She notes *Boston Globe* columnist Joan Wickersham's words: "each

[3] Statistics Canada says that "in 2016, there were 29,380 Aboriginal people in New Brunswick, making up 4.0% of the population. he majority of the Aboriginal population reported a single Aboriginal identity – either First Nations, Métis or Inuk (Inuit). Of the Aboriginal population in New Brunswick, 59.8% (17,575) were First Nations people, 34.7% (10,200) were Métis, and 1.3% (385) were Inuit" (SCAN Geography Series)

[4] In Kelle Keating Marshall and Wendy D. Bokhorst-Heng's research paper, "I Wouldn't Want to Impose!" Intercultural Mediation in French Immersion," they write that "Francophones (mostly Acadian) form just less than one third of NB's population."

of us has a personal pantheon made up of all the books we've read and loved or been shocked or turned on or scared or amused or educated or moved by" and that "the books we read over the course of a lifetime, help form our consciousness of ourselves, other people and the world" (18). With that thought in spirit, I'd like to talk about some of the creative works that influenced me, since they play a large part in the creation of my thesis.

There are several books of fiction by Maritime writers that have influenced and inspired me. Lynn Coady's novel, *Watching You Without Me,* was one of the most poignant and affective portrayals of a mother-daughter relationship that I've ever read. Coady is incredible at showing and hinting at a character's emotions and mental state versus telling the reader, and this was something I worked hard to do in my own writing. My focus was never very far from Coady's protagonist, Karen, and her mother, Irene's complicated past, even though it was not the central conflict of the novel. Coady thoroughly exemplified the limitlessness of inheritance within a mother-daughter relationship. For instance, as we follow Karen and her odd and disturbing platonic relationship with her sister's caregiver, Trevor, his abusive tendencies are soon revealed, but it's not until almost the end of the book that we Karen finds out her mother had dealt with the same kind of abuse by Trevor before she died. Karen who thinks she is entirely different from her mother, falls into the same trap, and this is one of their many parallels.

Coady's inclusion of "Jessi," who an important childhood friend of Karen's, can be seen as a pseudo-mother figure to Karen, as Jessica displays unconditional love and support, and is a symbol of resilience, stability, and constancy for Karen when Irene dies. Jessi is described by Karen as being an "unconscious, or maybe conscious, replication of

[Irene]" (69) and Coady's portrayal of Jessi inspired my character, Vivien Gunn, found in "Grandmother." Like Jessi, Vivien offers Nellie maternal support and genuine female friendship in her time of need and shows how a mother figure can influence a daughter-figure in the same way a biological mother can.

Another influential book was *Quilt,* by Maritime writer Donna E. Smyth. The character of "Myrt," was the most captivating for me, and Myrt's volatile and complicated relationship with her abusive husband Ralph. Smyth's descriptions of abuse are plainly spoken, and they showcase how violence can muddle with love, and follow a pattern. Smyth's writing is sharp and unsentimental, and extremely different from my own, and that's what I admire most about it. She utilizes the realism genre to push back against nostalgia which works to reveal a lot about the role of women in the mid-twentieth century, specifically in the Maritimes, as well as the toxic masculinity and domestic violence that was heavily prevalent and socially accepted at the time. WU Wenyan writes that "the mother's power exists only within a system organized by men, the mother, who seeks for identity, self-value and power by regarding her daughter as an alter ego to meet narcissistic demands, is actually a maintainer or a conspirator of patriarchy" (41). When reading *Quilt*, I noticed a lot of Smyth's female characters, much of whom Myrt would see as mother-figures and who are a lot older than her, feeling conflicted about certain aspects of the patriarchy—questioning some of it, but mostly upholding and maintaining it—which are conflicts I explored in my stories.

A Canadian writer worth mentioning is Quebecois writer Anais Barbeau-Lavallette. Her book, *Suzanne,* is a fictional account of her estranged grandmother's life that exemplifies gender limitations and the political movements of the early to mid

1960s. Lavallette's assertive and passionate need to understand the unknown facets of the woman who abandoned her mother was extremely inspirational to me and aligned with many of my own motivations for writing my thesis. Lavallette dedicates the book to her mother and daughter, reinforcing the generational and familial importance of the work. Lavallette's attempts to understand her grandmother's life, choices, and motivations mirror my own reasoning behind writing stories that are inspired by my matriline.

Lastly, we come to prolific Canadian writer, Alice Munro, whose short stories have always been a source of joy, education, influence, and inspiration to me. The first text I ever read of Munro's was *Lives of Girls and Women*. Like my process, *LGW's* development was "not linear but oblique and digressive, like a process of discovering secrets in unsuspecting places" (Howells 33). *LGW* links short stories in a clear and visceral narrative, displaying the social ideologies about gender in the Canadian town of Jubilee during the 1950s. However, strong resistance to the conformity of gender standards and a push for personal desires is exhibited by Munro's protagonist Del. Munro uses moments of Del's life to express the complexities involved in her journey to womanhood, which greatly informed my writing in "Daughter." I wanted to model my story after Munro's, but within the context of New Brunswick, having Izzy reflect some of Del's worries and anxieties, and building upon them, as Izzy's story takes place in 2021 and she is older, less naïve, and in a different place and time of her life. The character of Izzy, however, lacks Del's personal autonomy, even in adulthood, which adds another interesting layer to the story and speaks to her complicated relationship with her mother.

Coral Ann Howells writes in her critical text, *Alice Munro*, that, "Munro shows how writing about one girl's life involves writing about many other women's lives. Del is both different from her mother, her aunts and her girlfriends and yet also like them, a product of Jubilee and its small-town value system in the 1940s and 1950s" (33). The traditional gender roles displayed to Del by her father's aunts, Aunt Elspeth and Auntie Grace, are a constant source of questioning in Del's childhood, hinting at maternal influence, as well as exemplifying the social and domestic responsibilities of women at the time. Due to the aunts' strict ideals of gender conformity, their relationship with Del's unconventional mother, Ada, is a challenging one, and Del is affected by these same criticisms. Del's mother's progressive thinking is the key to their mother-daughter bond; however, Del refuses to recognize this bond out of fear of individuality. These Matrilineal dynamics were echoed in my writing of "Grandmother" and "Great-Grandmother," as they take place in 1959 and 1935, respectively.

Georgeann Murphy writes in her paper, "Memory, Identity, and the Aesthetics of Connection," that "to an extraordinary extent, the raw material of Munro's work comes from her own life, a fact she readily admits" (41). However, literary critic, Harold Bloom, writes in the introduction of *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Alice Munro*, that, "Munro, immensely skilled and wisely compassionate as she is, lacks the fine madness of great literary art…[her] characters are immanences of our daily lives" (2). Bloom goes on to say that she "blurs the line between the objective and the subjective, and between the small and the large, in order to discover what, if anything, will suffice for a more abundant life" (3). Bloom considers Munro's use of her own life as material and inspiration in writing against her, suggesting that stories about everyday life are not worth

much, to which I would greatly disagree. Munro taught me that writing about the real, and possibly mundane elements of life is the greatest source of revelation, providing an opportunity for reflection, discussion, and discovery.

Conclusion

I feel a kinship with Howells comments on Munro's ending of the *Lives of Girls and Women*. She writes that, "the book ends with the recognition by one woman writer of her enormous ambition and also of the limits of textual representation, as Del Jordan casts a retrospective glance back at her younger self, noting what she has learned and what she does not yet understand" (50). Through my research, I was able to examine matriarchies, matrilineality, and mother-daughter relationships specifically within the Maritime region. Through the writing of my thesis, I was able to create a matriline inspired and influenced by my critical and creative research, my travels, and my own experiences within my matriarchically organized family. I think my stories were worth writing because they exemplify how matrilines can and will impact female identity, and how they work to shape future generations due to the transcendence of maternal inheritance and influence. I'm proud of what I accomplished; however, I also know that I had enormous ambition and that, given the limits of textual representation, I'm bound to have missed or glossed over something that I will no doubt obsess about later. All the same, I cherish the stories that I wrote, I care deeply for the characters I created, and I feel closer to understanding my own place and identity within my home and family, and if I feel that way maybe someone else will too.

Women like the ones in my family are everywhere. They live under the constraints of the traditionalist and patriarchal systems present in and dependent upon

family and community life here in the Maritimes and beyond. These everyday women deal with poverty. They work two minimum wage jobs and just get by. They raise children on their own or with very little help, and they get into relationships with men that don't respect them or see them as equals or love them in the ways they deserve. They're sometimes abused and neglected. They don't always recognize their worth. They're the women that get pregnant at sixteen, and the women that come from those women. The ones who dream of brighter days and bigger futures but simply can't break out of the cycles they were born into. These women inadvertently pass along their trauma to their children[5], and sometimes their children carry that trauma on with them and pass it on to their own children. Sometimes the trauma ends with them. These are the kinds of women I want to give voices to. These are the women I want to write for. The women like my mother, my aunt, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother. I want to write for them and about them because they're important.

[5] Intergenerational trauma takes place when trauma is passed down through families. This can occur with all traumas, such as alcoholism, drug addiction, child abuse or neglect, sexual assault, and domestic abuse or intimate partner violence. In the research article, "Unresolved Trauma in Mothers: Intergenerational Effects and the Role of Reorganization," Udita Lyengar et al. conducted a study to try and determine whether a mother's unresolved trauma might lead to her inability to respond to her child sensitively, which would interfere with the development of the child, namely it's level of attachment, and lead to the baby experiencing intergenerational trauma (1). The study found that "mothers with unresolved trauma had insecure attachment themselves and were more likely to have infants with insecure attachment" (1).

“Daughter”

Izzy realized it was still hard to say no to her grandfather when she received his call Thursday evening. Izzy’s great-uncle Donald (who was in fact not her uncle at all) had died after a long battle with diabetes, Gout, and what her mother referred to as his “terrors,” or the symptoms of untreated PTSD probably developed during his time as a prison guard for the Dorchester Penitentiary. At the Meadow Manor Retirement home senior RN Dorothy Brown told her supervisor that she had gone about her normal routine, prepping Donald’s 1.2 milligram dose of Colchicine and his morning shot of insulin. When she entered his room, she found him stretched out on top of his bed covers in his undershirt and boxers, still wearing his reading glasses, a worn-out copy of Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley* lying face-down on his chest. He was dead, but looked peaceful for what Dot had said was probably the first time in many, many years.

When Gramps, who had worked with Donnie at the Pen, called to break the news he asked Izzy to come to Quispamsis for the funeral—*He always liked you, Isabelle. Thought you were a real good egg*. This didn’t exactly sway her. Donnie was a gruff old man with a wide gait and a wandering eye. What he liked was Sunday roasts, women in their 20s, and the local Dooly’s Sizzling Sevens slot machine. Izzy’s grandmother had never cared for him, and she had said as much. But Izzy’s grandfather was eighty-eight years old, full of new-found sentimentalism and arthritis, and she felt she couldn’t say no.

Today was Saturday. Izzy had kissed Len and their dog Benny goodbye the night before. She left them in their little apartment on Weldon Street with an overflow of dirty laundry, two eggs and a parmesan rind left in the refrigerator. She drove from Moncton to

Saint John, checking in to the Holiday Inn Express at 7 p.m. and scarfing down a cheeseburger from the McDonalds across the street by 7:15.

Her grandfather had asked her to stay with him.

"You can have the bed," he said, "I fall asleep in the La-Z-Boy most of the time, anyways."

"Oh, no, Gramps. Thanks, but I like staying in hotels. I like the pool and the continental breakfast. The solitude. You know? The quiet. I'm looking forward to having some time to myself." This was all a bit of a stretch. Izzy liked hotels when she wasn't alone. She liked them when she and Len went on vacation. They would smoke a joint in the parking lot, get too much room service, and climb into the King-sized bed to spoon. Bellies full of French fries and mac and cheese, they'd giggle like kids, lying there with more than an arms-length of bed free on either side of them.

Staying alone in a hotel meant triple-checking that the door was securely locked. Having to finagle the deadbolt in just the right way to deter any possible intruders. Checking the plugs, sockets, bathroom fan, air conditioner, radiator, fire alarm, and any other suspicious crevice for hidden cameras before even thinking about getting comfortable.

Izzy also avoided being alone, or rather, being alone in the quiet. Over the past year, audio books and true crime podcasts had often taken the place of real human interaction. Her playlist, "Belt it Out, Baby," was akin to a childhood friend. She listened to it on drives like the one she took to Saint John, injecting herself with the comfort and nostalgia of Sheryl Crow and Shania Twain's greatest hits, and the *Phantom of the Opera*

soundtrack. Izzy had a propensity to think too much when she would rather not think at all. She'd become an expert at filling silences.

Her grandfather was never an easy person to say no to, but thank God, age had softened him. He lived in the basement apartment of a retirement home run by the Royal Canadian Legion in Quispam'. The place—one bed, one bath, with an open concept kitchen and living area—was small to begin with. Exactly what a Canadian veteran's pension could afford. But considering that it was crammed full of military artifacts, it made for a rather uncomfortable stay.

Edmund J. Murray was the oldest of ten children. One of six still alive. He was a long-time disciplinarian and curmudgeon. Growing up, Izzy thought her grandfather had been born strict, sarcastic, and stubborn and Grandma Nell never contested this. Her grandfather idolized those that served their country. He wore a red poppy year-round. As a principle, he believed in the power, strength, and advancement born out of male comradery, and felt those who hailed from the empire were of a superior make. But he wasn't beyond showing occasional grace and respect for what he called his "African, Arabic, or Asian neighbours."

Izzy's mother, Anna, went through regular bouts of estrangement from her father. Gramp's and Grandma Nell had divorced long ago, and Gramp's tendency to put his foot in his mouth regularly interfered with his and Anna's relationship. He was always an intensely intimidating figure; talked at you, not to you. But Izzy knew that her mother's need for financial support eventually trumped any conflict between the pair, and they would end up visiting him again in his stuffy home, sitting silently at his dining room table, forced to listen to his ramblings.

At twelve or so, Izzy had been captivated by *The Diary of Anne Frank*. One day Anna, who had recently reconciled with Gramps, had told him about Izzy's new interest in the Second World War. Twelve-year-old Izzy had assumed that her mother was attempting to inspire connection between them. To foster a relationship stronger than Anna and Gramps ever had.

"Why don't you show Izzy the letters you have from Grampy Art, Dad? I'm sure she would love to see them."

Gramps had always cherished the letters his father had sent their family while fighting in the War.

"My Pa never forgot a single one of our birthdays, you know that?" He told Izzy, proudly pulling out a wad of worn-out envelopes from an old tin of Red Rose tea. He ran his fingers along the names, addresses, and unique stamps before handing them over to be read. "Listen here," he added sternly, "you be careful with those. They're worth more than your life."

As Izzy wasn't permitted to sit in Gramp's special chair, the only real piece of furniture in his home, she sat on the floor holding the letters like they were breakable. She gently pulled the precious contents out of their envelopes, unfolding the thin papers indented with cursive and reading each one carefully, trying to imagine the man behind the writing. Surprisingly to Izzy, there was rarely any mention of *I love you* or *I miss you* in her great grandfather's letters. They were nothing like Anne's diary. Arthur E. Murray's letters spanned from 1941 to 1944, before he was discharged due to a shrapnel injury to his leg. Instead of deep romance and heart-wrenching loneliness, Arthur's letters were simple and direct. He always wanted to know how the family's cattle farm was

running without him and he would direct his wife, Gertrude, in the farm's business affairs; *Don't be giving George Sanderson butter on credit, again*. He often asked Gertie to send cigarettes and cut back on the spending. *How are the crops looking? Thank you for sending new socks, I needed them.*

Izzy soon discovered that Gramps was right, and that Arthur did send a letter on each of his children's birthdays. Izzy's father had never sent her anything. The contents of Art's 'special' letters were mostly the same: the weather, the farm, and the finances, except that Arthur would mention having sent extra money that month, and he always ended these letters with *give my best to the children.*

Having sat with Arthur's letters for a good while, Izzy still felt that her war hero great-grandfather was a mystery. "Do you have your mum's letters to your dad?" Izzy asked, hoping Gertie's words might offer more clarity.

"No," Gramps said passively. "I don't think he ever kept *them*."

Izzy saw Gramps less as she grew older, making excuses not to visit and only seeing him when Anna insisted Izzy join her. It wasn't just that she couldn't go on ignoring his bigotry and black-handed comments. *I always thought your mother would make more of herself. Seems like she followed in your grandmother's footsteps, eh?* It wasn't even that all he ever wanted to do with Izzy was watch re-runs of *M.A.S.H*. or tell the same old stories about his childhood on the Island. It was that Gramps had refused to downsize his collection of war-time memorabilia when he moved from his house to the apartment. Whatever space could have fit people was taken up by historical texts, magazines, and articles stacked one on top of the other. With every visit there were more framed pictures and posters, propaganda, and newspaper clippings stuck to the walls. A

living hell for claustrophobics. Maps were hung and strewn onto tabletops, covered in pins and markers that signified important locations and battles. He had stacks of photo-albums full of strangers. They showed everything from candid pictures—a chain-smoking naval soldier shaving in his underwear; a letter being written in a trench while a riveting game of cards was played knee deep in the mud—to dead bodies, explosions and battles, and official military battalions and headshots. She knew he owned secret plans and documents that were classified and belonged in museums. These were displayed in shadow boxes or laminated and placed inside glass shelving and cases that lined most of the walls. These were also used to display perfectly pressed uniforms, helmets, boots, patches, medals, badges, and ribbons, and military weapons of all kinds: guns, bayonets, knives, and inactive grenades. He even owned a flamethrower. The family never openly acknowledged the carefully displayed Third Reich collectibles. Gramps couldn't get his head around a keyboard, let alone the internet, but he still had his sources. Every antique shop and army surplus in New Brunswick knew him by name.

Gramps had never come to terms with the fact that he wasn't able to fight like his father and grandfather did in the world wars. Being a soldier was a rite of passage, so in 1952, when he was just nineteen, he joined the Canadian armed forces and fought in Korea. He was part of the infamous Koje-Do incident, and when the war ended the following year, he stayed on as a military observer.

That night, he told Izzy and her mother about how he'd met Grandma Nell in '67. He had retired from the army by then and was working at the Pen. He spotted her from across the room with a group of new nurses visiting from Sackville. *I claimed her,* he said. *Told the boys that one's taken*.

Grandma Nell had just graduated from nursing school and signed a six-month contract with the Memorial Hospital, which at that time also provided care for inmates at the Pen. *They were sending sheep to slaughter* was the only thing Izzy ever remembered her grandmother saying about it.

"She was a good-lookin' woman, and I hadn't seen one of those in a dog's age," Gramps had said during another one of Izzy and her mother's visits. "Jet-black hair, strong shoulders, and good legs. Screwed, wasn't I?" He laughed, slapping his leg, and winking at her mother who smiled tightly.

"Okay, Dad. That's enough."

"What did I say? So, it didn't work out? Doesn't mean we weren't like rabbits in the beginning!"

"Dad." Anna warned. But Izzy was intrigued by this topic.

"You fell in love?" She asked innocently.

"Well, I was quick to knock 'er up if that's what you mean!"

Old age might have softened her grandfather, but it made him more isolated, too. Increasingly distrustful of the liberal government, and with the world still in COVID-19's clutches, he preferred to stay inside and away from people. He wasn't sure if he even believed in the so-called virus, but wasn't going to risk anything by getting sick or getting vaccinated. Izzy hadn't been to see him for almost three years now, and even though she had agreed to accompany him to Donnie's funeral, she would still keep her distance.

"Will you be seeing the old broad?" Gramps had asked her before ending their phone call.

"No. I'm not planning to." She said, adding quickly, "I'll only be down for the weekend."

Grandma Nell didn't live far away. She stayed in Hampton after the divorce. Izzy and her grandmother hadn't seen or spoken to each other for a long time. Really, it was Izzy's mother who wasn't on speaking terms with Nellie. Which meant Izzy wasn't either.

Coming back to this part of New Brunswick made her feel uneasy. Like she was thirteen years old again and attending a party in a dress one size too small, with a rip in the armpit. She believed that staying in Saint John would be better than Quispamsis. It wasn't as static. Saint John was where Izzy had lived for most of her childhood, and yet, she felt some anonymity there. Maybe because they never lived in the same location for very long. Or because it was a port city and people had been coming and going for over two centuries.

Uptown Saint John had one-way streets, historical buildings, art, culture, and prospering businesses, and was always bustling with people and traffic. She had never been anywhere quite like it. She thought of it romantically, the way people who don't live there tend to think of Montreal or New York. On the streets of Saint John, no one paid any attention to her, and she liked it that way. They were too busy living their own interesting lives.

She woke up in her hotel room that morning with the irresistible urge to go for a drive. After the pandemic hit, Izzy's drives had become a sort of self-care ritual. She didn't have to go anywhere in particular to be going *somewhere*. Len and Izzy had been

together for six years now, so he wasn't at all surprised when she called him from behind the wheel of Roxy, her beige Toyota Camry.

"Good morning, you. Already takin' off, eh?"

"Yep. Hittin' the road."

"Call me when you get where you're going."

"Will do. I love you."

"I love you, more."

Izzy drove into uptown and noticed that everything was being advertised as *historically refurbished* and *newly restored!* Apartments, lofts, and condos were being sold for millions. The corner grocery convenience store was replaced with an expensive boutique called "Petit Chat." The Subway appeared to have seen better days.

She drove past central and into the south end. This area was not *restored* and *refurbished*. It looked the same as it always had, with its run down and dilapidated houses and sketchy back alleys; the Irving Oil Refinery loomed in the distance. Pausing at a stop sign, she noticed three toddler-aged children, one in only a T-shirt and diaper, using street chalk to draw on the sidewalk. A tall woman stood nearby wearing an oversized Oulton College T-shirt. She paced and yelled into her cellphone, *they're your kids too,* then crouched down to soothe the youngest child who was now in tears. Further down the road two men and a young woman were standing outside the Sunshine & Suds laundromat. The men seemed paranoid, constantly looking over their shoulders. One alerted the other to Izzy's oncoming vehicle. The woman stared blankly ahead. She was shoeless and

using a plastic Sobeys bag as a purse. They met each other's gaze as Izzy turned the corner.

On Pitt Street, Izzy saw a skinny, dishevelled-looking man lying awkwardly on the steps of a weathered two-story building. There was a shopping cart nearby with a dirty burgundy comforter inside. *Is he asleep or dead?* She didn't think too hard about this as she drove past a little apartment building that she had lived in once with her mother.

Sheryl Crow belted, "if it makes you happy, it can't be that bad," as Izzy took the freeway and headed east. Anna always told her that you should never take the highway when you can take the back roads.

As she entered Rothesay, Izzy drove past a little lot that once housed a dairy bar called "Mellows." Mellows had been a soft-pink and sky-blue baby barn that sold hotdogs and Scotsburn ice cream cones in the summer months. It employed the teens in Rothesay that didn't come from money or have their lifeguard certification. One scoop at Mellows was equivalent to three scoops of the other guys, and for the same price. Mellows was gone now, replaced by equipment and tools from Rothesay Landscaping Ltd.

Izzy remembered when her mother bought their first family car—a second-hand Plymouth with over 200,000 kilometres on it—and took them to Mellows to celebrate. They'd both ordered two scoops of puppy paws in a dish and barely finished them. Anna would have been thirty at the time. The same age Izzy was now. It was hard to imagine not having a vehicle by this age; harder to imagine being responsible for a child.

Izzy drove past the Irving convenience store where the Plymouth broke down the same year it was bought. Anna and Izzy were looking for a Christmas tree. Anna used a payphone nearby to call Grandma Nell for help, but it was an hour or so before she could rescue them. The tree lot had been next to the Irving and Izzy and her mother had gone inside to keep warm. Izzy could tell that the cashier, a young guy with blue-elastic-covered braces and a bleach-blonde mustache, liked her mother. He invited them to sit behind the counter while they waited. Izzy watched people squeegee their salt-stained windows and remove their gloves and mittens to put gas into their cars. Anna bought four chocolate-covered marshmallow Santas, giving one to the smitten cashier as a thank you. When Grandma Nell finally arrived, Izzy and Anna piled into Nellie's Ford Ranger. With two Christmas trees tucked neatly in the cargo bed, the three of them drove back to Saint John, eating their marshmallow Santas. They listened to Andre Rieu play Christmas music on his violin.

"Andre is my ideal man." Grandma Nell had said, as she hummed along to "O' Holy Night."

Now, as Izzy drove down Rothesay Road, she admired all the big, beautiful houses along the Kennebacasis like she did when she was little. She used to dream about living in one of them. Always imagined it would look like the inside of the house in *Father of the Bride*. A grand fireplace to cozy up to in the winter. A big window at the back to watch the sun come up. A sprawling staircase with a railing begging to be slid down. For Izzy, George Banks was the ideal man. For a long time, she had wished she was Annie, coming home from college engaged, wreaking emotional havoc on her doting

dad. She wondered if that had changed. Shouldn't she now be identifying with Nina Banks? The patient wife and mother. The one who took care of everyone.

As she reached Quispamsis her belly rumbled. She decided to turn into the Tim Horton's drive thru. Pulling up to the speaker, a recorded voice said, "Welcome to Tim Hortons, can I take your order?"

"I'll have a sausage, egg, and cheese on a biscuit and a chocolate milk, please."

The audio muffled and a new non-recorded voice bellowed out of the speaker, "I'm sorry, but we're out of eggs right now."

"What? How can you be out of eggs? You serve breakfast food, like, exclusively."

"Sorry," said the voice. "Can I get you something else?"

She was frustrated, but ordered a blueberry muffin, warmed, with butter on the side. She wondered if she should speak to the manager. This all felt like some sort of conspiracy. *No fucking eggs. Can that be real?* But she chickened out after pulling up to the window. The woman who took her order looked no more than twenty and appeared to be very, very pregnant. Her nametag, covered in neon star stickers, said 'Brenda!' Though her mother and grandmother would have scoffed at the thought, Izzy was conscious of the fact that you should never assume someone is pregnant or comment on it, but Brenda's short hair was pulled into pigtails revealing a pair of dangling earrings in the shape of a pacifier and a baby bottle, leaving Izzy feeling pretty confident.

Brenda was wearing a medical-grade mask, but Izzy could tell she was smiling behind it as she handed over the card machine to take Izzy's payment. She tipped fifty percent.

"Wow. Thanks!" Brenda said, taking back the machine. She handed Izzy her chocolate milk and straw. "Any little bit helps!" She rubbed her belly lovingly and made her way over to another employee.

Izzy wondered how long Brenda had been on her feet. She imagined them, red and swollen inside of Brenda's non-slip shoes. *How can she be so cheerful?* Izzy thought. *What's she going to do?* Another employee suddenly approached the drive-thru window.

"Sorry for the wait," mumbled the teen girl who handed Izzy her muffin before slamming the window shut.

Traffic was busy as she pulled into the intersection and waited behind several cars at a red light. She could spot the Pettinghill Road street sign from here. That was where the Kennebacasis Community Funeral Home was, where Donnie's ashes awaited their final farewell. Izzy and Gramps needed to be there tomorrow by 10:30 am. Donnie's sister Ruth told Gramps not to eat lunch because there would be plenty of squares and finger sandwiches after the funeral. She imagined that social distancing during the wake may be difficult.

Something nagged at Izzy as the light changed and she turned right onto Hampton Road. Something about seeing sweet, young, gigantic-bellied Brenda labouring over the cash register had unsettled her. Izzy didn't even know Brenda. Maybe this was all going to plan. Maybe Brenda loved working at Tim Hortons; had met her soul mate; had her

soul mates baby kicking joyfully inside of her abdomen. Izzy was just being judgemental before. She always assumed the worst.

She used to want children, but the past few years had complicated things. She remembered a time when twenty-five felt old and now she was thirty. But she was *only* thirty! Grandma Nell was thirty-three when she gave birth to Izzy's mother, and there were women having babies in their 40s these days (something Gramps would call freakish or unnatural). There was still time for Izzy to decide. Len had just started a new remote job with Tourism NB, and Izzy was going on five years working as a graphic designer. Her boss promised her a promotion when things finally went back to normal—post pandemic—and a promotion would need to come long before a baby.

"I don't even know if I can get pregnant," she'd confessed to Len just weeks before. "I've never had a scare or anything."

"We could always adopt."

"That's not really the problem, though," she said, starting to feel irritated. "I don't know if I *want* to raise a child. To be a mother. Besides, I don't know if I'd be any good at it."

"First of all, you are a mother," Len laughed, gesturing toward Benny who was sprawled out on the kitchen floor, chasing something in his dreams. "And you're a great one."

"He's a dog, Len. I don't know if I want to bring a human into this world. Isn't it sort of selfish?"

"I think it's selfish not to. Besides, it wouldn't just be on you. We would be doing it together," he said, pulling her toward him playfully. But this didn't make Izzy feel any better.

Driving around, she thought about the fact that she and Len had a *choice* to make, and they were lucky to be able to make it, and not just willy-nilly but with serious consideration. She didn't want to be a mother accidentally. She wanted to plan to be a mother if she was going to be one at all. *Yes*, she thought, *when things went back to normal, after the promotion, they would sit down and decide.*

She planned to take the ferry over to the Kingston Peninsula. She was going to drive up through its familiar rural landscape. This part of the County had so much to admire and romanticize; big red barns and horses, herds of cows, some with calves sweetly suckling for their mother's milk, vegetable stands selling peaches and cream corn and homemade peanut butter fudge, fields of pink and purple lupins, and ditches lined with cattails and Queen Anne's lace. Maybe she would stop at McKay's Apple Orchard to do a bit of solitary u-picking. Len would love a bag or two of apples. He ate one nearly every day.

Grandma Nell told Izzy once that her great grandfather, who died before Grandma Nell was born, grew up in the opposite direction of the orchard, on a farm in Lower Norton. She could remember Nellie picking her up after school one day, when she was in Grade 2 or 3, and taking her across the ferry. They drove past fields and farms, making their way down to Lower Norton Shore Road. Izzy and Grandma Nell were together a lot in those days. Izzy loved that her grandmother always smelled like Juicy Fruit gum and Chanel No.5. She could remember rolling down her window to feel and smell the spring

breeze, pointing out at the most ideal looking farmhouses, with their white picket fences, paved driveways, and perfectly manicured lawns.

"Do you think it was that one, Grandma? Was that your dad's farm?"

"I don't remember, Iz," Grandma Nel had said. "I wish I knew."

As Izzy drove up towards the river, she saw there was no line for the ferry, but was suddenly compelled to ditch the whole idea. Instead, she made a left down Gondola Point Road toward the place she called home for a year of her life when she was ten. Her home with Aunt Bridgette.

You've gotta be kidding me, Izzy thought as the property came into view. She slammed the brakes and pulled Roxy over to the side of the road, sliding into park, and leaving the keys in the ignition. Her ears were ringing. Her keys and pewter elephant keychain clanged together loudly, making her wince and grind her teeth. She grabbed hold of the keys forcefully, pricking her hand on a tiny pewter tusk.

"Ouch!" She yelped, pulling her hand away and rubbing her palm. "Son of a bitch." Her mother had given her the elephant. *It's an important family heirloom,* Anna had said.

Izzy took a deep breath and looked out her right-side window to a line of cedar trees and clearing to a dock, exposing the flow of the Kennebecasis River, and view of the hills and valleys of the Kingston Peninsula. She had her window cracked about an inch and the smell of algae was overpowering her vanilla air freshener.

It was overcast, but the water was calm, and the autumn leaves still reflected dreamily off its surface. She looked down at her hand. It had a little indent where she'd

pricked herself. *You dummy,* she thought, *Len would laugh if he was here*. He'd tell her she was being dramatic, which of course she was. She'd have stayed in character though. Shaken her head at him. Given him a disapproving look and insisted that it hurt.

Looking to her right, she saw that the Thompson's dingy yellow two-storey was abandoned. The bay window was always the house's redeeming quality and now it only betrayed it, emphasizing its neglected, hollow interior. Izzy's eyes went from it to the RE/MAX sign with its large, shiny picture of Nancy Munn, realtor supreme, and her blinding white veneers. But it wasn't the 'for sale' sign that caused Izzy to pull over so abruptly, it was that Bridgette's house was gone. There was nothing left of it but the land it had stood on, which was seemingly included in the sale of the Thompsons' property.

This revelation along with the fact that her breakfast had flown out of its bag when she hit the brakes and toppled to the floor below the passenger seat really pissed her off. She looked down at the muffin, poised just so on its squished-in top. She decided to eat it anyway and reached into the brown paper bag, finding there was no butter, just the plastic knife she was meant to spread it with. *Those lazy, stupid bitches,* she thought, and felt an immediate pang of guilt.

Izzy nibbled at the dry baked good, wiping tears from her eyes, and wishing she hadn't come here. She pulled out her cell phone and considered calling her mother but decided against it. It was Anna who would have had to sell the property in the first place. She would know about the situation already. There was no point in starting a fight with her over it.

Izzy thought of calling Len, too, but figured he wouldn't really understand. Len would try to make things better, like he always did. That wasn't what she was looking for

right now. She wanted to be comforted, not realistic. She wanted room to be upset. Room to wallow. She glanced down at her phone and realized she'd been sitting there for over twenty minutes.

Izzy noticed that the old oak tree on the Thompson's property still had the tire-swing attached to it. The rope had grown visibly loose, and age revealed its brittle strands, as age often does. The rope had washed ashore long before any of the Thompson children were born. She could remember swinging from it dreamily, her legs through one side of the tire and Sammi's through the other, making them intertwine. As they swung, she would only hear the whoosh of the wind and the sound of Sammie's laughter, seeing her sandy blonde hair whip around in the air from behind the tire. Izzy would close her eyes and pretend they were driving on a highway with the windows down or riding the zipper at the Exhibition. The swing had offered them a sort of freedom. A vortex to another world.

Samantha Jane Thompson and Isabelle Murray were inseparable when Anna and Izzy had lived with Aunt Bridgette. Sammie was the middle child of the three Thompson girls. The oldest, Alexis, was five years older. She wasn't ever home. Jena was two years younger. She was a very quiet person and preferred the company of books, which was a quality that reminded Izzy of Grandma Nell. Jena would follow Sammie and Izzy around for a while, listen to them talk and take part in whatever thing they were doing at the time, but she almost always ended up under the oak, reading Beverly Cleary or one of the many Nancy Drew Mysteries she'd borrowed from the library.

Sammie and Izzy were only a month apart in age, but Sammie always seemed older and more knowing. She was confident and funny, never too serious, and she was

the only person Izzy would have ever described as being spirited. Izzy never told her mother that Sammie was her first kiss.

During their friendship, Sammie slept over a lot, but Izzy never stayed at Sammie's. Not only because at this time, Anna wouldn't have allowed it, but because Sammie never asked. Izzy figured that this was because Arlene, Sammie's mother, was what Bridgette described as 'unstable.'

"She's addicted to Oxycodone," Bridgette told Anna one night after Izzy had gone to bed, unaware that she could hear them. "Her husband beats her. The kids too, I suspect."

"How terrible," Anna said softly. "I feel like that could have been me if I hadn't come here."

"It can happen to anyone," Bridgette said. Then they were silent.

Izzy never asked Sammie about this. Never asked her about her father and the bruises she sometimes noticed on Sammie's wrists. Never asked her what Oxycodone was. Never asked Sammie anything about her mother.

Izzy wiped the crumbs off her pants and removed her seatbelt. She hadn't thought about any of these things in a long time and needed some air. *I'll just go over there for a second*, she thought, *no one's around, anyways*. *Nobody would mind*. She got out of the car and hurried across the road, straight toward the tire swing.

The oak was *old*. Big too. Twenty years had passed, but when she walked beneath it, she still felt as small as she always had. Someone, maybe a woodpecker or a beaver, had removed a lot of the bark from its trunk. She patted the tree, *you're a good tree*. *A*

real good tree and I'm glad you're still here, she thought, tracing her finger along its bark-less edges.

Moving towards the tire swing, she reached out and touched the rope gently, careful to avoid getting a splinter. Looking up into its great canopy, she could see a bird's nest, partially made of blue-tinted rope strands. The rope was now more of a sun-bleached turquoise, and there was something special about the aged remnants of thick paint, dulled and cracked by childhood, the push, pull, and oil of human hands, including her own.

She could remember coming home from spending days and evenings with Sammie and Jena. Panting, smelling of cut grass and wet soil, dirty and hoarse, she'd peel through Bridgette's little sunroom, offering a quick hello before racing to her bedroom desk to plan the next day's romp, looking down lovingly at her paint speckled hands and the shards of teal adorning her jean shorts. Those were the good days.

Looking toward the patch of land that used to be Bridgette's house, she couldn't believe it was gone. *If Aunt Bridgette had been alive today*, she thought, *I would have stayed here with her*. The house was still standing five years before, when Izzy had brought Len for a visit, but it must have come down shortly after that because grass had grown thick where it once stood.

She walked around a bit, kicking at left-over, half-dead dandelions, and trying to find exactly where her old bedroom would have been. She used her thumbs and pointer fingers to create a box to peak through in place of a window, scanning the backyard treeline for her old view. She finally gave up and walked back to the old oak, sitting down beneath it, and resting her back on its trunk. She closed her eyes.

Bridgette was Anna's older half-sister. The three met when Izzy was eight or nine, shortly after they found out about Bridgette. Gramps was the one who let it slip during a heated exchange that resulted in yet another long estrangement. Anna and Izzy had endured a particularly tense supper at Gramps when Izzy excused herself from the table to go to the bathroom. As she reached the top of the stairs, she overheard Gramps tell Anna that she was a disappointment. *You're just like you mother*, he'd said, *a lying tramp with a bastard child.*

"I spoke to your grandmother," Anna told Izzy after she had confronted Grandma Nell with what Gramps had said. "I found out she has another child out there somewhere and she was never going to tell me about it. Can you believe that?"

"No, Mum," Izzy had said, holding onto her mother's hands and trying to comfort her. "I can't."

"I mean, I shouldn't even be talking to you about this. It's not fair to you. You're my child, not my therapist. I just, I don't have anyone else."

"That's okay, Mum. We always talk like this. I like that we talk like this!" Izzy had said encouragingly, believing at the time that being her mother's closest confidant was the main purpose of her young life. Izzy would later ask her mother to recount the story in full.

"I don't know much," Anna said. "Mum was still tight lipped about it, and I was angry by that point, but she said that long before she met Gramps, when she was in her twenties, she had an affair and got pregnant. Apparently, the guy abandoned her. The baby was adopted by some French woman."

Anna and Izzy would come to find out that Bridgette was adopted by a couple that Nellie knew at the time in Saint John. Bridgette's last name was Gunn, and her parents opened a general store in St. Stephen shortly after her adoption. Bridgette said that they were good people who couldn't have children, but Izzy's mother was still appalled by the whole thing. Izzy knew that the already rocky relationship between her mother and grandmother was now completely unsalvageable. Anna felt betrayed and had no room for forgiveness.

Anna, Izzy, and Bridgette met for the first time at the new Quiznos in King's Square. The sisters had sent emails back and forth and were anxious to meet one another. Bridgette was nine years older than Anna, but they still looked alike, both having thick dark hair, sharp chins, freckles on their shoulders, and slight frames.

Izzy noticed that Bridgette had more confidence than her mother did. She sensed that this might have been because Bridgette wasn't as sensitive as Anna, who felt everything so deeply. Aunt Bridgette was rather analytical. A quick thinker and an expert at games and puzzles, she was also extremely competitive. Every morning, she timed herself filling out the *Globe and Mail*'s daily crossword, keeping record of it. The sisters got along well despite their differences and became fast friends.

Bridgette worked as an X-ray tech at the Saint John Regional Hospital. One day, Izzy remembered Bridgette getting home from work and telling Anna that an "Edmund J. Murray" had an appointment booked for the following day at 1:30 pm, and sure enough, Bridgette took X-rays of Izzy's grandfather's chest the next day.

"His blood pressure was a little high, but I think that's because he was so spooked by me! He didn't know who I was, but I could tell that he was desperately trying to place

me," Bridgette explained. Anna had laughed so hard that milk came out of her nose. "He kept tripping over his words," Bridgette said, "but I knew not to tell him anything!"

"I'm glad you didn't," Anna said as she wiped tears from her eyes and blew her nose. "He's impossible. You'd have got a real earful. Probably would have referred to you as 'Nellie's French bastard.'"

Bridgette's adoptive parents died a year apart when she was in college. They were already elderly by that point and left their only daughter everything they had, including their business and house in St. Stephen, and their sweet cottage on Gondola Point Road. Bridgette sold the business and the house and moved to Quispamsis.

"I couldn't stay there without them," she explained to Anna and Izzy one night over supper. "Besides, I worked in that general store till I left for college. My first boyfriend was the stock boy! I wasn't about to do that again."

Anna worked every Saturday at the salon, so Izzy and Bridgette spent Saturday's together, something Izzy used to do with Grandma Nell. Bridgette and Izzy would do projects around the house. Bridgette's mother was Acadian, and she had been raised bilingual, so she would teach Izzy random French words as they worked. They painted furniture. They baked bread. One time, Bridgette taught Izzy to use the table saw and they built a bookshelf for Izzy's room.

It rained hard one Saturday and Bridgette pulled out some old photo albums.

"You look like Mum there," Izzy said, pointing at photograph of Bridgette as a teen. She had fallen onto some grass and was holding onto a red hula-hoop, a big toothy grin on her face.

"She looks like me, you mean," Bridgette laughed. "I'm older!" She turned the page and pointed at a large Victorian style home, "That's the house I grew up in. Chez moi.." It looked just like George and Nina Banks' house in *Father of the Bride*.

"That was your house!" Izzy gasped. "For how long?"

"Gosh, honey, till I left for school. I was raised there."

"That's so lucky." Izzy brought the album up closer to her face to get a better look at it. "It's so perfect," she said, looking up with a confused expression. "Bridgette, why didn't you keep it?"

"Sometimes I wish I had," Bridgette said, wrapping her arm around Izzy and giving her a little squeeze. "But a house isn't really a home unless it's filled with the people you love, is it? For now, I'm happy here. Avec toi et ta mere."

Before they moved to Gondola Point Rd., Izzy and Anna lived in the south end of Saint John. In the apartment on Pitt Street. The one near the homeless man she'd seen on someone's front steps. It was the first apartment building that allowed Anna to paint and the only room she got around to painting was Izzy's. Izzy originally wanted a jungle theme. She had been watching *The Lion King* on repeat for months and had started reading *The Jungle Book*.

When Grandma Nell found out about this new obsession, she took Izzy to the Cherry Brook Zoo. They fed goats and ducks, watched squirrel monkeys swing from branch to rope. They admired the lion and lioness, intertwined in sleep on a sun covered rock. Izzy could remember asking her grandmother why there weren't any elephants in the zoo. Elephants were known to be Grandma Nell's favourite. She told Izzy that

elephants would be much too cold in the Maritimes, and Izzy suggested that the zookeepers knit them scarfs and hats, which Grandma Nell got a real kick out of. Grandma Nell told Izzy that elephants were the wisest and most empathetic animals in the animal kingdom.

"They cry real tears, you know." She said, "They're mammals, like we are, and the leader is always the oldest female. She takes care of everyone else."

"Like you do!" Izzy had said.

"Well, that's nice to hear," Grandma Nell laughed. "The female leaders are called 'mat-ri-archs,' and an elephant's social circle is usually made up of other females because when the male elephants come of age, they leave the group."

"So, it's just the grandmas, mums, aunts, and sisters left?" Izzy asked.

"Pretty much, kiddo."

"That's like our family, too."

That's when elephant's became Izzy's favourite animal, too. When her room was finally finished it was revealed that along with a lion, tiger, giraffe, gazelle, and lemur, Anna had expertly painted Izzy a family of elephants wearing knitted scarves, right above her bed.

Izzy shivered and opened her eyes. She wrapped her cardigan tighter around herself as the wind picked up, adjusting herself against the great oak. She felt her keys jam into her side and pulled them out of her pocket. She examined her little elephant keychain, making sure she hadn't dinged it. Izzy's mother had given it to her when she

had her appendix removed, *because you're so brave,* Anna had said. Things were good then; it was a few years before Anna met Todd.

Todd was handsome and outgoing. Short, but so was Anna. He was single (divorced twice). A forty-something car salesman for the Saint John Nissan dealership. He drove a sports car and wore a knockoff Rolex. Anna told Izzy that Tod was walking past the Saint John Head Shoppe and noticed Anna through the window.

"I want that woman, right there, to give me a haircut," he had said, smiling and pointing at Anna from the receptionists desk.

"I don't usually cut men's hair," she told him.

"I'll make it worth your while," he said.

Izzy was told that Todd was a gift-giver and had stopped by with an assortment of presents in those first few weeks. Flowers one day, candles and candy another. He was persistent.

"You know I have a kid." She had told him, "I said that I wasn't in a place to date anyone right now."

"You know I'm not just anyone," he said, offering her a box of chocolates wrapped in red ribbon. "I like a challenge but come on. Let me take you out. Let me spoil you."

"Oh, alright," she had said, taking the box. "Thank you. That sounds lovely."

"Don't eat all those in one go," He joked, as he made his way out, "Don't want you ruining that pretty figure before our date."

Anna didn't introduce Izzy to Todd or allow him into their apartment until she'd been seeing him for nearly two months. Since Izzy was born, Anna had only dated casually, and she never got serious with anyone. But things were different now. Izzy was nearly ten. She wasn't used to men being around. She wasn't used to sharing her mother.

"So, this is little miss *Isabelle*." Todd said when he met her. She didn't like the way he said her name. He had brought Izzy a hardcover copy of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* and a package of Fun Dip.

"That's so thoughtful. Isn't that thoughtful, Iz?"

"Yes," Izzy said, taking the gifts shyly, "Thank you very much."

"No problem-o" he said, turning to Anna. "Where's my kiss?" Izzy was dipping a white, chalk-like sugar stick into a packet of grape powder, and noticed her mother looking awkward, so, she pretended to read the synopsis on the back of her new book. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Anna give Todd a quick peck. Izzy had never seen her mother kiss a man before.

It wasn't long after that, that Todd moved his over-night things into their home. His Irish Spring soap was placed next to their Dove in the shower. His toothbrush thrown in the holder with her and her mother's. His Old Spice aftershave shoved next to Anna's perfume on the bathroom counter, and his socks and underwear folded in with their clean laundry. Izzy didn't like it, but she didn't want to disappoint her mother, so when Anna asked, "Do you like him?"

She said, "Yea, I guess so."

A few more months went by. Todd would take Anna and Izzy out for joyrides in his car and rent movies for the three of them from Blockbuster. He threw money around like no one Izzy had ever met. Though Anna still paid all the bills, Todd would regularly bring expensive steaks or roasts for Anna to prepare for supper, which was much better than the frozen fish and carrots Anna and Izzy seemed to have every other night. Todd was always the one making the plans and decisions, and Anna and Izzy followed them, but soon, Todd began to change.

One time, Todd told Anna and Izzy that they were all going out for dinner, on him. He had made a big sale at work and wanted to celebrate. *Get dressed,* he had said, *I'm taking you girls out on the town.* Izzy wore her best dress and sat with Todd in the living room waiting for her mother. When Anna was ready, she walked into the room positively glowing. Todd looked her up and down, and said, *never mind, forget the whole thing. I don't know why you thought I'd be okay with you wearing that. What are you trying to do? Embarrass me?* Anna went back to her room in tears to change, but no matter what she wore, it wasn't ever good enough.

Soon enough Todd had become critical of everything Anna did. *What a fantastic meal* warped into *look, it's okay. It wasn't edible, but I know you tried*, and ended with him screaming, *you're a grown woman, why don't you know how to cook by now?*

He would call her weak and stupid, *just like the rest of your sex*, reinforcing the worst thoughts Anna had about herself. Izzy watched as her mother's health deteriorated. She was always crying, locking herself in the bathroom for hours, and skipping meals.

Izzy remembered that whenever her mother got up the courage to tell Todd how awful he made her feel, he would say she was acting crazy and paranoid. That what she

was saying was simply untrue. That she was a *goddamn liar*. *God, you're such a drama queen. Listen,* he said once, waving his hand in front of Anna's face as Izzy watched from afar*, I see you, Anna. I know what you're doing. You're not the centre of the universe, you know. You're just a tiny, insignificant, little nobody. Get over yourself.*

Things only changed when Izzy became directly involved. Todd had started making inappropriate comments to her. He didn't say these things in front of Anna. He would wait until she left the room. *You're filling out nicely*, he'd say, or *you're looking more and more like how your mother looked when we first met, you know, when she still tried.* Izzy never knew what to say back. She was a child. She was mortified. She wanted to tell her mother, but she was scared that Anna wouldn't believe her or that it was all Izzy's fault, and she would be in trouble. Izzy began locking her bedroom door when Todd stayed over, which was becoming more and more frequent.

In May of that year, Izzy was cast as Dorothy in the grade 4/5 production of *The Wizard of Oz*. One day, she came home from school wearing her costume. The children had done a rehearsal of the play and she didn't have time to change out of it before Anna picked her up.

"Well, don't you look grown up," Todd said as Izzy entered the apartment.

"She's working so hard," Anna chimed in, making her way to their little kitchen. "I'm so proud of my little star."

"She's sure to be a star looking like that," Todd laughed. "She's practically jailbait." Anna froze, her face draining of colour.

"What did you just say?" she said, turning to look at him, "What did you just say about my child?" Anna looked back at Izzy, gesturing down the hallway, "go to your room right now and lock the door." Izzy was scared, but she did as she was told, but pressed her ear against her door frame to listen.

"What? It was nothing," Izzy heard Todd mumble. "Anna, it was a joke. Jesus Christ, calm down. You've lost your mind, you know that?"

"She's ten, Todd. How could you say that. How could you think that way? You're sick. You're a sick fucking pervert."

"I can't even make a joke anymore and you're jumping down my throat! All I was saying was that your *little* Isabelle is looking more like a woman than you are these days. Apparently, she's more mature than you, too."

"Get the fuck out of my house," Anna had yelled.

"You don't mean that."

"Yes, I do. Leave."

Two hours of begging for her forgiveness, then assassinating her character, and finishing with a string of veiled threats, and he was gone. Later, when Izzy was older and asked her mother to tell her the whole story, from start to finish, Anna confessed that she stood in the entrance of the hallway that day, blocking the way to their bedrooms, holding their only sharp kitchen knife in one hand and a child's aluminum baseball bat in the other. She told Izzy that she knew he wouldn't stay gone for long. He told her he would be back. That's why they had to flee. That's why they went to live with Bridgette.

Izzy pulled her cell phone out of her back pocket. There were three missed calls. Two from Len, and one from Gramps. She sent Len a text telling him she was doing well and would call him back soon. Izzy knew Gramps was calling to confirm a pick-up time for the funeral. He could wait.

Izzy stood up and leaned against the oak, placing her hand on its sturdy trunk, and thinking back to Bridgette's funeral five years ago. She fought long and hard but died from stage four breast cancer, like Izzy's great grandmother, Charlotte. Izzy brought Len to see the cottage when they had come to Quispam' to bury Bridgette.

Grandma Nell had wanted to come to the funeral. She came to the wake and waited in the parking lot for Anna and Izzy.

"No, Mum. You can't," Anna told her. "You weren't there for her in life, why would you be there for her in death?"

"It wasn't that I didn't want to be there. I just couldn't. I didn't want to interfere."

"Interfere? Bridgette was your daughter. You chose to abandon her like you do with everyone and everything." Anna hissed. "Come on, Izzy. We're going."

Izzy remembered her mother taking her hand and leading her away from her grandmother. When she finally looked back, she saw Nellie sitting behind the wheel of her truck with her head in her hands and thought that she must have been crying. Izzy had felt the urge to go to her and offer her comfort. To understand her. But she didn't. Looking back now, she regretted it.

Her grandmother had always been there for her, whether Anna was talking to Nellie or not. In adulthood, Izzy realized that Grandma Nell's life couldn't have been

easy. She was raised by a single mother, like Izzy had been, and Grandma Nell had been married to Gramps for fifteen long and strenuous years. Before that, when she was young and alone, she had gotten pregnant, and must have been really scared. Izzy knew there were reasons behind all the things Nellie did, and all the choices that she made, she just didn't know what those reasons were, and who was Izzy to judge her?

Izzy was starting to recognize that she had spent a lot of her life avoiding hard truths and harder conversations. Maybe she owed it to Grandma Nell to finally hear her out. To listen to her story. To ask her grandmother the difficult and personal questions that wouldn't always have straightforward answers.

She got up from the tree, giving it one last loving pat, and said a silent farewell to Bridgette, and Sammie, and the chapter of her childhood that took place there. She crossed the street to Roxy, getting in and starting her up, and pulled out her cell phone. She dialed a number she knew by heart but hadn't called in years. It was picked up on the third ring.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Gran? Grandma Nell, it's Isabelle."

"Izzy?"

"Yes, it's me. I'm in Quispam'. I was wondering if I could stop by for a visit?"

"My God, of course. You know, you don't ever have to ask.

"Alright. Thanks. I'll be there in 15 minutes."

"That's great," Grandma Nell said, "I'll be waiting."

“Mother”

My mother, Nellie, was sipping on coffee in a Styrofoam cup and seated in a corner by the window reading *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. When she looked up at me, her eyes were watering. I asked her where Izzy was.

“They just took her in for an ultrasound.”

“Why aren’t you with her?” I said, irritated.

“I’d just be in the way.” She sighed, removed her glasses, and marked her place in her book. “When *I* worked in the ER, I hated people waiting around the nurse’s station. They were always looking for answers we didn’t have.”

I told her people were waiting around and asking questions because they were scared, and she just looked at me.

“I understand that Anna,” she said, “but it made it harder for us to do our *job*.”

Nellie had this air of superiority whenever she talked about the hospital, as if she was privy to all this insider knowledge, but she hadn’t even worked there for eighteen years. Currently, she was working for the Milledgeville blood clinic, spending her days finding veins, drawing blood, and comforting panicked patients whose fear of needles posed the potential threat of fainting. Before that, she worked for Sullivan’s nursing home, giving the elderly their daily meds, cleaning their shitty bums, and caring for them until they inevitably died. None of this work ever appealed to me, but that never stopped her from pushing me to pursue a career in health care.

I remember her being distraught when I told her my decision to go to beauty school. *Listen,* she had said, attempting to bargain with me, *I understand you don’t want*

to be a nurse, but why not try something in administration? When I tried explaining that I wanted to do something creative, like hairstyling, she told me that I'd have time to be creative after work; *hobbies are for creativity, Anna, not careers.* A few years later, when I found out I was pregnant with Izzy, she shook her head at me and said, *mark my words, now you'll be slaving away at a salon for the rest your days*.

As a child, I was shocked to learn that she had spent most of her twenties working as a salesclerk in Manchester, Robertson & Allison's department store. At the time, this seemed like a real revelation. My mother, this woman I loved and desperately wanted to understand, had lived a whole life before me that I knew nothing about.

It was the 80s—before the divorce—so, I must have been around thirteen. We had come to Saint John for a dentist appointment. As we made our way down King Street, I stopped in front of a large shop window to look at my reflection, opening my mouth up wide to see my back molar's new silver filling. When I turned around, I noticed my mother was wiping away tears and I asked her what was wrong. She said I was too young to know, but that the building we were standing in front of, Brunswick Square, used to be where the MRA's department store was before it was demolished in '73. She said she was thinking back to the time she worked at the perfume counter there. *Why does that make you cry?* I asked her. *Oh, no reason,* she had said, *some memories just do that.* This slight acknowledgment of her past revealed little to me and she pretty much refused to talk about it anymore after that.

It wasn't that I couldn't picture her working there—my mother had always had impeccable taste and a love for pretty things. It was surprising to me because she never talked about this time of her life. She always skipped over it, going straight to 1965 when

her Great Auntie Wallace died and left her and Nanny MacCallum a small inheritance that helped put my mother through nursing school.

For my mother, nothing in her life could ever compare to her time working in the health care industry. Not motherhood, marriage, family, friendships, or hobbies. As far as I could tell, she didn't have much else going on other than her work. She wasn't a part of any social clubs, church groups or the like, and she didn't have many friends outside of a few neighbors, and some people she grew up with. Most days, she got home from work and sat by herself, reading.

I shouldn't complain. I guess it's lucky for me when it comes to childcare. My mother often picks Izzy up from school and watches her while I'm at work. But there's a catch: My mother feels entitled to give me her opinion on every little thing that involves my kid.

"Weather's looking bad out there," I said, gesturing to the windows that were beginning to ice over and attempting to make some sort of conversation.

"Then it's a good thing you probably won't be taking Izzy home tonight," she said, running her freshly manicured hand through her hair. "Speaking of that, I just can't understand how you two can take taxis all the time. Don't you find them dirty? I mean, you have Izzy to worry about. How do you know they're taking you to the right place or that they can *even* drive? I certainly don't trust them."

Here we go.

"Mum, I don't have much of a choice when I don't have a car."

"Yes, I know," she said, shaking her head disapprovingly, "But, I'm sure your father would give you some money towards one if you asked him."

I gave her an exaggerated look of shock, "We're talking about the same man, right?"

"Don't be silly. Of course, we are!" she said, waving me off, "God knows he has the money."

Of all people, Nellie should know that when it came to family, her ex-husband and my father, Edmund, was the cheapest man alive. He didn't believe in handouts. He was a veteran. You pull yourself up by your *own* bootstraps when the going gets tough. Nothing's given out for free.

"By the way," she said, changing the subject, "it was just as I suspected. They think it's her appendix."

At this point, I couldn't tell what was getting more on my nerves, the ping, ping sound of the freezing rain hitting the Emergency room windows or my mother. It was easier to like her when I was a little girl. I remember her waking me up in the morning to tell me Jack Frost had been to our house. I would fly out of bed and rush to my window to see the intricate designs etched in the frost. I imagined Jack was small, like Thumbelina, and that at night after we had all gone to bed, he would sit on the window's ledge and lace up his skates.

I remember describing this to my mother, telling her that when the window had completely frozen over, Jack would toe jump, camel spin, and double axel his way along the windowpane, defying gravity, and gliding gracefully like my childhood hero, Dorothy

Hamill. Back then, she had complimented my brilliant imagination. *What a lovely way of seeing the world, Anna,* she said.

Just two days ago, Izzy had rushed to her own window to see it's frosty mural after I told her the magical story of Jack Frost. But instead of Dorothy Hamill, I told her that Jack was as good a figure skater as Kristi Yamaguchi.

"Wow, I want to skate like that," Izzy had said, starting to dance and spin around the room in her socked feet.

"Maybe you will," I told her, pulling clean clothes out of her dresser drawers and laying them on her bed. "You can do anything you put your mind to."

"Really?" she said, pausing mid-spin. Her bed head was out of control, curious face framed in soft baby curls, and as much as I needed a vacation from everyone and everything, I wished she would stay this way forever.

"Really." I said, "now, go get in the bath."

"Not without Barbie and Theresa!" She announced enthusiastically, grabbing hold of two unfortunate-looking blondes who'd endured several months of 'bath time,' most likely resembling medieval water torture. My father had a saying for women who looked like Barbie and Theresa—*rode hard and put away wet.*

It was later that same day that CBC news had warned of the coming storm. It was heading our way from Ontario and forecasted to last several days. This was something out of the ordinary for ice storms which usually last a few hours at most. The storm was meant to start today, Monday, which was Izzy's first day back at school after the Christmas break.

I had suspected that school might be cancelled and planned to bring Izzy to work with me. We had a routine on those days she had to come with me to The Head Shoppe. She would sit in the salon styling chair next to mine, and our esthetician, Tracy, would pump it up so Izzy could be face to face with my clients, whom she regularly entertained with jokes and stories. My co-workers, Rachel and Lynn, were more into hair trends than I was and travelled to all the big hair shows in New Brunswick, like the Textured Hair and Beauty Show, and the annual Cosmetology Convention. They would do what Izzy referred to as a "cool girl makeover," where they styled her hair in an assortment of updos and braids, oo-ing and aww-ing at her in the mirror afterwards. At lunch, Izzy and I would take my tips down to Pete's Frootique in Market Square and get a chocolate milk, then share a slice of bruschetta pizza from Sister's.

"She's such a good girl!" Everyone always said.

Izzy was good, especially for a seven-year-old. Tantrums had never been a real issue with her, and when they did happen, it was at home. She was a happy kid, probably because she had colic for her first 6 months. That was enough upset to cover a lifetime.

With Izzy, I always emphasized the importance of good manners. She said 'please,' when she wanted something, and 'thank you' when she got it, and when she was five years old, I taught her to say, 'excuse me,' when passing by someone. She proceeded to say it to everyone we came across for a good month or so.

Don't get me wrong, being a parent, let alone a single parent, wasn't easy. Sometimes I'd go without because Izzy's needs came before my own. Sometimes, I'd want a break when there simply wasn't one available. The days were often long, and the

nights sometimes sleepless. But I still wouldn't change it for anything. Being Izzy's mum was the best thing I had ever done, and probably the best thing I would ever do.

That morning, the sky looked rather pink, and I sang out, *red skies in the morning, sailors take warning* happily as I poached Izzy's egg. When she came into the kitchen, her pajamas were on backwards and turned inside out.

"I did everything I could to make it a snow day, Mummy," she announced, sitting down at the table. "I put a spoon under my pillow, and I wore my jammies like this," she said, pointing to her odd-looking sleep attire with both thumbs.

"What's the spoon supposed to do?" I asked. I fished the egg out, put it on a piece of buttered toast, and set the plate down in front of her.

"I don't know," she said, picking and squishing at her egg but making no attempt to eat it. "My friends at school told me if you put a spoon under your pillow, it'll help make it a snow day!"

"And the inside out, backwards jams?" I asked, "what do they do?"

"Duh, Mum! Don't you know? It's supposed to turn the weather inside out!"

"Oh my word so we're saying 'duh' now?" Seven going on seventeen.

The skies had mostly cleared by the time I'd finished my Carnation's Instant Breakfast. Izzy barely touched her egg, which I pitched in the garbage without question. Sometimes she was just off eggs.

Disappointed as we were for not getting a snow day, we got ready and walked to the corner of Pitt Street to wait for Izzy's school bus. That was the first time she

mentioned her stomach being upset. I told her it was probably because it was her first day back. *It's just nerves*, I said. *Don't worry, it happens to me, too*.

Izzy had gotten into the habit of calling me at work from the principal's office claiming she was sick and needed to go home. It started before Christmas, and it wasn't that she didn't like school or that she was being bullied, it was just that she wanted to be home with me. I'd rather be home, too. But Izzy needed to practice her cursive, and addition and subtraction or she wouldn't move past Grade 2. I needed to cut hair at the Head Shoppe, or I wouldn't be able to afford our rent. Izzy didn't really get it. I didn't even get it half the time. Why was living so expensive when we didn't even ask to be born?

Her first call had come around 9:15 AM. I'd seen two clients at work already. Candace Munn, a waitress at Keystone Kelly's Pub whose roots came in within three weeks of bleaching, and Mrs. Bentley, a retired lawyer who got a wash and blowout once a week. I was taking Mrs. Bentley's credit card when Tracy told me I had a call on line two. She said it sounded like Isabelle.

"Mummy, I'm sorry for calling you at work." I could hear her twisting the telephone cord around her finger, something she did with our home phone on a regular basis. "My tummy *really* hurts." I asked her where exactly it hurt, and she told me the discomfort was lower down and on one side. Could just be gas, I thought. I still assumed that our dashed hopes for a snow day and back-to-school nerves were the main culprit, but I asked her if she had eaten anything at school.

"I had an apple for snack," she said.

I told her to go back to class until lunch and to call me if she still felt unwell or if things got worse. I remembered my mother telling me once that apple skin was hard to digest. I thought maybe the apple was bothering Izzy, but I was wrong.

I could have guessed that by 4 p.m. an ice storm would be raging outside, but I wouldn't have believed you if you told me that I'd be sitting here in the Saint John Regional Hospital Emergency Room next to my mother, waiting to hear about my kid who was currently alone and in pain, and having an ultrasound done somewhere out of sight.

I felt completely unequipped to handle any of this, and the longer we sat, the more my mother's calm demeanor angered me. She was using her coat like a blanket and had it annoyingly draped across her lap, and though she didn't like wearing her reading glasses in public, they were on, and sitting far down the bridge of her nose. She looked ridiculous. Nellie acted like she was in the comfort of her own home, reading for pleasure on her blue checkered couch. I couldn't fathom how she was so completely unbothered.

"Hey," I said to her, "I'm going out for a quick smoke."

"Oh?" She replied, raising her eyebrows, "I didn't know you were smoking again."

"Come and get me if anything happens." I said, ignoring her look of disapproval.

I had quit when I found out I was pregnant with Izzy. It was only after I got Nellie's call today that I'd caved and bought a pack before grabbing a cab to the hospital. I considered keeping this information from my mother, but knowing her, she would find out about it sooner or later.

Everything outside was slick and shining with ice. I went and stood under an awning next to a woman wearing a navy-blue terry cloth bathrobe over her johnny shirt. She was standing with her IV, smoke billowing out of her mouth and ashes collecting on her slippers.

"Hello there," she said, her voice raspy but warm. "Nice weather we're having, eh," she chuckled, causing her to let out a thick cough.

"Real nice weather!" I said after she'd stopped coughing. The 25-pack of Player's was still sealed, and I fumbled with the wrapping before tapping the bottom and removing a cigarette.

"Need a light?" She asked, offering me a red Bic. I took it and thanked her before she continued with, "What brings you here?" which caught me a little off guard.

"Oh, um, my little girl," I said. "She's been having some stomach pain. She's getting looked at now."

"Well, I'm really sorry to hear that," the woman said, sincerely, spilling some ashes onto the sleeve of my jacket as she went to pat me kindly on the shoulder. "Oops, sorry about that!" She wiped the ashes away and added, "I have a daughter, too, but she's all grown up now. Doesn't like coming to visit me here," she gestured at the hospital. "Can't blame her, though."

I wasn't sure how to respond so I just smiled and nodded politely. The freezing rain was coming down hard now and two native men in wheelchairs, halfway through their smoke break, were deep in conversation about the storm and wondering aloud how long it would last. I wondered the same thing as I took a deep and soothing drag. The

buzz was instant, and though my nerves were shot, my hands finally stopped shaking. Thank God, I thought.

The first time I smoked was the night my mother and I snuck out of our house in Hampton. I was fourteen. Nellie waited till my father was asleep and then came to my room and woke me.

"Anna? Get up. We're leaving."

"Huh? Where are we going?"

"Quiet, now," she whispered, pulling back my bedsheets, "We're going to Nanny's house."

I didn't know what was going on until we got out to the car. I saw my mother's teal-blue suitcase and my light-brown leather duffle stacked neatly in the backseat. My childhood teddy bear was leaning against our bags and his missing eye made him look mischievous, as if he was winking at me. I asked her groggily how long we were going to visit, but all she told me was that she'd packed enough clothes for a week.

Fighting was normal in my house. She would shush him and whisper *simmer down, the kids will hear* as he howled and went on. By the time we left, my half siblings, Margot, and Rick, had already moved out. My parents' weak attempts at hiding their disdain for one another was abandoned by then. Neither of them ever seemed to consider me.

My father was large and domineering, but Nellie was smarter than him, and she knew it. He often resorted to smashing things when he got upset. I think that breaking stuff, especially her things, made him feel better. She would take aim at him when she

could; remembered every misstep and wrongdoing of his, always throwing it back in his face when he was at his most vulnerable. At the time, this was *her* form of violence, *her* way of breaking things.

The evening before we left, they started arguing about the power bill. That fucking power bill. My father was a real cheapskate, and always had some sort of issue with our family's electricity usage. He would walk around the house turning off lights and putting the thermostat to 0, even in the dead of winter. That summer was a hot one, and they had finally caved and installed an air conditioner. He was yelling at her about it being on all the time and messing with the bill, and as she washed the dishes, and I dried, she told him if anyone was at fault, it was him, since it was his idea to buy the damn air conditioner in the first place. This put him over the edge. My mother and I watched in horror as he got up from the table, picked up Mum's crystal vase (one of Great Auntie Wallace's heirlooms) and threw it with force across our living room, shattering it against the wall. Then he said he was going out, *you'd better go clean up that mess, Nel.*

I'll never forgot her getting down on her hands and knees—her face stony, her body mechanic— and using her bare hands to scrape the wet shards of glass, petals, and peony clippings that covered the carpet. For my mother, that was the last straw.

He had always warned her that he'd been through two failed marriages before and wouldn't have a third. He'd die or kill my mother before going through with another divorce. She believed him and decided that her best chance of survival was to lawyer up and leave without telling him.

As we drove down the old highway through Norton in our yellow Volkswagen Beetle, she lit a cigarette, and I watched as she took a long drag, blowing the smoke out

of the crack of her window. My mother always looked beautiful, even at the worst of times. She noticed me watching her, and though she liked to joke and tease sometimes, I could tell she was being perfectly serious when she offered me a puff. I inhaled and found out quickly that a real cigarette was nothing like the candy ones I got in my Christmas stocking. There was a sharp stinging behind my eyes and inside my nostrils, and I coughed like mad on the exhale. My head spun, but I liked it.

I can remember Nanny MacCallum's face when she opened the door to find us on her front steps at 4 a.m. in a torrential downpour. My mother had been crying, and my eyes were red, but I didn't tell Nanny it was because of the tobacco. She wrapped us both up in a tight hug and told us we could stay as long as we needed.

Before we got into bed, my mother told me she wanted to give me something, and pulled a little pewter elephant, about the size of a chestnut, out of her coat pocket.

"Nanny MacCallum gave this to me when I was little," she said. "I've always thought of it as a symbol of strength and wisdom and God knows I've needed to stay strong and be wise these past few years. I think that's why, now, I'm passing it on to you," taking my hand in hers, she set the figurine in it. She closed my fingers around it but kept hold of my hand. "I'm truly sorry that things had to happen this way, Anna, but I want you to know that we're in this together. From here on out, I want us to be a team."

Like many things, we did not see this gesture the same way. I felt that she had never treated me like a team member or a friend. I was just someone for her to boss around and judge, and at that time it was crazy to me that she would use this situation to imply growth in our lives and relationship, choosing to ignore all the things that had happened before, and all the fallout that would take place after. Gifting me this stupid

trinket was not going to change things. Though I'd never really talked back to her before, I was so overwhelmed by everything that I pulled my hand free from hers and let her have it.

"No, Mum," I said, "We're not a team, and we've never been one." She watched as I marched across the room and tossed the elephant carelessly in my open duffle. "All you're doing is being selfish and breaking up our family!" I could tell that I had already hurt her, but instead of apologizing, I doubled down. "I wish I could be back in my bed, not stuck here with you. Just leave me alone!"

She didn't say another word that night. Nanny's house had a tin roof, and as we lay in bed, side-by-side, I drowned out the sound of her crying by focusing on the steely ting of the rain on the roof echoing throughout the house.

We left most of our things behind, like my acoustic guitar and her grandmother's China. Couldn't fit much in two suitcases. Worst of all was that I had to leave my cat, Sophie. She was the sole survivor of her litter, and I had raised her from a kitten. Mum said we'd go back for her after things calmed down a bit. Two weeks later, when I spoke with my father on the phone, he told me that he gave Sophie away to another family.

"The cat was your responsibility," he'd said, "not mine."

The woman in the robe finished her cigarette and put it out under her ashy slipper. When she walked past me, she said, "better get inside, girly. This weather's getting worse by the minute!" I nodded and stubbed out my smoke out, too, then followed behind her up the sidewalk.

The sky had turned mauve, and the mixture of streetlights and headlights moving and reflecting off the ice added to the swimmy effect of my nicotine high. The sidewalk was filling up with sand-sized ice pellets, making it even more slippery, and I offered the robed woman my arm, which she gladly took. We turned to each other for a moment before parting at the entrance to the ER. I told her that I wished her well and hoped she wouldn't be in the hospital for long.

"Same goes for your little one," she said, flashing her yellow smile. "As for me," she laughed and coughed, "I'm always here!" She shook her cigarette packet in the air, adding, "can't ever seem to kick the habit, even knowing it'll be the death of me. Don't be like me. Listen to your kid when she tells you to quit."

I walked back into the waiting room and noticed the windows were almost completely coated in a layer of ice, making it nearly impossible to see anything outside. It felt almost intentional or symbolic. Of course, the outside world was a blur. What did it any of it matter when everything important was taking place in here.

"Any news?" I asked, sitting down next to Mum.

"None, but I'm sure it won't be too much longer."

There was a riled-up man in his seventies blocking the waiting room television. He was shovelling handfuls of Humpty Dumpty Hickory Sticks in his mouth, dropping the majority onto his army-green khakis. Under his bomber jacket he wore a black t-shirt with "NEW LABOUR, NEW DANGER," printed across its front in red. A "Hockey Night in Canada" rerun was on, and he was murmuring to himself, *what kind of shot was that? Defence, Jesus Christ. DEFENCE*. I wanted to tell him to shut the fuck up. If Izzy

had been there with me, I would have, excluding the cuss. I considered asking him to move back a little so that I could see the weather announcement running along the bottom of the screen but decided against it. Better to just leave men like him alone.

When he was called out of the waiting room I walked up to the television. The ice storm was now forecasted to hit New Brunswick and Nova Scotia for several days, and civilians were being advised not to leave their homes. I probably wouldn't have to go in to work the next day. People were already reported to have lost power. I hoped that I wouldn't have to bring Izzy home from the hospital to no heat and lights.

Last year, during March break, high winds blew a tree down in front of our apartment and knocked the power out for nearly a week. The first day of the outage, Izzy and I made a blanket fort in the living room and ordered pizza. By day three we had used up most of our candles and were living off of peanut butter. I read Izzy both *Heidi* and *The Secret Garden*, and we took turns listening to Weezer, Chantel Kreviazuk, The Eagles, and the *The Lion King* soundtrack on Izzy's battery-powered cassette player. I started to hear "Say it Ain't So" and "The Circle of Life" play on loop in my dreams. I held out as long as possible before going to stay with my mother, who took no time reprimanding me for not bringing Izzy sooner. *It's March, Anna! It's freezing out there and Izzy could have caught a chill in that little apartment of yours.*

Thinking about pizza and peanut butter made me hungry. I hadn't really eaten all day, so I went over to the vending machines. There wasn't much to choose from. Mostly chip bags and chocolate bars. I certainly wouldn't be eating any Hickory Sticks. I put a toonie in and pressed D4. Mum looked at me curiously when I sat back down beside her.

"It's a Snickers," I showed her, "you want half?"

"No," she said, turning her nose up at it. "Watch my things, please. I need to use the washroom."

Along with being a nurse, my mother felt she qualified as a nutritionist as well. She made it her job to monitor other people's eating habits, and though she wouldn't usually say anything directly, she would give you a glaring look of disapproval, which was worse.

My father's approach was always more up front. When I was around four years old, he started calling me the "An-nihilator" because there was nothing I wouldn't eat. By the time I was seven I was hiding food under my bed. By twelve, I was bingeing and purging, and he was calling me "lard ass."

"Pass the salt, lard ass," he'd laugh, startling the family as he slammed his hand down on the supper table. In the beginning, my mother would come to me and say *that's just your father. He talks the same way to me. To everyone, really. Just ignore him.* But it was hard to ignore when the shaming came from both of your parents.

Like my father, Nellie didn't limit her criticism and disapproval to family. She was also known to point out and criticize random people on the street who had a couple extra pounds around their middles. To be fair, she was equally as hard on herself as on others. I think this was because she didn't have anyone else to consistently monitor besides herself. It got worse as she grew older.

She was the best looking sixty-three-year-old grandmother that I'd ever seen. Even my friends and colleagues commented on her ability to care for herself and age

gracefully. She was always clean and well dressed, and you'd never catch her without nail polish and mascara on. Y*ou've got great genes* everyone told me when Mum would come in for a trim. But this wasn't enough for her. If she wasn't a size 4 and didn't look thirty anymore, then she'd seemingly failed, and if my mother failed, she was quick to pick out and make known everyone else's failures as well.

"How are you doing?" She asked me when she got back from the bathroom.

"How do you think? My child is sick. We are in the hospital. So, not very well."

"Well, you don't need to be so snippy with me," she said, pulling her book back out of her bag.

I always thought my mother got divorced from my father because he was too critical of her. She was never thin enough; smart enough; ambitious enough. In reality, he was critical of *all* women. No woman could live up to his own mother. He didn't like the way Nellie ran their home because she didn't do it the way Grandmother Gertie would have. *My mother made bread every day before the sun was up*, he'd say, *then she'd go out and do the farm chores.* He'd ask my mother mockingly what she was doing with all of her time, and before she could even answer him, he'd say*, fixing your hair?*

He always complained about her cooking. He would regularly dump the contents of his dinner plate into our dog Whinny's food bowl. My mother would later say that my father smoke and drank so much that he'd ruined his taste buds. *He couldn't taste anything*, she said, *needed it all to be burnt to satisfy him.*

She always seemed to forget that my father had been critical of me, too. He had wanted another boy but got me instead. He brought his daughter and son from his last

marriage into our family. Margot was ten years older than me, and Rick was six when I was born. My father decided to retire from the Dorchester Penitentiary when I arrived, and our family moved to Hampton. We lived with Nanny MacCallum for over a year while my parents saved to buy something of their own.

My mother liked Margot best, even though she wasn't her biological child. I think she felt Margot and her were friends because they would vent to each other about my father. He favoured Rick. The two of them would go hunting and fishing together a lot, something my father never did with me.

I always wondered what it would be like to be an only child. I would have liked having siblings if they had been nice to me. Margot found me a nuisance. She would tattle on me when I tried to play with her, or even talk to her. *You just go to your room and leave Margot alone*, Nellie would say, and then they'd go off to have one of their long, private talks. Rick was too busy stealing from our neighbors and pawning off their things for money to buy booze, and fireworks to pay me any notice.

I always wished my half-siblings would go live with their *own* mother. I never actually found out why they didn't, but I guessed it was a control thing for my father. He took them so their mother couldn't have them. I think that's why Nellie took me with her when she left him. Not because she wanted me around, but because she wanted the control.

I'm glad that Izzy is an only child. I met her father, Brian, when I was sixteen, but we didn't get together until we were in our twenties. Brian had a lot of potential. He wanted to be an architect, but he ended up having to care for his ailing father, Paul. He received disability for an injury he sustained when he fell off a roof and broke his back in

‘85. I always liked Paul, he was gentle and kind, and had a great sense of humor. I admired his positive attitude despite the pain he was always in. Brian’s mother died in childbirth. I was twenty-two when I moved in with them. There wasn’t a week that went by that I didn’t find myself getting piss drunk with Brian and Paul, waking up after a blackout in Paul’s basement bathroom, my eyes smeared with last night’s mascara. When I found out I was pregnant with Izzy, I knew I had to change. I had break things off, not only for my own sake, but for my kid. I loved Brian then, but he just wasn’t father material.

I would have more children if I met the right person, but that hasn’t happened yet and I’m not sure it ever will. For now, I’m content caring for one. Izzy and I have always wanted a dog, though. A big, smart dog, like a German Shepard or a Great Dane. Izzy suggested the name ‘Charles.’ She has a thing for Charlie Brown right now. I suggested ‘Snoopy,’ but she said that was too obvious. If we named him Charles, I’d nickname him Chuck because I always liked Peppermint Patty. Her assertiveness is fascinating. It’s a gift I wish to possess. Unfortunately, we can’t have a dog in our apartment, and I doubt we could afford one if we could.

The waiting room was starting to fill up when a nurse in triage called out to the room, “Who is the guardian for Isabelle Murray?”

“Hi! That’s me,” I said, quickly getting up to my feet. “I’m Anna Murray.”

“Hello there, I’m coming too,” my mother chimed in.

The nurse told us that the doctor wanted to speak with me, and we followed her through the ER, making our way to the nurse’s station.

"My god," said an older doctor with salt and pepper hair when we arrived. "Is that you, Nellie MacCallum?"

"Dr. Bourque!" my mother said, going in for a hug. "I didn't know you were still working in the ER?"

"Well, I left a few years ago but I'm back covering for a colleague. What brings you here?"

My mother proceeded to introduce me, and said, "We're here because my granddaughter, Isabelle, is sick."

"Really? I'm actually her doctor. I didn't recognize the name 'Murray.' Your married name, I presume?" he said, looking at me.

"Oh, no. That's my father's last name."

"Her father and I are divorced," Mum inserted.

"I see," said Dr. Bourque, clearing his throat uncomfortably. "Okay. As you likely guessed, Isabelle has appendicitis."

"I knew it," My mother said.

"We are going to take her in for surgery within the next 30 minutes."

"Surgery?" I said, and as hard as I tried, I couldn't stop myself from welling up with tears. I hadn't even thought about surgery. They were going to cut open my *baby*? I was only twenty-four when I got pregnant with Isabelle, and I had tried to do everything in my power to keep her safe from that moment on. Now, I felt I had failed her. When she called me this morning and told me something was wrong, I brushed her aside. I

didn’t listen. I assumed she was fine, and it killed me that it wasn’t me who had detected the problem and brought her here. It was my mother.

When Izzy called me that morning and told me something was wrong, I had brushed her aside. I hadn’t listened. I had assumed she was fine, and it killed me that it was my mother, not me, who had detected the problem and brought her here. ~~It was my mother.~~

When Izzy called my work for the second time, I knew I’d have to call my mother to go pick her up from school. On Wednesdays and Fridays, my mother worked till noon. The clinic always picked up after the first ring.

“Hi, you’ve reached the Milledgeville Blood Clinic. How can I help you?”

I asked for my mother.

“Give me one moment. I’ll see if she’s still here.”

When Mum got on the phone, I told her that Izzy needed to be picked up from school because she was feeling sick. “She was doing this before Christmas, too,” I said. “She seems to think she can call me to come and get her whenever. It’s so frustrating.”

“Well, this is something kids do, Anna,” Mum said. “If she wasn’t so reliant on you then she probably wouldn’t be seeking attention in this way.”

“What do you mean ‘reliant on me’? She’s seven and I’m her mother. Who else is she supposed to rely on?”

“All I’m saying is that she should be able to care for herself a little by now. She should have better coping skills.”

“Mum, I don’t need you diagnosing my child,” I said, “I cared for myself most of my life and look how that turned out.” She was silent, so I said, “Are you going to help me or not?”

A couple hours later, Nellie called me and said Izzy was admitted to the hospital. That she had been flushed and keeled over in pain when my mother walked into the principal’s office to get her. *That good-for-nothing secretary was reading a Harlequin Romance while Izzy sat there moaning,* my mother said. Izzy was sick to her stomach in Nellie’s driveway, and so she took her straight to the hospital.

The first thing Izzy said when she saw me was, “Mummy, I’m scared.” I don’t think I’ve ever felt so bad in my entire life.

Dr. Bourque had told us they were taking Izzy into pre-op holding, so*, you and your mother can come back with me and see her before we take her into surgery*. I didn’t want my mother coming with me. I wanted to go see *my* kid *alone*. But it was too late for that.

I held back my tears when I saw Izzy hooked up to the IV drip. She looked incredibly small and fragile in her hospital bed, and I wished I could trade places with her.

“Mummy will be here the whole time,” I said to her, holding her clammy little hand. “I’ll be with you as soon as you wake up.”

“Grammy, will it hurt?” Izzy asked, looking over at her grandmother.

“No, darlin’. It’s like Mummy said, it’ll be over in a flash.”

“Mummy?” Izzy said, looking back over at me. “Why do you smell like Uncle Rick?” My mother gave me a look, and I told Izzy that the cab driver was smoking a cigarette when I got in the car.

After I’d soother her and kissed her and held her for as long as they would let me, they wheeled Izzy into surgery, and I went out for another smoke. I needed to get away from this place, but the freezing rain had not let up since it started, and I felt like I was trapped in a snow globe. When I walked back in, I looked fleetingly at my new pack of smokes before tossing them into a nearby garbage can.

I met my mother in the surgical waiting room, choosing to sit opposite her. It was just the two of us there. There was a poster on the wall of a kitten hanging from a tree limb. It said, “Just Hang in There!” The kitten looked like Sophie. Mum was reading her book again and for some reason this infuriated me.

“You can go, you know?” I said, pointing over at the door. “I’m sure you have things to do, and I can call you when she’s out of surgery. You can read just as easily at home.”

Mum closed her book, furrowed her brow, and frowned. “Why wouldn’t I want to stay? She’s *my* grandchild.”

“Yes,” I said, “and she’s *my* child, and I’m telling you that you’ve done enough. You don’t need to waste your time here.”

“What’s got into you?” She said, folding her arms across her chest. “Why are you so upset with me? None of this is my fault.”

“I wasn’t assigning blame.”

"Why don't you just say what you mean, then, Anna. You're upset because *I* picked Izzy up from school and took her here, and it turns out that *I* was right to do that, and you don't like when I'm right, especially when it has anything to do with Isabelle."

"You know what, Mum?" I said, finally losing my temper, "I am upset with you, but not because you were right. It's because you think you make better decisions for my kid than I do, and honestly, I think that's pretty fucked up considering you weren't a very good mother to me." At first, I couldn't believe what I'd said. Part of me wished I could take it back. It was something I'd thought about for a long time, but never planned to say out loud, and it was a lot more complicated than could even be put into words. But admittedly, it was oddly satisfying to be mean to her. To attack her. Someone who could be so easily, needlessly, and wrongfully self-righteous.

"I did the best I could," she replied, opening her book back up and preparing to read it. "Stop taking your anger out on me. It's not fair. We better end things here before you say something you'll regret."

This was a common tactic of my mothers. If she didn't like what was being said, she simply blocked it out.

"No. Put that book away already," I demanded. "You are going to hear me out this time. I'm not taking anything out on you. *You* are the problem," I said. "I don't think you ever wanted to be my mother. I think I was just a mistake on your part, like Dad, and I think that you're a real hypocrite for acting like Izzy is so important to you when you were the one who didn't want me to have her in the first place." I was shaking mad now.

"What are you talking about," Mum said, acting genuinely confused. "When did I say that?"

"You're kidding me, right?" My head was pounding. It was probably all those fucking cigarettes. "It was the day that I told you I was pregnant," I said. "You suggested I get an abortion. You said, 'why don't you just get rid of it'?"

"No, Anna. I don't think you're remembering that right."

"I know what you said, Mum. I'll never forget it."

"Well, I don't remember it like that. But really, can you blame me for suggesting it? I mean, you were twenty-three years old, making minimum wage as a hairdresser." She threw her hands up in the air, exasperated. "That drunk, the man who got you pregnant? He wanted nothing to do with you and Izzy! I was offering you the most rational choice." She gave me a pleading look. "We're in the 90s. You had more choices than anyone *I* ever knew. I didn't want you throwing your life away to have a child when you weren't ready."

"But I never asked for your opinion, Mum. I wasn't even asking for choices. I wanted her, with or without Brian's help, from the moment I knew she was inside me. She didn't ruin my life, she saved it."

Suddenly, a nurse knocked timidly and popped her head in the doorway. She looked embarrassed as she entered the room and asked us politely if we could keep our voices down.

"Some patients are trying to rest," she said shyly. "If you need to, you can always go out to the cafeteria to, um, *talk* more openly."

I sat back down in my chair, red faced, and rubbed my aching temples.

"No, no. We're so sorry," my mother said. "We'll be quieter. We're just stressed out about this surgery."

"Yes, I understand," said the nurse, nodding and backing slowly out of the room. "Really, this happens all the time."

My mother sat back down but she didn't start reading again. Instead, she pulled out a pen and notebook, and started writing. I got up and paced for a bit. All I could think about was Izzy. I wished we were back in our apartment, having steamed broccoli and Kraft Dinner, watching the something on one of our three television channels. I wanted to hear her laughing and talking about her friends and her dreams, and what she learned that day at school. I'd give anything to be playing Go Fish, or "What Time is it Mr. Wolf," and taking turns chasing each other around the living room. If today had been different, we could have finally finished reading *Matilda,* or we could have walked down the hall to visit my friend Lisa and her son, Nathan, who was one of Izzy's closet pals. We could have stayed up a bit little later since tomorrow would finally be our snow day.

An hour had passed, and I was beginning to feel guilty for yelling at my mother. I probably embarrassed her in front of that nurse. This reminded me of something my old friend said to me once. Genevieve Lutz and I met at the Francois LeMond Beauty Institute, and one time we were talking about our childhoods, of which hers was exceptionally hard. She said that we couldn't choose where we came from, but that we had the right to decide who we let into our lives and who we didn't, regardless of who they were. *You choose your family,* Genevieve said. I remember telling my mother about

this, and her take was completely different. *Family is family*, she said, *there is no choice when it comes to blood. You'll be there for each other till the end.*

I looked over at her to see that she was still scribbling in her notebook. When I was young, I considered my mother to be the definition of perfection. She was the person I idolized and desperately wanted to make proud, but never felt I could. I remember being traumatized after seeing *Dumbo* for the first time. The separation of Dumbo from his mother had dominated almost every nightmare of my childhood. At that time, my worst fear was being taken away from my mother and yet, in my adult life, I felt like I was constantly pushing her away.

"Anna?" she said, noticing me looking at her and setting down her pen. "Have you anything else you'd like to say?"

"Do you remember the last time we were here together, Mum. At the hospital?" I asked. "When we came to see Nanny for the last time?"

"Yes, I remember," she said, looking down at her lap. "That was a really hard day."

"Yea it was," I said. "I remember two specific things from that day. The first, was that the hospital didn't smell like latex and cleaning products that day. It smelled like Nanny's house because she never went anywhere without her lavender potpourri."

"Yes, that's true," my mother said. This made her smile.

"The second thing I remember," I continued, "was what Nanny said to me when I kissed her goodbye. She asked me to make her a promise, but for some reason, it's always been the hardest thing for me to do."

"Hmm," Mum said curiously, "and what was that?"

"She asked me to promise that I would go easier on you."

At this, the nurse came into the room again to tell us that Izzy's surgery was over. Dr. Bourque would be coming in soon to update us, she said, but as far as she knew, everything went fine. We both jumped up from our seats. My mother was already in tears and hurried across the room to embrace me. I was reluctant at first to hug her back, because to be honest I was still angry at her, but the longer she held me, the more relief I felt, and I'd suddenly started to sob freely into her shoulder. She rubbed my back and said, *it's okay, baby; everything is going to be okay,* over, and over again. I let her comfort me for the first time in a long time.

Dr. Bourque told us that Izzy's surgery went as good as they get. She would be ready to go home within the next three days. "This crazy ice storm should pass by then," he said, and told us we could go in and see Izzy one at a time. I told him that I was her mother, and I would be going in to see her first.

Izzy managed a small smile when she saw me come in. She was awake, but still drowsy. "Hi baby," I said.

"Hi Mummy."

"She's been talking about you since she came to," said a nurse checking Izzy's pulse.

"Isabelle here thinks her mother is the best thing since sliced bread," another nurse added, laughing as she checked Izzy's charts.

That night, after my mother had gone home, I drifted in and out of consciousness in a chair in the corner of Izzy's room. Nothing and no one could persuade me to leave her. She was in great spirits in the morning, having woken up to find that her hospital room window was covered in thick ice.

"Look, Mummy, Jack really outdid himself. I can't believe he came to visit me at the hospital!"

It was 9 a.m., and the nurse was coming back in a half hour to check Izzy's vitals. Nellie was coming to visit around 10 a.m., so I pushed Izzy to try and eat some of the strawberry yogurt she'd been given for breakfast. As she dipped her spoon in and out of it, barely getting any in her mouth, she went over the events of the day before. She talked about her experience at school, Grandma Nell coming to get her, and her time in the hospital before the surgery.

"Wow, you've had quite the adventure," I said when she had finished. "Listen, before Grandma comes, I have something to give you. It's for being such a brave girl yesterday." I opened the side pocket of my purse and pulled out the pewter elephant my mother had given to me when I was fourteen. Even though I had rejected it back then, I eventually had it made into a keychain, and kept it with me ever since. "Here," I said, handing it to Izzy, and watching as her eyes opened wide with amusement, "this was *my* Nanny's once and then she gave it to Grandma Nellie."

"Why?" Izzy asked, looking at the elephant in wonder and then back over at me. "Was Grandma Nellie brave, too?"

"You'll have to ask *her* about that," I said, "but, when I was younger, Grandma Nellie gave me the elephant, and I guess it was because I was also brave."

"Oh," Izzy replied. "Is it magic? It seems like it could be magic!"

I considered this for a moment. "Yes, baby," I said, "You're right. It does have a kind of magic."

“Grandmother”

When Nellie MacCallum was just six years old, she felt a horrible shift take place in the world around her. It seemed that everywhere she went emotions were heightened, and there was a constant sense of urgency and anticipation unlike ever before. This was when the panic started. Sometimes, she panicked because she got anxious, nervous, or upset. Sometimes, it was for no reason at all.

As Nellie grew older, she figured her panics came from having an overactive mind, rather than something worse like hysteria. Her mother, Lottie, always said that Nellie’s imagination simply ran away with itself, leaving Nellie to determine what was real and what was not. Lottie referred to these moments of panic as *the feeling* and told Nellie that whenever she felt her heart begin to race and palpitate, or the air escape her lungs and the room begin to spin, she must simply start counting.

“Count to one hundred if you have to,” Lottie had said. “Count until *the feeling* goes away. And count silently, alright? I don’t want anybody thinking you’re nutty.” Nellie agreed and never once in her life counted out loud.

Seven, eight, nine. The Irving City Transit sure was crowded that morning. She noticed people of all ages. Smartly dressed women determined to get to the office before the boss. A Saint John High School teacher carrying a large tote bag full of books and papers, a world map tucked neatly under his arm. Nellie recognized the tip of the Antarctic peeking out at her, as if to say, *see? You could be colder*.

There were quite a few businessmen on board. Their tailored suits and ties just visible under their long wool coats. A man who wore thick dark-rimmed glasses and a

duckbill cap was seated in a ray of sunlight. He soon removed his coat and hat and wiped the sweat shimmering off his brow with a paisley handkerchief. It was difficult to tell whether his perspiration was on account of the sunshine, or the attractive woman he'd been admiring. She was sitting close by and wore fox-fur and leather gloves. She seemed misplaced there on the bus with her expensive coat, ruby red lips, and blonde bob tucked under a black cloche. Nellie saw that her shoes were from Manchester, Robertson & Allison's department store. *Chic but quite impractical for February,* she thought. Nellie worked across from Intimates and Footwear in the Fragrance department at MRA's and she was used to seeing women like this. Rich women who came from influential families, or who married high-powered attorneys and government bigwigs. Her mother always said that beauty was an asset, *use it if you've got it!* These beautiful women were always taking themselves shopping. Treating themselves to something nice. Nellie wished she could take the few bills in her pocket and put them towards a dress she'd been eyeing since October instead of a doctor's appointment. *Wouldn't Michael be furious*, she thought.

Nellie recognized two people on the bus. A bank teller, who was the only woman working at The Bank of New Brunswick, and regularly cashed Nellie's pay cheques, and a younger woman who sold tickets at the Paramount Cinema, where she'd twice met Michael in secret. A little further behind them sat two Black men chatting about the work to be done that day.

"I reckon Henry's bringing in the hogs."

"I'll break them down if you grind the shoulder for breakfast sausages."

"And the register?"

"You and Terry take turns."

"That's a good deal. I'll take it."

The bus stopped on Hospital Hill on its way into central to drop off several women and a chain-smoking maintenance man. Out of everyone on the bus, Nellie admired those women the most. The crisp lines of their starch white uniforms, free of dirt or wrinkles; their clean rolled cuffs and sharp collars. Some wore pinafores, some did not, but either way Nellie felt nurses were tailored to demand respect.

It wasn't just their physical appearance that intrigued her. It was also the way nurses held themselves. To Nellie, they exuded poise and confidence, and when she looked at these women, she saw women who knew who they were. Women that had *real* purpose. Women who *helped* people. They were the kind of women Nellie wanted to be.

She had visited St. Joseph's Hospital just three weeks prior to drop off a urine sample. She signed the bottle 'Joanne Doe,' leaving telephone numbers for the Fragrance counter and her room at the boarding house. A nurse had called her at work, and she made the appointment with Dr. Keith for today at 8:30 a.m. She requested the day off and Michael obliged.

"Handle it, Nel," he'd said.

Thirty, thirty-one, thirty-two. There were several women with children on the bus. They were probably running the weekly errands. A little boy pulled at his sister's pigtails, and she began to cry. Nellie watched as his mother lightly scolded him, seemingly pre-occupied by the flyer she was clipping coupons out of. There was a baby cooing softly in its mother's arms; *no doubt, a short-lived moment of peace,* Nellie thought.

One mother/child pair got off with Nellie on King Street. The woman was a bit older than Nellie, and her pregnant belly was putting pressure on the silver buttons of her soft pink overcoat. Her little girl was tightly bundled and looked to be about three. She was constantly wiping her runny nose on her mittens. *Stop that*, her mother would say. They all made a right at the corner and Nellie realized they were headed to the same place.

"Popular destination, eh?" The woman said as the three of them climbed the two-storey staircase to Dr. Keith's office.

"Sure is," Nellie replied awkwardly. *Sixty-five, sixty-six, sixty-seven.*

The office was empty, apart from the receptionist. Nellie insisted that the pregnant woman and her child go first, and went to sit by the window, counting to seventy-eight before she noticed the run in her nylons. She followed the run up her leg, finding a tear smaller than a dime on the outside of her left thigh. It couldn't have been there the night before when she dug the stockings out of her dresser drawer and draped them over the shower curtain railing. She would have seen it. And surely, she would have noticed a hole that morning when she turned to the side, sucked in her stomach, and whispered, *that's it, no more dessert* at her reflection in the mirror. *Damn*, she thought, *I must have snagged it on the bus.*

She was adjusting her slip and skirt, doing her best to hide the run, when the receptionist looked out from behind the children's books and fashion magazines. *Next!* She called out. The pregnant woman smiled at Nellie as they passed one another, but Nellie could barely look at her. She couldn't help but see the woman as a bad omen.

The receptionist handed Nellie a clipboard with the patient registration form attached to it. “Fill that out and bring it back when you’re done, honey.”

Date? February 10th, 1959. Valentine’s Day was coming up. This would have been an exciting prospect a few months ago. *Michael will probably be spending it with his wife*. She looked up to see the pregnant woman’s little girl throwing wooden blocks around the room and refusing to sit still. *What do silly holidays matter anymore, anyway,* she thought.

Title? She wrote out “Miss,” but considered crossing it out and putting “Mrs.” *No, I better be honest.* First Name(s)? Nellie Jane. Last Name? MacCallum. Date of Birth: April 21, 1935. Nellie wondered how differently her life would look by the time she turned twenty-four. Would she still be working at MRA’s? Would she still be in Saint John? Would she still be alone? She excused herself to bathroom to be sick.

Ninety-one, ninety-two, ninety-three, Nellie counted after giving her form back to the receptionist and reclaiming her seat by the window. She reached one hundred when the nurse finally led her to the examination room.

The room was cold, and her arm and leg hair were standing on end. She wanted to put her coat and boots back on. She wanted to leave. To her right was a poster that read, “Are You Having a Boy or Girl?” *Craving sweets? Excessive nausea and morning sickness? Feeling moody? Congratulations, you might be having a girl!*

She needed something to chew on. She got off the examination table to get a tootsie roll out of her handbag. Chewing on something always helped with *the feeling*.

She always kept things like gum or soft caramels on hand, and if she got *the feeling*, she'd start counting and chewing, and more times than not, it went away.

During her first experiences with panic, Nellie got so worked up that she'd hyperventilated and passed out. The funny thing was that while Nellie hated panicking, she didn't mind passing out. She liked that when she came to, she could hardly recall why she had panicked in the first place. It was like her brain simply needed to re-set.

Brigette Kane was the one who told Nellie's mother about the fainting. The Kanes lived upstairs from the MacCallum's apartment on Adelaide Street. Bridgette, who wore her hair in curlers till noon and had three children by the age of twenty-two, looked after Nellie while her mother worked as a housekeeper at the Wallaces in uptown Saint John. Brigette's son Bobby had alerted his mother to the incident, when from his room he heard Nellie's laborious breathing. It seemed to be coming from the bathroom, and he made his way there just in time to hear a thud and watch a bar of New Brunswick-made Surprise Soap slip out into the hallway. He walked in to find the water running steadily into the sink and Nellie unconscious, soapy-handed and sprawled out on Bridgette's newly installed second-hand linoleum.

"I'm afraid your little girl took to fainting today, Lottie," Bridgette told Nellie's mother that day when she came to collect her. Nellie was deeply embarrassed by all of this and refused to make eye contact with either of them.

"For heaven's sake, Nellie, what happened?" Her mother asked after they'd gone down to their apartment.

"I don't know," Nellie whispered, growing redder by the minute, "I don't remember."

"You must remember something," Lottie prompted.

"Well," Nellie began, looking down at her feet, "I know I asked Bobby about *Treasure Island*."

"*Treasure Island*, the book?"

"Yes," Nellie said, "he was reading it and I asked him what it was about. He told me that a boy meets pirates and gets left on an island."

"I see," Lottie said slowly, being as patient as she could while trying to determine how this played any part in Nellie's accident. "Can you tell me what happened after that, Nel?"

"It sounded scary. I went to the bathroom because I needed to catch my breath."

"You were out of breath because you were scared?" Lottie asked. Nellie nodded. "Does that happen a lot?"

"Just sometimes."

"Okay. Now tell me what happened when you got to the bathroom."

"I washed my hands," Nellie said, rubbing her hands together and acting out the action. "Then I looked at one of Mr. Kane's bathroom books. The ones with the funny pictures on the front."

"I don't know what you mean about the pictures. Can you explain it to me?" Her mother asked gently.

"There was a picture of a pirate on it, and he was smiling at a crying lady. The lady wasn't wearing very much. Bobby calls those ladies on the cover something funny," Nellie said with a slight smile.

"Hmm," Lottie thought aloud. "Well, that all sounds a little shocking to me. Maybe even a little scary? Did it make you more scared, Nel?"

"Scared silly! It made me think about you, Mum, and what would happen if pirates stole you away." Nellie began to sniffle. "Then I *really* couldn't breathe." She was blubbering now. "After that, Bridgette and Bobby were standing over me and telling me to get up."

"Oh dear," her mother sighed. "Has this ever happened before, Nel? Tell me the truth." Nellie hummed and hawed for a second, and then slowly nodded.

"Heaven Forbid. Nellie Jane, you need to tell me about these things," her mother said, sighing again heavily and pulling Nellie into an embrace. "I'm not going anywhere. No one will steal me away. You understand?" Nellie clung to her mother's side wiping her wet face into her mother's abdomen. "And there's to be no more secrets between us," Lottie had said, "you hear me?"

Nellie found herself standing in aisle four of Ingraham's Drug Store. She was in a sort of trance after walking out of Dr. Keith's office, hardly able to process her feelings. She decided that having a destination—going somewhere easy and ordinary—and doing something nice like buying herself a magazine and a cold pop, would be the only way she was going to get her legs moving again. *Five, six, seven.*

Eight weeks ago, she was sitting in Michael's office having lunch with him. Turkey on Rye from Jeremiah's Deli. She was nervous and had taken two bites of her sandwich and counted to forty before he had looked at her.

"You know how I feel about you, don't you, Nel?" he said.

"No, not really."

"Oh Darling. I'm leaving Sheila."

"You are?"

"Come over here and I'll prove it to you."

She was in love with him, and he knew it. It only happened the once, but that's all it took.

It was following the incident in October, after everyone had left MRA's for the long Thanksgiving weekend. There had been longing glances across the sales floor and playful banter with Michael since he'd started working at MRA's, and that evening he had found her alone in the employee locker room as she was buttoning up her coat. He had locked the door and pressed her up against it, kissing her dizzy.

Sure, he was her boss. And, no, he never explicitly said that he loved her. But he did say he was leaving Sheila—she just didn't understand him—and that Nellie was the most beautiful girl he'd ever laid eyes on. He told her she was interesting, and he wanted her. *Only* her.

She had been with one man before Michael, and she thought she'd marry Bobby Kane, but he was mean and possessive when he drank, which turned out to be a lot, and one night he tried to choke her to death. The Kane boy's own mother had taught Nellie

long ago that a man will try and tell you he has the right to do whatever he wants, but he'll only hurt you if *you* let him.

Nellie told Bobby's younger brother Percy about what Bobby had done, and after he'd sobered up, Percy had a talk with him. The only people who could ever talk any sense into Bobby were his two brothers. They were the only people in Saint John Bobby seemed to respect. *You've marked Nellie up plenty, now,* Percy told him*, and it's time you smarten up and make something of yourself.* Surprisingly, Bobby agreed. But this didn't involve marrying Nellie and settling down into a life of sobriety. Instead, he hitched a ride to Halifax. *I'm finally joining the Navy*, he told her. Nellie's mother said that a man like Bobby was better off alone.

Yes, Bridgette Kane was right. She was always right about men. This was all Nellie's fault. *Handle it, Nel,* Michael said. He was just like Bobby. Only cared about himself.

"Nellie? It's Nellie MacCallum, right?"

Nellie looked up from the bottles of Coke and Sussex Ginger Ale to see Vivien Gunn. Vivien worked in Intimates at MRA's. She was 5 foot 10, practically unheard of for a woman in New Brunswick. She had a naturally tan complexion and always smelled of Chanel No.5, which was Nellie's favourite too, but she couldn't really afford it. The suddenness of hearing her own name and seeing her co-worker caused Nellie's head to spin, and *the feeling* hit her hard. Her breath caught in her throat.

"Nellie, are you alright?" Vivien asked, looking concerned.

"I'm not sure," Nellie managed to say, starting to gasp for air.

"Oh my god. Help!" Vivien yelled, noticing a young man re-stocking band-aids in aisle three. "Please, this woman needs help!"

"I'm fine," Nellie panted. *Forty-one, forty-two, forty-three.* "I just need someplace to sit down." The boy rushed over to help Nellie into a chair next to the pharmacy counter. Vivien followed and watched as Nellie dug frantically through her purse, finally coming upon a Pal-O-Mine which she swiftly unwrapped and bit into.

"Hey, look at me," Vivien instructed after Nellie stopped chewing but continued hyperventilating. "Ready? Deep breaths. In through the nose, and out through the mouth. Come on, we'll do it together. Inhale. That's right. Now, exhale." After what seemed like the longest five minutes of her life, Nellie was finally able to breathe. She wiped the tears from her eyes and looked at Vivien.

"Thank you," she said.

"Do you smoke?" Vivien asked. Nellie nodded slowly. "Good. Come on, we need one after that."

Nellie had gotten lots of practice counting her troubles away at the Kanes. Bridgette Kane's husband, Freddy, was the first man Nellie knew who had fought in the Second World War. Like everyone on Adelaide Street, the Kanes were poor, but Bridgette still emphasized the importance of a modern, stylish home. Freddy worked as a handyman and would bring home the extra bits and pieces of whatever project he was doing at the time, and Bridgette would roll up her sleeves, wrap a red scarf around her curlers, and get to work updating their apartment. One morning in 1941, Nellie and her mother went upstairs to find Bridgette sitting at her kitchen table, her painting overalls

and red scarf splattered with plaster, a box of lime green tiles knocked to the floor and strewn about the room. Freddy had gone and joined the army, she said between sobs, and she knew he would surely die.

"My Dad's going on an ocean liner," Bobby had told Nellie proudly. Bobby loved anything to do with the sea. "When he gets back, he said we'll go fishing!" But Bobby never got to go fishing. Freddy died within that first year, and the Adelaide Street apartment's tenants listened through their paper-thin walls as Bridgette received the dreaded telegram.

A dark and heavy cloud hovered over the Kanes home after Freddy died, and it seemed that Nellie wound up counting to one hundred every other day. Bridgette rarely took the children on outings to the park or up to the City Market anymore, and her do-it-yourself projects ceased altogether. There wasn't much space to play now that the living room was off limits. Bridgette had installed a small shrine there around a framed photograph of Freddy in uniform. His identification tag was hung from a small figurine of Jesus on the cross, and a pocketknife (that Bobby often swiped till his mother took notice) engraved with "F.B.K" was placed atop a copy of Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man*. A dried-up wedding boutonniere lay lifelessly nearby.

Bridgette soon discovered that supporting three children on a war widow's pension and the small fee collected from caring for Nellie was nearly impossible. "I would have joined the war, too," Nellie overheard Bridgette tell a friend over the phone, "if it weren't for the boys."

Soon, men started coming around the apartment in the afternoons after Bridgette took her curlers out, and when Bridgette had a gentleman caller, the children were

shuffled into the boys' room and told to keep quiet. This often triggered *the feeling*. Bobby had grown sour and distant since his father's death and didn't seem to notice Nellie struggle, and baby Georgie was too young to understand, but, Percy, who was the middle child, was always more perceptive. He would get Nellie to tell them stories and this would take her mind off things.

Nellie always loved stories and would recount the ones her mother read to her at bedtime. Her favourite was *A Little Princess*. She loved the character of Sara Crewe, who had dark hair and green eyes, just like Nellie. When her mother finished reading it, Nellie was left with the sadness only felt at the end of a spectacular story, and her mother, sensing this, gifted Nellie a pewter elephant.

"Like from India!" Nellie squealed, turning the elephant over in her hands and running her finger along one of its smooth tusks.

"That was mine," her mother told her. "But now I want you to have it."

"Oh, wow," Nellie whispered. "Thank you, Mum. I'll keep it safe, always."

"I know you will."

Nellie showed her little tusked miniature to the Kane boys. Bobby didn't take much notice, but Percy and Georgie took turns holding it excitedly while Nellie told them about *A Little Princess*; Sara's memories of India, her poor treatment at boarding school, the death of her father and loss of her wealth, her survival through kindness, imagination, and friendship, and the justice she receives in the end. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," she said to them, "to have a father like the good Captain Crewe?"

"We'd be rich!" Percy exclaimed.

"Are you kidding?" Bobby laughed, "our dad was better than stupid Captain Crewe. But I guess it makes no difference to you," he said, smirking at Nellie, "You're a bastard child. You'll *never* have a dad."

Nellie felt like she'd been hit. Her stomach heaved, then felt as heavy as cement. She didn't understand what that word meant, but by the way he had said it, she knew it wasn't good. *One, two, three, four*…she had counted.

That night, after Nellie's mother had tucked her into bed, kissed her goodnight, and turned out the light, Nellie said, "Mum, can I ask you something?"

"Mhm."

"What's a bastard?"

"Nellie Jane!" her mother gasped, reaching over to turn on the bedside lamp. "I ought to clean your mouth out with soap! We don't use that kind of language in this house."

"But I didn't know!" Nellie pleaded. "Bobby Kane used it. He *called* me it."

"He called you a bastard?" Lottie said in disbelief.

"A bastard *child*," she clarified.

"In all my life," her mother said, shaking her head slowly. "I'll be having a long talk with his mother."

"Please, Mum," Nellie pleaded. "What does it mean?"

Her mother paused, then took a deep breath. "It means a child born out of wedlock. A child whose parents are not married. It's a terrible insult. He must not have

realized what he was saying." Nellie had known Bobby all her life and found it hard to imagine that he hadn't realized what that word had meant. "Or maybe he likes you, Nel," Lottie suggested, "maybe he was just trying to get a rise out of you!" Her mother placed a hand on Nellie's shoulder, "Either way, there's no excuse. It's a terrible thing that boy said, and he was wrong to say it. You're best off just forgetting about it."

"So, Bobby was wrong?

"Well," her mother began.

"I do have a dad?" Nellie cut in.

"Well, of course, you do."

"Really? You never mentioned him before!" Nellie cried, "What is he like?" She tossed off the sheets and sat up enthusiastically, taking hold of her mother's hands and forcing her to sit back down on the bed. But Nellie's smile quickly faded when she saw the worried look on her mother's face. "Where is he, Mum? You can tell me. Is he in Europe like Bobby's dad was? Fighting the war?"

"No, darlin'," Her mother said, reaching up to tuck a loose curl behind Nellie's ear, "He's not here anymore. He died. Like Bobby's dad, except it was before you were born."

"But how?" Nellie replied, crestfallen. "In a war?"

"No, there was an accident. He was a Miner."

"A Miner?" Nellie mused. "Like the seven dwarfs?"

"Yes, I suppose so, except he didn't mine for gold. He mined for coal in Minto."

"And, what happened?"

"The mine shaft he was working in caved in. Rocks and debris fell and trapped the men working inside. I knew it would be upsetting for you, that's why I never told you about him. Please understand."

Nellie wasn't angry with her mother. This news was just so sudden and the thought so morbid that she didn't quite know how to feel about it. She only had a few men in her life as is. She rarely saw her Grampa, and her uncle Tom was always sullen and withdrawn when he joined Aunt Kathryn for a visit. Uncle Wallace was by far her favourite, he reminded her of Matthew Cuthbert from *Anne of Green Gables*. This conversation with her mother had in one moment revealed that she had a father, but in the next she learned that she would never know him, and though Nellie was young, she could still sense that her mother was not entirely ready to talk about him.

"Alright." Nellie said, slowly climbing back under her bed sheets. "Mum?"

"Yes?"

"What was my father's name?"

"Augustin Clairmont."

"That's a nice name, isn't it?"

"Yes, but I always called him Augie."

"I like Augie better," she had said, getting tucked under the covers once more. But before she fell asleep, she thought to herself that Bobby had been right about one thing after all. Nellie would never have a dad.

"So, you're expecting?" Vivien said casually as she inhaled her Kinney Brothers cigarette, brushing a bit of ash off her mustard yellow coat. "Can I ask how far along you are?"

"I'm not," Nellie began. Vivien just stared at her. "Well," Nellie said, "I'm about eight weeks. How could you tell?"

"Oh, women can sense these things."

"It's because I've gotten fat, isn't it?" Nellie joked. Vivien laughed at this, and Nellie felt some relief. She took a final drag of her cigarette and flicked it to the ground. Then she noticed the woman and child from Dr. Keith's office walking on the opposite side of the street. The child had thrown her snot-covered mittens into the road and was now lying face down on the sidewalk, flailing and kicking, screaming, *No! No! No!* as her mother scrambled to get her up off the ground. *Good God,* Nellie thought, *what have I done. What am I going to do?* No matter how hard she wanted to believe that Michael would come to her rescue, that he really would leave Sheila, and marry her, and help her raise their baby, she knew that none of that was true. This was a woman's problem. She was on her own.

Handle it, Nel, he'd said.

"Please don't tell anyone at work that I'm with child," Nellie whispered, looking desperately at Vivien, "I can't lose my job."

"Don't worry about me. I won't breathe a word."

“Thank you.” Nellie said. She didn’t know Vivien very well, but she certainly seemed sincere. She had helped Nellie back there, no questions asked, so, Nellie accepted Vivien at her word.

“Hey,” Vivien said, “would you like to come over for a coffee? I was just on my way home and I’d love some company.”

If this was any other day, Nellie would have said no, and made her way back to her boarding room to eat an entire box of cherry cordials and finish reading Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* (which she felt entirely perplexed by). Yes, if this was a normal day, she’d go home and read, but it wasn’t. She didn’t want to be alone. “Yes, thank you. A coffee sounds swell,” she said.

The heels of their boots clicked along rhythmically as the women walked together along the icy sidewalks. It was sunny, but cold, and their breath turned to steam in the air as they made their way up and down the hill of Carmarthen Street. Nellie felt pride walking next to someone like Vivien, with her dark sunglasses and fur hat. Vivien was confident and classy, and Nellie loved that Vivien’s long legs were keeping in stride with her own. There was also something maternal about her. Nellie had the urge to hold her hand like she did with her mother when she was small.

“Here we are,” Vivien said as her home came into view. She lived a few blocks down, on the corner of Princess and Carmarthen. “We’re on the second floor,” she said, leading the way up the front steps of a three-storey brick building. There were two entrances, and Vivien opened the door on the right revealing a staircase that led to her apartment. “Howard and I have lived here for four years now,” Vivien said, “and I still forget to lock this door.”

The entryway was warmly lit by a stained-glass lamp that sat atop an ash and walnut console table. Vivien picked up a clear glass vase full of white daffodils from the table. “Dead,” she announced, frowning dramatically, and pointing at their bruised looking petals. “Beautiful things never last, do they?” Nellie nodded and followed Vivien’s lead of removing her boots and setting them inside a closet full of shoes and coats.

She followed Vivien through a fully furnished living room with twinkling brass touches and jewel-toned fabrics. The white walls contrasted with the full wooden bookcase lining the far wall. It framed an extravagant brick fireplace. There was a television and a record player, everything you’d need to entertain. Nellie had never been in such a stylish home. Bridgette Kane would have eaten her heart out.

“Your home is beautiful,” Nellie gushed. “You must have friends over often!”

“No, not much.” Vivien said as they entered the kitchen. “My husband’s colleagues and their wives come for dinner every so often. I do the whole ‘bit’ and entertain as best I can. But I don’t have many friends around here. I think you’re the first person I’ve ever invited over.”

“Really? Are you not from here?”

“Oh, no,” Vivien laughed as she put the kettle on, “Between you and me, I’m from Bouctouche, born and raised alongside Acadians and Mi’kmaq, alike! My surname was ‘Renaud’ before I married Howard. ‘Vivien Violet Renaud.’ French is my mother tongue.”

“Really,” Nellie said with genuine astonishment. “You don’t have an accent.”

Vivien laughed again, “Well, as much as I’m proud of who I am, I worked hard ironing that out after marrying Howard. I even changed the spelling of my name, V-I-V-I-E-N-N-E, to V-I-V-I-E-N. It was easier for me to change than expect anyone else to.”

“Change?” Nellie asked.

“Yes.” Vivien said, “I was living in Moncton when I met my husband in 54’. My mother had found out that the Eaton’s department store was looking for models for their catalogue, and she pushed me to get off our farm and make something of myself. Howard was working for Eaton’s at the time, and it wasn’t long before he was telling me he wanted to marry me. That’s when he warned me that people would be prejudiced against me because I’m Francophone. It was something I already knew, but I wasn’t exactly prepared for how many people around Howard would think I was ignorant and illiterate. He suggested that I *change* myself, at least enough to pass for English, and ever since people have treated me better.”

Nellie didn’t know what to say. Her previous association with the French language had always been the country, France, and how the wealthy in New Brunswick always wanted to go there. Nellie could remember her Auntie Wallace going to French tutoring lessons with her girlfriends in preparation for a trip to Paris; a trip full of expensive hotels, beautiful clothes, and rich cuisine. She realized that her understanding of the French people in New Brunswick was limited. She could remember her mother telling her that Acadian’s had faced hardships when they first arrived in the Maritimes, and that they were often poor and lived in small communities all over New Brunswick. But Nellie had always assumed that was the life they wanted. A life they had chosen. *The French are different,* she could remember Bobby saying once. This seemed wrong now.

"Do you know any other French people around here?" Nellie asked, "I don't feel like I hear it spoken very much."

"Oh, and you wouldn't!" Vivien said. "Saint John isn't built for the French. I think most French people around here just try to blend in. I remember reading a story in the newspaper a few years back that said an Acadian boy in his teens was beaten to death one night, and I can guess why. But things might be changing, you know, seeing as we might have some proper representation in the government soon."

Nellie could tell that Vivien was waiting on her to respond, but she wasn't used to this forthcoming and unapologetic way of communicating, especially with other women, and about topics like this. People never asked Nellie's opinion on these sorts of things. Though she found herself mostly at ease with Vivien, she couldn't discern what Vivien thought about *her*. Nellie's mother always told her that their family hailed from Scotland. That they'd come to southern New Brunswick in the 18th century and settled there. She was told little to nothing about how it had all come about.

"I'll admit that I don't know as much as I should about politics," Nellie began, feeling sort of foolish, "but I've read a lot of good things about Louis J. Robichaud." She could feel her face turn bright red as she said it. "Did I say his name right?"

Vivien smiled and nodded, "Yes, you're a natural! Oh, do you still want coffee?"

"Yes, I'd love a cup," Nellie said, feeling a little more confident. "Well, Mr. Robichaud seems to have a lot of great plans for the Liberal party," she continued, "lots of things I agree with, if that matters at all."

"Of course, it matters!" Vivien said, warmly. "My husband would kill me if he heard me talking like this! My God, when his family met me, they thought he was crazy. They said to him, *you want your children to be stupid? You want them speaking French*? He told them, no, that won't be a problem, she does what she's told."

"That's awful, Vivien."

"Oh, well. I live in a comfortable home. The money I make at MRA's is mine to use how I like, and truth be told, I send a lot of it back to my mother. Howard only asks that I throw the occasional dinner party and avoid speaking French in town. We make sacrifices, you know?"

"Yes, I know."

"The only thing that really gets me down, other than the fact that I miss my family, is that I doubt Howard and I will ever conceive. We've been married 5 years now, and still nothing."

Vivien's sudden talk of conception made Nellie's stomach turn. *What number was I at before,* she wondered to herself*, better just start fresh. One, two, three.*

"I'll tell you something," Vivien went on, "if we are ever blessed with children, I'll tell them the same stories and sing them the same songs that my mother taught me. Stories about the *Lutins,*" Vivien made a gesture with her hands to signal that these 'Lutins' were very small. "They are these little fairy creatures," she explained, "that only come out at night. Oh, and of course, I'll read my children the poem "Evangeline," and recount stories of important Acadian figures, especially women, like "Tante Blanche," and "Tante Henriette." What's wonderful is that they are opening new French schools all

the time, now. Things *are* changing, Mr. Robichaud being a big change. I doubt the people of Bouctouche have ever been so hopeful!"

"Bouctouche is pretty far from here, isn't it?" Nellie asked.

"Yes, unfortunately. I'd give anything to be closer. I miss my mother the most."

"I'm lonesome without my mother, too." Nellie said, explaining that Lottie had moved back to her childhood home in Hampton to help care for Nellie's grandmother who had a stroke a few years back.

"Do you ever take the train out to visit?" Vivien asked.

"No. We never went to Hampton when I was growing up, and I've only ever been there a handful of times. Can't afford to go on many trips on my wages, anyhow. Do you get the train out to Bouctouche very much?"

"No," Vivien sighed, walking over to the kettle, "Howard needs me to stay around here and take care of things." Vivien went about pouring the water into the bottom half of a percolator pot. She added two heaping spoonsful of coffee grounds and screwed the top back on. "We make sacrifices for the ones we love," she said flatly, placing the percolator onto the stovetop's lower left-hand burner. She took two mugs out of the cupboard and set them on the counter. "That'll just take a minute or so. You take cream and sugar?"

"Yes, both please."

"So, then where is your father? Did he move to Hampton, too?"

"No," Nellie said, "I never actually knew my father. My mother told me he was a Miner in Minto, and that he died in a work accident before I was born."

"Oh, Nellie, how tragic. I'm truly sorry."

"That's alright. I doubt I would have known him if he had lived."

"Oh? Why is that?"

"My mother wasn't married to him," Nellie admitted. "I thought they were married when I was little, but I realize now, being that I'm in the same position my mother was, that I would have his last name, 'Clairmont,' if that were true."

"Ah, Oui! That's French! Ca c'est Acadienne!" Vivien exclaimed as she filled their mugs with coffee.

"What," Nellie said with surprise. "Really?"

"Absolument! I'm certain! I knew there was something about you," Vivien said with a wink. "There was a reason I felt such connexion to you." Hearing this, Nellie felt a spark of joy. She didn't think she could handle any more news today, but at least this was something good. Her father, an Acadian? Maybe so. She would have to ask her mother.

"My God," Nellie said, "what a day."

Vivien came to sit with Nellie in the breakfast nook, placing Nellie's coffee down in front of her. "Now," Vivien said after taking a sip, "Speaking of fathers, I hope you don't mind me asking, but *who* is the father?" she said, pointing down at Nellie's belly. "I understand if you want to keep it to yourself, but I promise that it will stay between us because I have absolutely no one to tell."

Fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, Nellie counted. "Well, actually, you might have people you can tell" she finally said, wincing, "because it's Michael Haggerty."

"You're kidding."

"I wish."

"Oh dear, Nellie. But he's married!"

"Yes, and I'm ashamed. I believed him when he told me he was going to leave her. It's all my fault, really."

"What! No, it's not," Vivien interjected. "*He* is married. *You* are not. He is just as responsible as you are for this, if not more. I don't care what they say. It takes two."

"That's not what the world thinks," Nellie sighed, "and that's not what he thinks, either. When I told him that something was wrong with me, that I was getting sick every morning, he thought I was trying to trick him. I promised him I wasn't and told him I was going to have to go to the doctor and he hasn't said much to me since."

"Terrible behavior, but not surprising. He's a man, and a real wolf, I think. To be honest with you, Nel, I don't think you're the first. I've heard some nasty rumors going around about him."

"What am I going to do?" Nellie asked, wiping away some tears. Both women sat, thinking quietly, and letting what was left of their coffees grow cold.

When Nellie got home, she counted to fifty, then called Michael at the office. She considered telling him it had all been a scare. No reason to panic. But once he'd picked up, she knew she would have to tell him the truth.

"Well, it's not mine."

"How could you be so cruel, Michael? You know it couldn't be anyone else's."

"And why should I believe that?" he said, coldly, "I don't know everyone you've *been* with."

"But I've only *been* with *you*," Nellie pleaded, counting *Fifty-six, fifty-seven, fifty-eight.*

"What if I were to tell everyone that you were making false claims against me?" he said, "I mean, even if they believed you, Nellie, do you really want everyone knowing the kind of woman you are?"

Nellie always thought that Bridgette Kane was a wise and resourceful woman. She did whatever she had to do for the sake of her children, and each of her sons, though rough around the edges, went on to graduate High School and grow up to be as big and strong as their father had been. But raising them required Bridgette to be an immoveable force. She had established rules to be followed by every person who stepped foot in her home, including her afternoon dates. When a man came to see Mrs. Kane at the Adelaide Street apartments, they were to come no earlier than noon, leave no later than 3 p.m., and they were not to see or speak to the children.

For Nellie, these rules were known in the form of a routine. After Bridgette had entertained, and the men had gone, she would let the children out of the boy's room and call them into the kitchen to see her, one by one, shutting the door behind them. Nellie was always called last. Bridgette's curls had fallen by then, and Nellie, counting in her head, would do anything she could to please her. Bridgette would say, *you're a good girl, aren't you Nel?* then get up from her chair and open the pantry door. She would stand on

a foot stool and reach back into the top shelf and pull out a sweet. Sometimes it was a lollipop; sometimes it was penny candies. Once or twice, it was a whole chocolate bar. But before Bridgette would hand it over, she'd say, *and you'll keep what happens here in the apartment between us, won't you?* Nellie would nod and thus, receive her sugary prize.

As Nellie's pockets filled with goodies, she began to feel more and more guilty for keeping secrets from her mother. *The feeling* began following her from the Kanes home to her own, and before long, Nellie's mother had found her passed out on her bedroom floor in a suspicious pile of candy wrappers.

"I need you to tell me what's going on, Nellie," her mother had said sternly, "and don't you dare lie to me. Mothers always know when their children are lying."

After Nellie tattled, Lottie grabbed hold of her and marched straight up to the Kanes apartment door. "Bridgette Kane," she yelled, knocking hard, "open this door right this minute!" Nellie counted, *twenty-five, twenty-six, twenty-seven* as she listened to Bridgette's steps coming toward the door.

"Have you lost your mind, Lottie?" Bridgette asked, opening the door a crack, then proceeding to undo the chain lock.

"I need to have a talk with you," Lottie said. "Nellie, you go to the boys' room."

Georgie, Percy, and Bobby had heard the commotion and were already standing in their doorway as Nellie walked up to them. Lottie followed Bridgette into the kitchen, and they closed the door behind them.

"Come on," Bobby whispered, beckoning Nellie and his brothers to follow him quietly down the hall. "Shh," Bobby said, placing his pointer finger over his mouth, and Nellie, Percy, and Georgie followed Bobby's lead, kneeling quietly in front of the door.

"I can explain everything, Lottie," they heard Bridgette say.

"Oh, can you?" Lottie asked. "How do you possibly explain locking our children in their room so you can entertain men?"

"Oh, Lottie, come on," Bridgette said, sounding steady and calm, "Nellie was mistaken. You know how kids can be. You *know* Nellie. That imagination of hers can really be something else." *Forty-two, forty-three, forty-four,* Nellie counted, her heart racing so fast she could feel her pulse in her ears.

"Don't bother, Bridgette. I know Nellie's not lying because the guilt of all this has been eating away at her. She's been passing out every which place!"

"Well fine, then," Bridgette said, managing a laugh, "you've caught me. I've been seeing someone. You can't possibly expect me to stay a widower forever."

"I see," Lottie said coldly, "then why is it exactly that Nellie told me she hears lots of different voices coming in and out of here? Lots of different *men*. What in God's name are you playing at, here, Bridgette? Do you not have a conscience?"

"Oh Lottie," Bridgette groaned, "Would you grow up, already? Where do you think the money comes from to pay for this apartment, huh? It's not like I get much from you, and my husband is dead. I'm not you, okay?" she said, softening, "I don't have family or connections to bail me out when the going gets tough. You, you've got those

moneybags, the Wallaces. What do I have? Three mouths to feed besides my own, and another, counting *your* daughter."

"Well, you won't need to worry about Nellie anymore because she's not coming back here. She'll be coming with me from now on. You should feel ashamed, selling yourself this way. What would Freddy say?" Nellie could here Bridgette begin to cry. "I'll pray for you," Lottie continued, "but I doubt it'll do you a lick of good, Mrs. Kane. You'll probably go to hell for this."

The children heard the shuffle of chairs and moved as far away from the door as they could before it opened, and Lottie stormed out. "Come on, Nellie. We're going," she said, grabbing hold of Nellie's hand. Nellie turned back for a moment to see Percy running up to his mother's side. Bridgette was sat at her kitchen table, quite inconsolable, much like the day that Freddy signed away his life to the War.

Nellie and Vivien had agreed to meet for lunch. It was two weeks since they'd had coffee, and the women had kept quiet about Nellie's condition. Michael had avoided Nellie at work, and there was now a rumor going around that he'd been offered a job at J.R. McLean's, a men's clothing store in Sussex, and was planning to move.

"Good riddance," said Vivien, cutting into her baked potato. When Nellie left Vivien's house the other day, the women agreed to do some thinking and meet up again to talk about Nellie's next move.

"Well, first of all," Vivien said with a mouthful of Salisbury steak, "I'd lie. Lie to him about being with child."

"But he already knows." Nellie said, "He just refuses to believe it's his."

"Exactly, so, all you need to say is that you've lost the baby. That way, you don't have any reason to keep in touch with him."

Nellie was heartbroken but agreed that this would probably be best. She still loved him, or maybe it was the idea of him. *Love is something you can't just turn on and off*, her mother had always said. Nellie knew Michael didn't feel the same. He wouldn't have said the things he did if he truly loved her. She determined that she was better off with Michael not knowing anything about this child. He would have nothing to hold over her head anymore.

"Okay," Nellie said. "I'll do it. But then what? What will he say if he doesn't take that job in Sussex and ends up seeing my belly popping out of my skirt?" Nellie took one bite of her cheeseburger, but it tasted metallic, and she pushed her plate away. "I can't eat that," she said.

"Want some of mine?" Vivien asked, though she was already halfway done. Nellie shook her head and said she would stick with her strawberry shake. "Okay," Vivien continued, "so, the next thing is for you to get out of town."

"What? But my job, Vivien. And where exactly am I supposed to go?"

"You can get another job, Nellie. Didn't you just tell me last week that you wanted to get a job in health care? Now is as good a time as any." Nellie gave Vivien a questioning look, but Vivien ignored it. "You could go stay with your mother and her sister in Hampton," she said. "Have the baby away from here. If what you say is true about your father, your mother will understand. You can find a home for the child after."

Nellie thought hard about this. She knew her mother would put her up in Hampton, but she hadn't even considered telling her mother about the baby. She hadn't thought things through that far yet.

"I guess it could work," Nellie finally said. "But I dread having to tell her about this."

"Nellie?" Vivien asked suddenly, setting her fork down on her empty plate.

"Yes?"

"Could you raise it? I mean, would you consider raising it on your own? You said your mother did it, so why not you?"

"Because I'm not my mother."

"Fair enough."

"I don't know," Nellie sighed, "I can barely afford my own lodging, and all I have is a room. The boarding house doesn't even allow children. I didn't plan any of this. I was supposed to be married by now, or at least have a good paying job. Yes, my mother did it, but at what cost? She worked hard every day of my life, and she loved me, but what would things have been like for her if she hadn't had to do it? She gave up so much and lived her life for me, and she did it because she didn't have any other choice."

"And do you have any other choice?" Vivien asked.

"I don't know. I guess I'm still figuring that out."

The women met again on the weekend at the Saint John Library; both having agreed that some research needed to be done before Nellie made any final decisions. She was now three months along and knew that time was ticking.

"You know the Salvation Army?" Vivien asked.

"Yes."

"I found out that they've operated a maternity hospital for vulnerable women for a while now. Unmarried women. If you can hide your belly, then when it's time, you can have the child there. Then, you can drop the child off with a church. I'm Catholic, and I know they do that sort of thing. I've heard that the Home of the Good Shepard runs an orphanage."

"But I'm not Catholic. I'm Protestant," Nellie said, trying to keep her voice down. "I don't know whether they have the same sort of thing as the Catholic church. Either way, I don't know if I could live with the idea that I gave a baby up to an orphanage. Or God forbid, what if the baby wasn't wanted and ended up being hurt? I've heard about baby's being dumped along the shore of Courtenay Bay."

"Ugh, how awful," Vivien said, wincing at the thought.

"Or what if the baby ended up at one of those awful places? You know, a 'baby farm'? Have you ever read *Oliver Twist*? My God, Vivien, it's evil."

"Yes. I guess if these options were easy there would be more people taking them," Vivien said with a sigh. "Well, there is another option I wanted to talk to you about."

"What?" Nellie said, lifting her head up from a medical text.

"You could get it *taken care of*," Vivien whispered, "get rid of it before it goes any farther."

"You mean take an herbal tea or something?

"No! Everyone knows those things don't work, Nel. What I mean is you can have a *procedure* done."

"A procedure?" Nellie repeated, then it all clicked, and Nellie gasped. "But that's illegal, Vivien."

"I know, but that doesn't mean it's not happening."

Nellie shook her head defiantly. "Listen, I'll be back," she said, "I'm going to investigate the newspaper archives."

When Nellie returned an hour later, Vivien was surrounded by encyclopedias and scrapbooks full of old newspaper clippings. "Find anything interesting?" Vivien asked.

"Yes, just listen to this," Nellie said, "I learned that in 1923, there was a trial for a woman who performed," Nellie lowered her voice even further, "*abortions*. It was huge news here. A young woman died after having the *procedure* secretly done. Before she died, she identified the woman that performed it. They said it was done with a knitting needle. The woman that did it turned out to be the daughter of a police officer here in Saint John. She was charged with murder! It was a huge scandal."

"Oh my God," Vivien said. "What happened to the woman? Was she convicted?"

"The jury was split. The case was dismissed, but the woman still spent one hundred days in jail and would have been public enemy number one. And, I mean,

regardless of all that, a young woman died. Good gracious, Viv, I don't want to be killed."

"Well of course you don't. But to be frank, it's been thirty-six years since that all happened. Don't you think they'd have updated things by now? It's probably a lot safer."

"We don't know that. We don't even know where to go inquire about it. I can guarantee you that there's no information on it in the library. I mean, for all we know, we could be arrested for simply asking about it."

"I hadn't thought of that," Vivien concluded.

It was 8 p.m. by the time the women finally left the library, both with bloodshot eyes and heavy hearts. But as they made their way to up to Nellie's boarding house, a plan began to materialize, and soon not a detail had been missed. Nellie would quit her job at MRA's and move to Hampton to stay with her mother. She would have the baby there, avoiding any possible sightings that might generate talk in Saint John. Vivien had a part to play, too. She would borrow the car and drive up to Hampton in August, after the baby was born.

"I'll handle everything with Howard," she said, giving Nellie her signature wink.

When they arrived at Nellie's boarding house, Vivien went inside to call Howard to pick to her up, and then women went outside to wait on the front steps.

"So, it's agreed then?" Vivien said, reaching out for Nellie's hand.

"Yes. Well, if you're sure you want to do this."

"To be completely honest with you, Nellie," Vivien said, looking up at the night sky. "I think it was fate that I bumped into you that day at the drug store. I think this was

God's plan all along. Remember when I found out you were Acadian?" she laughed, "I told you I'd recognized a 'connexion' between us? This must have been it."

Nellie nodded and followed Vivien's gaze up to the night's sky. It was rare to see stars in uptown because there was always so much fog, but tonight the sky was clear. Car lights suddenly appeared up ahead. "That must be Howard," Vivien said, and the women made their way down to the street.

"Vivien, I think it's a girl," Nellie said.

"Really?" Vivien said smiling. "Any ideas for a name? I know I'll be raising her, but I would love if you chose her name."

"What do you think about 'Bridgette'?"

"Great-Grandmother"

December 31st, 1934

Dear Baby,

When I was growing up, I assumed that when I finally left Hampton it would be to move to New York or Hollywood. I wanted to be the next Ginger Rogers. The Florence Lawrence of New Brunswick and the Mary Pickford of talkies! Every day, I'd be dressed in lace, taffeta, or silk; acting, singing, and dancing my way across Broadway stages, and signing film contracts with RKO.

You don't know this about me yet, but I was a founding member of the Hampton Village Drama Club, and at only fifteen I landed a bit part in the local stage production of *The College Flapper*, which was, quote, the "Biggest Event Ever Staged in Hampton," and at the United Church, I played Mary in the nativity play for four years in a row. My rival, Ethel Johnson, was mad with jealousy!

I dreamed of the day that the ladies getting their hair done at Tootsie's Beauty Parlour would look down at their *LIFE* magazines and recognize my face on the cover. *The witty and vivacious star*, Charlotte, or rather, '*Lottie' MacCallum*. Instead, I find myself on the afternoon commuter train to Saint John on New Year's Eve with all my worldly belongings stuffed into two suitcases stowed above me. Tomorrow is the first day of 1935, and the first day of the rest of our lives, baby. Dr. Stephens says you should be here in about four months.

For as long as I can remember, I've gone with family to Saint John, or 'Town,' for shopping and entertainment since Hampton has little of either. I've done this trip many times, just never alone.

But I'm not alone, am I? I have you.

You are probably wondering how I came to be here, and for that matter, how *you* came to be. That's the first reason for my writing to you, Baby. Today I leave my old life behind and start anew with you, but in starting this new life I fear my memories will fade away and I'll no longer be able to recall my old one, and all the people and places that it was made up of, and I want you to know where and who you came from. So, writing it all down seems appropriate.

The second reason I am writing to you is as a means of confession. I feel I must admit to all my wrong doings and acknowledge the part I've played in so much suffering. If it weren't for me, your father would probably still be alive. If I had made different choices, then when you finally came along, you would still be able to have a relationship with my mother, and your grandmother, who has refused to be involved in our lives from here on out.

I suppose I'm writing these letters for both of us. I'm not certain that I'll ever even share them with you, since it might be easier for us to just move on, and not look back, but it seems to me that writing this, even as an exercise in catharsis, is important for me all the same.

Before you came along, I was the baby of the family, and everyone in the village referred to me as the youngest MacCallum girl. I was born nine months from the day my father left to fight in the Great War, and I didn't meet him until he returned in 1918.

My sister Kathryn is only older than me by fourteen months, but she never lets me forget it! The family calls us the 'Irish twins.' Kathryn has the voice of a nightingale and leads the church choir, and I think she could be famous if she wanted to. Everyone who sees her or knows her says she's one of the best-looking women in Kings County, and she is still, somehow, completely unaware of this. She teaches Sunday School and piano lessons to Hampton's youth, and I think she's made even more beautiful by how kind and humble she is.

For years, I've tried convincing her to join me in some sort of sister act. *Let's get into show business*, I've said. *We'll dance and dress like the Ziegfeld Follies; sing like Kate Smith. Kathryn, we'll be half of the Lane Sisters with double the talent! Imagine the parties. Imagine the money. We could afford everything we've ever wanted.* But Kathryn has always been practical—too practical in my opinion—and she told me that money could not give us everything, and that, *show business is for the talented or the bold, of which I am neither.* Delusional, isn't she?

I hate to think how long it will be before we meet again. 'Kathryn Jane MacCallum' is now 'Kathryn Jane Smith,' and currently away on her honeymoon.

Baby, I'll never understand it! Your aunt could have married anyone, and she still chose Thomas B. Smith. He's three years her senior, and his family owns and runs the Hampton Apothecary. Unsurprisingly, he followed in his father's footsteps and graduated from Dalhousie as a pharmacist. Kathryn and Tom were devoted to each other the whole

time he was away, which would be romantic if Tom wasn't Tom. When they return from their honeymoon in Halifax—a place Tom never stops talking about—he'll take over the family business. He's nice enough, I guess. Soft-spoken and dependable, but he's also as dull as dishwater, and, not to mention, a neurotic know-it-all.

They originally planned to get married in the spring but had a winter wedding instead, right before Christmas, because Kathryn wanted me to be there. Tom was flustered by the sudden change in plans, but he agreed that they should marry as soon as possible when he was finally told about my condition. You see, Hampton is a very small place. Talk spreads thick and fast from the village to the station, and eventually, everyone knows everything about everybody. You can just as easily be tainted by rumour, or by association, as you can by your own doing.

Kathryn's wedding was a particularly hard day. Unfortunately for me, crinoline has long been out of fashion, so I did my best to hide my belly under several yards of pink satin skirting and had to stay seated whenever possible at the ceremony and reception. I was sad, sick, and uncomfortable, and had to pretend I wasn't, but the worst part was watching her at the altar as she recited her vows. I realized that everything was happening much too fast, and I wasn't ready to say goodbye to our childhood, but all I could do was watch helplessly as she said *I do.*

The wedding was difficult for our father as well. He wept uncontrollably as he walked her down the aisle and was loaded long before the cake was cut. Kathryn and I agreed that Mum might never forgive him, but at least she'll probably never have to go through that again since there are only two of us, and I'm not getting married any time soon. Mum said so herself, *what kind of man would want you now?*

Something to know about my father is that he's always been a boozer. I guess it's a kind of consolation that he happens to be the nicest drunk you could ever meet. Poor Dad told us girls that he helped his own father make shine from the time he could tie his own shoes, and watched his father fill himself as full as a tick with firewater every day until he'd poisoned himself to death.

Dad's family was dirt poor, and when his father died, he and his siblings were taken away from his mother and raised by his aunt and uncle in Chatham. He also had a real hard time of it in the war—saw a lot of terrible things that he never talks about—and he can't sleep soundly without a nightcap or two. Mum thinks it's a sin, but I know she pretends not to see when Dad goes out to his not-so-secret stash of homemade hooch he has hidden under the hay of our chicken coop.

I have a memory of Mum stumbling upon Dad's stash and pouring every drop of liquor down our kitchen sink. I think this was the moment Dad realized he'd have to be clever about getting his fix. A few years later, after the Canadian prohibition ended, Dad developed this plan where he would tell Mum he was taking Kathryn and I out for a stroll or a swim in the river, or best of all, an ice cream, which he did do, but only after he visited the tavern in The Hampton Hotel and got sufficiently pickled.

The Freezes owned the hotel, and to Mr. Freeze's dismay, while Dad steadily added to his tab, Kathryn and I would play. We would speak to each other in British accents, and sashay across the hotel lounge, pretending we were tourists. If Mr. Freeze saw us, he would immediately shoo us away. *Those seats are for guests only!* he'd yell. But when his wife, Cathy, saw this she would say, *calm down, Gerald. They're not hurting anyone*. During one of our visits, Cathy served us left-over tea, crustless

cucumber sandwiches, and strawberry shortcake, all of which we devoured greedily. It didn't take long for Mum to catch on to Dad's scheme—she'd heard enough whispers at church to know something wasn't right—and Kathryn and I ended up in nearly as much trouble as he was in.

Before the war, Dad worked in the match factory for G & G Flewwelling Manufacturing Ltd., which was closed and sold upon his return home in 1918. After that, he started working for his long-time friend, Guy Keirstead, who grows beets, cabbage, carrots, cucumbers, peas, yellow and green beans, pumpkins, tomatoes, and all kinds of flowers on his farm. The farm is currently called "Sunshine Gardens," but this probably won't last as Mr. Keirstead seems to change his mind about the name every other week.

Dad is responsible for loads of tasks, including planting and harvesting, but his favourite job is taking the train to town and selling produce to the City Market. Mum likes this task the least because she can no longer keep an eye on him.

I'm afraid that you will never know your grandmother, Baby, since she's disowned me.

She says that I've done something unforgiveable, and I'm inclined to believe her since I know God is angry with me. I just wish she would understand that I'm the only one who should be punished. You are innocent, and as much one of God's children as anyone is. Before Kathryn left for her honeymoon, she told me that this would all pass and Mum just needed some time. *She's lost a child before*, Kathryn said, *how could she put herself through that again?*

It frightens me to think about 1922, especially now that I'm with child. That was the year that Mum nearly died giving birth to our little brother, James, who at first, everyone called 'the miracle baby.' When the midwife left, Dad brought Kathryn and I in to see Mum and James, and I remember her being as white as a sheet. She was sitting up in bed, singing to him softly, and rocking him. He was the most fragile thing I've ever beheld.

James was only five months old when the two of us caught TB, and I was the only one to survive. I can remember violently shivering and being wrapped up tightly in one of my mother's hooked rugs. My fever went on for several days. I saw strange figures on the walls and couldn't differentiate between dream and reality. Every bone in my body seemed to twist and ache, every joint was stiff and weak, and I coughed so hard there was blood on the tissues.

Mum was never the same after baby James died. She locked herself in her bedroom and refused to speak to anyone. Her sisters made her see a specialist in Town, and he diagnosed her with melancholia. But when she went back to see our family doctor, Dr. Stephens, he disputed the diagnosis, telling her that she was completely normal and that what she needed was to try for another baby.

Mum never was in the family way again. Instead, she used any free time she had to get more involved with the church. She started seriously studying the bible and devoting herself to God. After Sunday service, she would have long talks with Reverend Bell, using her faith to ease her pain, or maybe ignore it. Soon enough, everything came second to God. She even went as far as to hang portraits of Jesus up above the beds in our rooms.

When I was small, I used to get down on my knees and pray to his picture, imaging he was right there with me. I always began my prayer with the one my mother taught Kathryn and I:

Now I lay me down to sleep,

I pray the lord my Soul to keep.

If I should die before I wake,

I pray the Lord my Soul to take.

Then I'd add my own, more personalized bit, such as:

Dear God (and Jesus),

I hope you are doing swell up there! Thank you for providing me and my family with good food and shelter, and especially dessert. Please watch over Mum, Dad, Kathryn, all my aunts and uncles, and our pregnant barn cat Lucy, and help her kittens to be healthy and able to catch lots of mice. Oh, and please watch over the chickens—even Hank. He may be loud, but he is a Rooster.

If it's not too much trouble, God, could you help to guide me in getting the part of 'the miller's daughter' in my school's production of "Rumpelstiltskin"? Otherwise, Ethel Johnson will never let me live it down. And please forgive me for calling Ethel a brown-noser. I know it wasn't kind, but someone had to say it.

Lastly, God, please help Kathryn to pass her math exam. You know that she's hopeless with numbers. Amen!

I stopped praying like this when I got older. To be honest, Baby, I think I was jealous of God and Jesus, and the relationship they got to have with my mother. I know that's an awful way to think. I regret it now.

Giving back to the community seems to be the only way Mum can keep going. She's the organ player for our church and worked as the Sunday School teacher until Kathryn graduated from school and took over. She's also a prominent member of several influential clubs devoted to charity and community development, including the Hampton War Guild, and the Imperial Order Daughters of The Empire, whose motto, "Not for self, but for country," can be heard from the United Churches basement every Thursday night at 7.

You should also know that Mum is a talented seamstress, and one of six ladies in the Hampton Village Quilting Bee. They meet once a month and spend the entire day together finishing a quilt that each lady has worked on individually throughout that month. The quilts are very impressive, and often donated to families in need, or auctioned off for the church.

As I mentioned, Mum has two sisters. They both live in Hampton as well. Betty-Lou is the oldest. She and her husband, Joseph Bell, run a Bed and Breakfast off Main Street. The Bells have two sons. Cousin David works as a bank manager in Town, and Cousin Marvin is the editor for the *Kings County Record* in Sussex.

Mum's younger sister, Marion, lives next door to us on Baker Street. She's a teacher at the Hampton Consolidated School and runs the debating society. Kathryn and I love both our aunts, but between you and me, Marion is my favourite. She's warm and funny, and easy to talk to, and she's always treated us like we were her own. Marion is a

widow and never got to have any children. Her husband died in the war, and she never remarried.

I have a feeling that out of everyone, you'll get to know Kathryn and Marion best, since they're the ones who will probably visit us the most. Marion has arranged for me to give birth to you in secret. It turns out that The Salvation Army operates a maternity hospital in Saint John, and they've agreed to deliver you. They are charged with contacting Marion, who will travel to Town when she gets word that you've arrived.

Aunt Betty knows everyone, and Mum calls her the social butterfly of the family, while Dad calls her a busybody. But it's her we have to thank for getting us a place to work and live in Saint John, Baby. Things could be so much worse. We could have been sent away to live with nuns, or to one of those homes for wayward girls! Instead, I'm going to work for Mr., and Mrs. Wallace, who are long-time friends of my aunt and uncle.

Upon finding out about you, Betty spoke with Cousin Marvin, who pointed out that the Wallaces had taken out an ad in the paper for a housekeeper. Betty called Mrs. Wallace on the telephone and told her about me, choosing to be completely upfront about my condition. Mrs. Wallace asked that I send her a letter highlighting my credentials, and I did so. She then responded with an offer of room and board until I can find another living situation, to which I accepted.

Betty described Mrs. Wallace as a firecracker and said that she's quite an influential lady. Apparently, she's a member of both the New Brunswick Women's Equality Association and the Women's Enfranchisement Association and was

instrumental in the recent decision to allow women the right to hold provincial office in New Brunswick.

She's in her late fifties and seems like a very nice person. She wrote that she would be doing the housework herself if she hadn't developed cataracts, since they've made it increasingly difficult for her to see what she's doing. She also said she was looking forward to having someone to chat with in the mornings and evenings and was pleased to hear that I also like to play gin rummy.

Betty told me that the Wallaces lost both of their sons in the Great War, and I think that despite all her political enterprises, Mrs. Wallace is quite a lonely person. Mr. Wallace has been described as a quiet and successful man with a love bordering on obsession for model trains.

Well, Baby, I'm nearly to town and scared out of my wits, but I promised myself and your father that I would raise you and care for you, and love you for all my days, and I will. I am leaving this letter here but will pick up where I left off as soon as I can.

I must just keep reminding myself of the last thing Marion said to me at the Hampton Station. *Nothing worth having comes easily*.

January 1st, 1935

Dear Baby,

Mr. Wallace was waiting at the station when I arrived. He was admiring the various locomotives and train cars and seemed genuinely pleased to see me. He didn't say much on the ride home, but he encouraged me to talk about the trip, and smiled and

nodded his head attentively while I spoke. There's a grandfatherly quality about him that I liked straight away.

Mrs. Wallace is short and spritely, and embraced me at the door. I hadn't expected this and didn't realize how badly I needed to be hugged until she took me in her arms. I felt safe and welcome immediately, baby. She apologized for smelling like baking spices and laughed when I told her she smelled delicious. *I can really see the family resemblance* she said, pointing to my dark hair, and then she told me she was awful glad I'd got there alright.

The Wallace house is large and made of brick. I was shown around all the rooms, some of which are quite extravagant and full of expensive-looking furnishings and art, like early drawings and sketches of buildings and landscapes, and oil paintings done of important looking people from other times. Their eyes follow you as closely as you follow them! There are beautiful textiles, Persian rugs, and thick velvet drapery. They even have some sculptures, including a bust that Mrs. Wallace says was Mr. Wallace's great-grandfather. There's so much to look at and inspect.

The rooms that the Wallaces spend the most time in are the most welcoming, with Mrs. Wallace's shall draped over a chair, a glass of orange juice close by, and her reading glasses sat atop a novel, and Mr. Wallace's house slippers warming in front of the fireplace, a fresh stogie waiting patiently on side table for his return.

I noticed two Death Pennies mounted on the wall outside of Mr. Wallace's office and took a quick look at them. There were framed photographs next to them with inscriptions along the bottoms. The first showed a young man who resembled Mr. Wallace, named Clayton John Wallace, he was a Sergeant in the 26th Canadian Infantry

Battalion, and died in 1916. The other, Walter Elliot Wallace, looks more like his mother, and was a Land-Corporal in the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. He died in 1918. How awful, baby. The Wallaces have been without their children for as long as I've been alive.

My bedroom is a lot larger than I expected. There's a brass-framed twin bed, and the quilt reminds me of something Mum would make with the Quilting Bee. There's a night table with a lamp, so I can read, and Mr. Wallace told me I was welcome to borrow any book I'd like from his office library. The best part is the small writing desk at which I am currently sat. It's in front of a window that gets lots of light and looks out on the Saint John Harbour. It was peaceful to wake up and look out at the water, shimmering in the morning light.

Last night, Mrs. Wallace told me that I was welcome to take dinner in my room and have the evening to myself. She had a tray ready for me with a ham sandwich, cheese and crackers, apple sauce, and a large slice of molasses cake. *I didn't know what you liked or how hungry you would be*, she said, *so I added a little of everything!* I went to my room with my tray and shut the door. My mother always had rules about dessert, and she only served it occasionally. She said it was a sin to overindulge, but I was absolutely famished, and I relished in every bite of that meal, starting with the cake.

Before she left me for the night, Mrs. Wallace told me that I wouldn't be expected to start my housework duties until the 2nd. This was a great relief. I am now able to continue to write to you.

Baby, when I left off yesterday, I had just introduced you to my side of the family and explained how we found ourselves on route to Saint John. Today, I hope to be able to introduce you to your father.

In all honesty, the subject of your father is a sore spot for me. I will explain things as I go, but for now, you should know that he passed away unexpectedly, a little less than four months ago. Though no one in the village other than Kathryn was privy at the time to the intimate details of our relationship, such as our secret engagement or my falling pregnant with you, I received my fair share of prayers and condolences. The thing is that no one truly understands my grief and loss, except maybe his family.

Your other grandparents, the Clairmonts, lived on Lower Norton Shore Road and were one of two Acadian families left in Hampton. I feel I should explain to you, Baby, as your father once explained to me, that the English and French in New Brunswick have never gotten along. This started long ago, in the 17th century, and continued after the Great War. For instance, my parents considered the Clairmonts, and the Acadians in general, to be unintelligent and indifferent, suggesting that it was their own fault for being poor and unlearned. Mum and Dad, along with almost everyone else in the village, made their feelings known by making the Acadian families feel excluded from the rest of the community, and since families like the Clairmonts experienced so much hostility, many felt pushed out. The French, outnumbered, ended up moving and settling in all-Acadian communities closer to Town, or as far as Westmorland County. I can't tell you why the Clairmonts stuck around Hampton for as long as they did, but when their son died, they knew they had finally had enough, and left for a place farther east where they had more family.

Along one side of the Clairmonts two-bedroom farmhouse ran the Pickwauket Brook, where your father, Augustine, told me once that his older brother, Remi, nearly drowned one spring. They got tired of catching minnows and decided to wade deeper into the water. Remi, who at the time weighed about eighty pounds soaking wet, went out too far and got caught in the current. Thank God, their father, Claude, was nearby fishing in a bend of the Kennebacasis river called The Oxbow and was able to get to his son and pull him ashore.

Augie said that his father worked hard to care for the family, and it wasn't easy work. He was a reliable fisherman, and in the spring and summer, Claude caught salmon and rainbow trout, and in the winter, he would ice fish. Claude would wrap much of his catch up in old newspaper and twine, and send Augie and Remi down to Felix Mabee, the local butcher, to sell them. I remember my mother cooking those very same salmon, but I never knew they came from the Clairmonts until much later when Augie told me.

Augie said that Remi was confident and hard-headed, which made him a good negotiator, and he never took Felix Mabee's first offer. Remi's regular line was, *you know they're worth more than that, Mr. Mabee*. Felix would then re-inspect the fish, hum, haw, and grunt to himself, then finally agree to increase his offer. Your father told me he was always too scared to question Mr. Mabee, but that he could tell the old man liked his brother and this back-and-forth routine.

Augie's father hunted, too. He sold the hides of wildcats and mink and fed his family with deer and pheasant. Remi joined in the hunting around the age of seven, having been taught everything by then about a rifle, but your father never liked to hunt. However, when he got older, he did snare rabbits that were sold to the Fletcher's fox

farm, which provided him and Remi with some extra pocket money. Augie's other regular job was to milk the family's dozen cows, morning and night, collecting cream to be sold to the Norton butter factory.

In late summer and early fall, Augie would join his mother, Anais, in harvesting their small field of crops. Anais doesn't know very much English, and I always considered her to be quite isolated on their farm, so, with Claude and Remi always off together, I think she welcomed Augie's his company.

Augie's favourite part of harvesting was helping his mother in the kitchen, preparing the preserves, pickles, and jams. Boy oh boy, did your father love to cook! When we walked by the village bakery he would stop to look in and comment on the goings on. *That's called lamination*, he'd say, pointing to a man folding a large slab of dough around a flattened-out sheet of butter, and sealing it in like a card in an envelope. *Watch, Lottie! See how he folds the dough and rolls it? He might need to fold it twenty times before he's happy with it. Can you believe that?* I asked Augie how he knew all that and he told me he took books out on it at the local library. He had a difficult time reading English and explained that cookbooks often had pictures, which made it easier for him to match up the words with the actions shown in the photographs or illustrations.

Considering the little they interacted with the local community, Claude and Anais knew enough English to get by, but their sons, who were homeschooled by their mother, did not became fluent in both languages until their late teens. Another way they taught themselves more English was to take what little money they had and hop the train to town on the weekends to go to the theatre. Augie said they would watch as many films as they could fit and afford in one day. This is how your father and I first fell in love.

I'll start at the beginning.

In November of 1933, I turned seventeen. It was a wonderful birthday. Dad came home with a small bouquet of wild, blush-coloured roses, and an imported bottle of sparkling wine that he hid from my mother. He knew I had always wanted to try champagne. Dad, Kathryn, and I snuck out to the chicken coup, and he poured the bubbly into three mugs. *Why mugs?* I asked him. *So that if your mother sees us*, he said, *she'll think we're drinking coffee*. It tasted like perfume and seltzer, and how I imagine an electric shock would feel!

Betty-Lou, Joe, and Marion all came for supper, and Mum made a roast beef, and even though she refused to call it by its name, she had baked me a devil's food cake covered in rich boiled frosting. I wished for an adventure when I blew out the candles.

As soon as we finished eating it was time for presents. I still have no idea how she did it, but Kathryn bought me a gorgeous fur stole, and I kissed her so many times she turned bright red.

Mum gifted me a new coat that she made. *I hope you don't mind the green*, she had said, and looked worried when she gestured to the coat's emerald-coloured fabric. She told me that she had ordered the wool in navy blue, but they sent the green instead, and it was too late to change it if she wanted it finished for my birthday. I assured her that it was the most elegant piece of clothing I had ever owned, and I meant it. I wore it on the train, and it's hung up in the closet of this room now. I still feel so mature and grown up in it. It's single breasted, with a big dramatic collar, and a swing sweep, so it sways gracefully when I walk. It's tapered in at the waist and has a belt, too. I'll need to remove that soon, or let it out a little, to make more room for you growing in my belly.

Money was scarce since the war, as were may indulgences, but to our disbelief Aunt Betty and Uncle Joe gifted Kathryn and I a trip for two to Saint John. We hadn't stayed anywhere without our parents, and we squealed and gabbed, giddy at the thought of it all. Mum shook her head and said, *I won't have you girls acting so silly. You're lucky I agreed to this plan in the first place.*

Kathryn would turn eighteen at the end of January, and we were given train fare and a night's stay at the Admiral Beaty Hotel. Marion and Dad gave us pocket money to eat at restaurants and go to the pictures.

January came, and Kathryn's birthday fell on a Thursday, and on Friday morning, in our brand-new coats (Mum made a red coat for Katherine), we boarded the train to Saint John, holding hands the whole ride, and squeezing tightly as we finally pulled into Union Station.

Riding the streetcar to our hotel was exhilarating, and that night we went to the Old Diner for burgers and fries before walking from the foot to the head of King Street, and through King's Square past the bandstand. That's when I noticed the Marquee letters spelling out "Capital Theatre," to our right. Growing up, it was called the Imperial Theatre, but it changed to the Capital when it moved from showing live entertainment, to showing films as well. I'd never witnessed it at night, and it looked magical all lit up. I remember telling Kathryn that someday my name would be under the *Now Showing* sign.

We had planned our trip meticulously, knowing we wanted to see *Flying Down to Rio*, starring Dolores del Rio and Gene Raymond. It was also Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire's first film together. We rushed over and bought two tickets for the 1 PM showing the following day. I had a terrible time getting to sleep that night with all the

excitement and anticipation I was feeling. *How can you sleep at a time like this*? I said to Kathryn as she kept dozing off.

We ended up seeing the film twice. We sat in the middle row during the first showing, and I was captivated by Ginger, who played a singer, "Honey Hale." When Fred convinces Ginger to dance with him to the "Carioca" it looked like so much fun that I wanted to get up out of my seat and twirl around the theatre. When Ginger sang "Music Makes Me," I leaned over to Kathryn and whispered, *that could be you*, into her ear. She just scoffed at me and mouthed *I'd never sing this!*

When the lights came up, Kathryn laughed and said, *you'd never catch me dancing on the wing of an airplane either!* and then she stopped in her tracks and grabbed my arm. *Isn't that Augustine Clairmont over there*, she whispered. I followed her gaze and saw that your father was sitting in the far-left corner. He hadn't gotten up to leave yet, and Kathryn was the one who guessed that he was probably staying for the second showing. Watching the film twice hadn't even crossed my mind till then, and I jumped at the chance to watch Ginger and Fred together again. *Come on,* I said, prodding and nudging her, *it'll be fun! We never go to the movies, and we are only here till the end of day*. Kathryn was reluctant at first, but finally caved in when I said, *we'll go sit with Augustine. He's all alone over there and it would be kind of us.*

We bought two more tickets and walked over to Augie. *Excuse me, are these seats taken?* I asked him. He was surprised to see us there, but smiled and said, *No. You're welcome to them.*

Augie was the handsomest boy in town, and most of my girlfriends said as much. They also said he was probably as dumb as a post because he never said much to anyone.

It seemed to me that I hadn't spent more than ten minutes of my life in the same room with him, and soon, I found that it was almost impossible to pay attention to the film with him sitting next to me.

As "The End" flashed up on the screen, your father turned and leaned in close to me. *Happy belated birthday,* he said. My stomach flip flopped. I was stunned! *How did you know about my birthday?* I asked. He looked a little disappointed and said, *you don't remember?*

He recounted a previous birthday of mine, in which we bumped into each other, and he never forgot about it. It was my twelfth birthday, and Kathryn had taken me out to Smith's Pharmacy to get a root beer float. I could remember that while she chatted with her future husband, I watched Augie come in with a prescription to be filled for his mother. I remembered he was dressed in overalls covered in dust, and as he stood at the counter waiting, Kathryn came to sit next to me. She must have noticed me looking at him because she said, *Hello Augustine,* to which he nodded. She then gestured over to me and added, *today is Lottie's birthday!* I remember him looking over at me and smiling. *Happy Birthday,* he said.

We found out that Augie was taking the same 6 o'clock train home to Hampton, and we met him at the station, having agreed to sit together. We talked a lot during that trip, more than we ever had, and I would come to discover that your father didn't speak much to anyone in the village because he was embarrassed by his accent and felt self-conscious when he spoke English. *I'm not confident with it*, he'd said, looking down at his lap. *That's okay*, I replied, *it's not your first language, and it takes practice.* Kathryn nodded in agreement, and he seemed to perk up a little.

By the time we reached Hampton Station, I was completely infatuated with Augustine Clairmont. Before we parted ways, Augie look at me and said, *I'd love to talk with you more some time, Lottie. You know, to practice my English?* Baby, believe me when I tell you that in that moment I might as well have been Ginger Rogers, dancing on the wing of a plane.

You're not going to do it, are you? Kathryn asked me as we walked home with our suitcases. I admit that I was in my own little world by then, imagining what it would be like to be alone with him. *Do what?* I said nonchalantly. Kathryn was getting inpatient with me now and put out her arm to stop me from walking. *Go out with a Clairmont*, she said, *everybody says they're bad news. Besides, I don't think Mum would like it.* I told her to mind her own business and kept walking.

To be fair, Kathryn didn't know Augie well yet, and she was trying to protect me, just repeating what the village had been saying for years. We didn't say a word to each other until we reached our front lawn, which is when I stopped her and apologized. I told her that I wasn't like her, and I wasn't going to end up with someone like Tom. I just wasn't interested in that kind of life. *What kind of life do you think Augustine can provide?* she asked in all seriousness. I said I didn't know. All I knew then was that I liked him. Kathryn was quick to forgive me, as she always is, and said she was sorry for meddling. The last thing I did before we went inside was ask her to swear to keep everything we had talked about a secret. *Oh Lottie*, she said, shaking her head, removing her hat, and unbuttoning the collar of her coat as if she was suddenly overheated, *why are you always getting me involved in your schemes? Please Kathryn,* I pleaded with her, *you*

know I'd do the same for you. She knew this was true, and stomped away hotly, yelling, *fine!* over her shoulder.

On the following Monday, I spoke with Aunt Marion during the lunch break at school and told her all about our trip, excluding the run-in with Augie. She told me that my mother had a hard time while we were gone, and that she was worried about us being alone in town. *Well, she'll have to get used to it*, I remember saying, *because I'm not staying around here after graduation!*

I was in my last year of school and couldn't wait to finish. As I mentioned to you in my first letter, Baby, my plan had been to move away and pursue my dreams of becoming an actress, and I'm not sure if Mum and Dad believed I'd actually leave, but they knew I was going to get a job that summer to save money.

On my way home that afternoon, I stopped to watch some kids skating on the Kennebacasis and noticed a man in a large patchwork fur coat coming down from Lower Norton and skimming his way along the frozen river. When his face became clear I realized it was Augie. *Hello*, I yelled out, waving to him. He waved back and we met each other at the shoreline. We exchanged niceties before he said that he had been thinking about me, and wanted to ask me if I would be interested in accompanying him to Sussex on Friday evening to watch a hockey game. I told him I would, but that Kathryn would need to come with me. Augie said that Kathryn was always welcome. *Should I meet you at your house?* he asked. *Oh no*, I said, *I'll meet you at the station*. For some reason, I put my gloved hand out to shake his and though he seemed a bit confused, he returned the gesture, and we began to laugh. *Don't forget your skates*, he said as he

turned to leave. *My skates?* I replied. *You'll see,* he yelled, already making his way back down the river, *it's a surprise!*

Mum had a rule about dating. For instance, when Tom was home from university, and Kathryn went out with him, they would need to be in a public setting, or she would have to have some sort of chaperone nearby. The same rules applied to me, but it seemed that the only dates I'd ever been on were to the local dances, and they were always full of people. Heck, I was technically surrounded by chaperones, seeing as I knew them all.

I promised Kathryn that I would take her share of the chores for two weeks and let her borrow my silk scarf any time she'd like if she would agree to go to Sussex with me and Augie on Friday. She said she would, but that she was only doing it so that she could keep an eye on us.

We didn't lie to Mum, exactly. We told her that we were going to a hockey game on Friday, and that we would be back by curfew. She asked if anyone else we knew would be there, and before Kathryn could say anything, I interjected with, *probably lots of folks from the village,* which was sufficient for our mother.

Friday came, and as instructed, Kathryn and I stood at the station with our brown leather ice skates tucked in our father's old military duffle bag waiting for Augie. When he finally appeared, he had Remi with him, and they greeted us warmly, handing Kathryn and I our train tickets.

Remi was shorter than Augie and more rugged, but he was outgoing and jolly, and struck up a conversation with Kathryn right away. She looked at me, absolutely mortified. As we boarded the train, she held me back and told me that she had not agreed

to a double date and that if Tom found out about this, he'd be furious. *Don't be silly. I'm sure it's not a double date,* I assured her, *for all we know, Augie's mother has the same rule as ours does.*

The hockey game was splendid fun! As we would come to find out, Augie and Remi were huge hockey fans, and they yelled remarks, freely and enthusiastically, in French and English, from our seats in the stands. Soon enough, Kathryn and I had joined in, and when Kathryn responded to a particularly rough board check, *hit him back!* the four of us erupted with laughter. During intermission, Remi bought us hot chocolates, and Augie told me why he had asked that we bring our skates. *We are skating home on the river*, he said excitedly.

When the game had finished, and we were all bundled up, we walked from the Sussex Arena to the Kennebacasis. *I'm not sure about this,* Kathryn whispered to me as Remi yelled, *over here, girls,* pointing to a large boulder. He helped us up on the rock, one by one, and Augie laced up our skates. Once we were on the ice, I took Kathryn's hand, and we began skating in the direction of home.

It was a full moon, and the sky was filled with stars. *Don't you think this is the most beautiful place in the world?* Kathryn asked me. I said that I wasn't sure that it was the most beautiful in the *world*, but it was certainly the most beautiful place I'd ever been. *Not to mention the coldest,* Kathryn added as her teeth chattered.

Augie skated up next to me and asked if he could take my other hand. I said yes, and I wished we weren't wearing gloves *and* mittens. Remi then asked Kathryn if she wanted to have a race, to which she said yes, because Kathryn may be one of the sweetest people, but she is also one of the most competitive.

Augie and I didn't talk for a while, we just glided past the trees and farmland, holding onto each other's extremely padded hands. Kathryn and Remi were only a few metres away from us, by now, and Remi seemed to be challenging Kathryn to skate on only one leg.

Augie broke our silence when we were about halfway home and asked me what I wanted to do after school. I was surprised by how embarrassed I suddenly felt to tell your father about my big plans for acting in New York and Hollywood. *It's silly, isn't it?* I said to him. *No,* he said, quickly, *I think it's nice, and I think you can do it*. He seemed like he was deep in thought, and then added, *it does make me sad, though.* I asked him why, and this was the first time I felt some intuition about what he might be thinking or feeling. I would go on to use this intuition throughout our entire relationship, often knowing what Augie wanted to say before he said it. *Because we have so little time to spend together*, he said, looking at me shyly. I didn't know what to say, so I just smiled. I didn't want to embarrass him.

We had come close to the Hampton bridge, now, and I knew that Kathryn and I would be walking home from there, whereas Remi and Augie would need to go further down the river to get to their house. I let go of Augie's hand and skated over to a snowy patch, where I fashioned two snowballs, throwing the first at Augie, which hit him in the hip, and the second at Kathryn, just missing her. Remi was invigorated by my invitation for a snowball fight and joined me in skating over and collecting some snow from the bank to throw at Augie. Soon, we were all involved, the four of us covered in snow, and as Augie threw a last snowball at me, I tripped and fell to the ground.

All three rushed over to help me up, and as they did so, I heard my father's voice sternly call from the bank, *Girls, you better come home now.* Kathryn and I were completely startled by this and ran to the shore to remove and skates. *Can I see you tomorrow?* Augie said, leaning down to help me untie a knot in my skate's lace. *Maybe,* I said, *do you have a telephone?* He said no, but that he and Remi went ice fishing Saturday mornings and always brought their catch down to Mr. Mabee to sell, so, he should be in the village around noon. I nodded my head and slipped on my boots. Then Kathryn and I scrambled up the bank to follow our father home.

We could tell that Dad was tipsy because he sort of swayed along the side of Baker Street. *Dad?* Kathryn said, but he didn't respond. He just kept walking. Kathryn and I looked at each other, and we knew that something was wrong.

Mum was crocheting an Afghan at the dining room table when we arrived. *Betty called,* she said as we entered the room, not looking us in the eyes. *She told me a friend of hers saw you girls at the rink with two fellows, and I said, what two fellows?* That's when I came out with the whole truth, right there. I took complete responsibility. *I made Kathryn come with me,* I said. Mum said that Kathryn was an adult now, and that she could do as she pleased, which almost reduced Kathryn to tears. *The same doesn't go for you, Charlotte,* Mum said, *how dare you lie to me. What if those men had hurt you? We can't trust these people. We don't know them.* I tried to explain that the Clairmonts had lived in Hampton all their lives and that they weren't bad people, they just kept to themselves. *But they're not our people. They're outsiders and I don't want you going near that boy again.* I told her that I wasn't a baby anymore; I was old enough to choose who I spent my time with. *Not if you're living under our roof,* Mum finished. I looked at

Dad, who was sitting silently in his chair. He was plastered by that point. He said *I can't say that I trust their lot either, Charlotte*. *The French are only concerned with themselves.* Mum got up from the table at that point and walked over to me. *Do you know what they were like during the war? The war your father fought in, and could have died in? They didn't believe in it and didn't want to be our allies,* she said, *and no child of mine will be dating one of them.*

I barely slept that night. I couldn't believe what my father and mother had said, and their coldness towards a person they didn't even know. Kathryn snuck into my room after everyone had gone to bed and rubbed my back while I cried. *It's only because they love you,* she tried to tell me, *they're just worried for you.* I told her, *if they love me so much then why don't they trust me?*

Turns out they were right not to trust me, Baby, because I saw Augie the very next day. I told the family I was going for a walk, and I met him outside Felix Mabee's butchery. I told him everything that had happened. I could tell he was hurt by what my mother had said. I said that she was wrong, and that I wouldn't stop seeing him. *How will we do it, though?* he asked.

We started meeting at the Hampton Community Library. It was ideal for many reasons. The first, was that the librarian, Clara Reid, was eighty-two years old and blind as a bat. The second, was that Augie wanted to practice and learn more English, and the library was the perfect place to do that. If anyone questioned us about why we were together, we would tell them the truth, which was that I was tutoring Augie in reading and writing in English. The third reason was that we could easily tell our friends or family that we were going to the library instead of telling them we were going on a date,

and the last reason, was that if we couldn't meet, we would just leave the other person a small note explaining our absence. Your father knew enough to write, "can't come, will see you tomorrow," which was his go to for a while until he had built up his English vocabulary.

Soon enough, your father was able to write me love letters! Meeting at the library had worked for four lovely months. Then came Augie's nineteenth birthday. He was touched by my gift, a book called *All About Home Baking. You should become a Baker*, I told him, *you would be so good at it. You could open your own shop!* Augie told me he loved the idea and that when we were married, he would bake for me all the time. *We should go to France for our honeymoon*, he said, *it's about time you have some French lessons!* We hadn't spoken at all about marriage, and I sat there, shocked and delighted by what he had said. *You want to marry me?* I asked. *Well, of course, I do*, he said, *I just need to make some money first. We need to get you to Hollywood, now, don't we.*

In June, I graduated from school, and Tom gave me a job at the pharmacy. He had changed its name from Smith's Apothecary to Smith's Drugs. He was inspired by his time in Halifax, finding that pharmacies there were selling more than just prescriptions and sodas, and were referred to as "Drug Stores." He stocked up on over-the-counter products and cosmetics, but this meant he needed a cashier.

The summer heat was starting to become unbearable in the library, and Augie started visiting me at work, and walking me home when I finished. By now, people had gotten used to seeing us together, and though I'm sure that most people caught on to our scheme, there were still those that assumed I was only Augie's English tutor.

One day, Augie walked me home and we found my father in a real tizzy. One of the farm hands on Mr. Keirstead's farm had fallen and broke his arm, and they needed help to get the remainder of beans harvested for the weekly trip to the Market. Augie volunteered, and Dad was in no position to refuse him. Augie ended up working with my father for a whole month, but by week two Dad said, *the kids not half bad,* right in front of my mother. She turned her nose up and left the room without a word. Marion had even taken to Augie at that point, feeling as though this new tutoring venture of mine might mean I was planning to stay in Hampton, or become a teacher—*I think you're a natural*, she told me.

Mum started spending even more time at church that summer, running a bible study on Monday and Wednesday afternoons and evenings. At the time, this worked out well because she rarely encountered Augie. The thing was that, when she was home, she barely spoke to me. Mum wasn't thick, and I could tell that she sensed my dishonesty. One day, Kathryn came into my room to talk, and I'm certain Mum overheard her tell me that I had that 'first love glow' because when we sat down to eat supper, Mum looked at each of us around the table, then gave thanks, specificizing how very thankful she was to have a family as *open, honest, and virtuous* as ours. Things got worse after that. The space between us continued to grow, and I could find no way to appease her that didn't involve ending my relationship with your father, who I loved deeply by that point.

In late July, Augie told me about Minto. He showed me the ad in the paper for NB Coal. Minto was full of coal seams, and they needed men to blast out sheetrock. They were offering well-paying coal-mining contracts, starting in September, to men willing to work two weeks on, one week off, for a year. Augie said that together, we would be able

to make enough money that we could get married and move anywhere we wanted. *Maybe, I'll even be able to open that bakery.*

It was all too good to be true, though, Baby.

I sat my father and mother down that very night and finally told them I was dating Augie. *We knew that didn't we?* Dad said. *No, we didn't,* Mum replied.

Your father and I consummated our love the day before he left on the train to Minto. He took me fishing in the Ossekeag Creek, something we'd never done together before, and then we snuck into the empty scout cabin. Mum had always emphasized remaining pure and chaste. *Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go to hell.* Good girls wait until marriage because marriage is the only place for intimacy. Bad girls are loose, and face consequences. But I really had no idea what I was doing while I was doing it. I felt funny, afterwards, when Augie walked me home. We had just done this monumental thing, that people in love did, and yet I felt so guilty for having done it, and knowing I couldn't take it back. I knew I had committed a mortal sin, and I would need to repent for it, so that night I said my prayers for the first time in years. After I had finished, I climbed into bed and listened to the sky rumble with thunder. The next morning at the breakfast table, Mum told us that the United Church's steeple had been hit by lighting.

I went to meet your father at the station at 8 a.m., not knowing it would be the last time I would ever see him. We kissed and hugged, right there in the open, and though I still felt conflicted about what we had done, I loved him, and being able to show everyone was liberating. It didn't matter who saw us anymore because in our minds, we were going to be together forever.

Augustine Clairmont died on September 25th, 1934. The Clairmonts did not have a formal funeral for him. NB Coal sent them his body in a cedar coffin, and they buried him in the Hampton Cemetery, next to his grandparents. Remi had already left Hampton by that time; he went to Saint John to work in the fish market there, and he was the only one in the Clairmont family who knew about me and Augie, so I decided to keep that way.

By November I knew you were there. I should have been scared out of my wits, but all I could think about was the fact that a piece of Augie would now live on in the world when he couldn't. Your father was my first real romance, and I often feel as though I could never love anyone the way I loved him.

I told Kathryn first, and then she sat with me as I told Mum and Dad. Dad didn't say anything, he just got up, put a hand on my shoulder, and squeezed, and then he walked out back to our chicken coup to have a drink that my mother could not refuse him.

Mum was ashamed of me but seeing Dad's compassion seemed to soften her a bit. She attempted to comfort me. Told me that this was all a terrible accident. A mistake. But then she said, *did he force himself on you, Charlotte? You can tell me*, and I pulled away from her. I said no, of course not, and that Augie would never do such a thing. Then she said I had two choices. We could go see Rev. Bell and create a plan. *You can have it,* she said, *and then give it over to the nuns. They'll find it a good home.* Or I could leave. *I refuse to have an unmarried woman with a child living in my house. If you make this choice, then you are no daughter of mine.*

I don't think I've ever felt as conflicted about anything in my life. It was hard to understand how God could let your father die, but bless me with his child, providing this beautiful life out of tragedy, and yet, I would have to lose my mother to keep you.

Well, you know the choice I made, Baby, and I don't regret in the least. I'll always love my mother, but she was wrong. You and your father were not accidents or mistakes. God had a plan for us.

I'm being called for supper, so I better leave this letter here.

I love you, Baby. Here's to our new life together. May it be full of love.

January 1st, 1935, continued

It's late, Baby, but I've just discovered something that I feel I must tell you about.

I went to find a small pair of earrings that Kathryn gave me for Christmas, as I'm rather homesick and wanted to wear them tomorrow. When I was looking through my jewellery box for them, I came upon a small pewter elephant that I've never seen before. I didn't notice until now because I haven't touched my jewellery since arriving at the Wallaces.

Baby, I think that it came from my mother.

Mum used to read to me and Kathryn before bed, and our picture books were held between two wooden elephant book stands. I always had to be the one to retrieve the book because I was mesmerized by these elephants. Mum told me that I used to speak to them and stroke them as if they were real. In 1925, when I was nine, our house caught fire. The house was salvageable, but the bookstands were destroyed.

When I got a little older, I asked Mum if she remembered the bookstands, and she explained that they were very sentimental to her. Our grandmother, who had died by that point, had given Mum the bookstands when she found out Mum was pregnant with me. She explained that it had been her childhood dream to go to the circus and see an elephant in real life, and her mother always told her that they would go if the circus ever came to New Brunswick, which it never did. Mum explained that her mother brought the elephants to her in the form of the bookstands because she knew that Mum would probably never see an elephant in real life, especially now that she had two children to care for.

I wonder, Baby…

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