

FAKE ID

MARIKO TAMAKI

Women's Press

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M A R I K O T A M A K I

Women's Press
Toronto

Fake ID
Mariko Tamaki

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*This book is dedicated to Charissa Wilcox and to the memory of her mother,
Hélène, who passed away in February 2003.*

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THAT WILL COST YOU

THE WORST PART OF ANY MONOPOLY GAME COMES near the end when everyone has bought up everything and started building millions of houses and hotels, so many that you have to start substituting for the limited supply of red and green wood chunks.

So it's like, this My Little Pony comb is a hotel. This fuzzy sticker is a house. This Smurf button is three hotels.

By then everything you land on is outrageously expensive. No matter what you roll, someone wants something from you. Typically something you can't afford. It's like a trial run for your adult experience with credit cards. You have to start mortgaging off your stuff, trading your pride for orange hundred-dollar bills. You hold your breath and pray you land on Go while all your friends greedily rub their hands together, waiting for you to step on their spring-loaded debit traps.

Yesterday I was buying a birthday present for a friend, and the salesman at the store tried to upsell me on my Monopoly purchase, suggesting that I buy one of the specialty Monopoly boards they have for different cities. He tried to convince me

that it would be “cool” for the players—that they would relate better to the game if they were buying up their own neighbourhoods instead of, say, American states they’ve never seen.

I wanted to say that my life already feels like a Monopoly game. Like no matter where I land I owe someone something, like no matter where I move there is something at stake.

I remember when I was little my brother and I used to play The Game of Life with the Reynolds twins, whose parents were friends with ours. The Reynolds twins were both already independently wealthy and very good players at all games. They always won. At the end of the game they would yip and scream, rubbing the pastel paper money across their bare chests.

All I ever wanted from The Game of Life was the little paper card that said I had a pony, which I would never trade in, not even if I was desperate. I’d rather risk bankruptcy.

“I’ll live in the stable with Flicka,” I’d insist. “So take my money. I don’t care.”

One day Mr. Reynolds caught me saying something to this effect and pulled me aside. “Either you play to win,” he said, “or you don’t play.”

That night I crept into the games room and stole the pony card out of the box. And I never played Life again. I had what I wanted.

SWALLOW

ACCORDING TO THE LITERATURE ON THE SUBJECT that I have read, a career sword swallower should begin training by the age of fifteen, although most successful swallowers will have developed a predilection toward this career by an even younger age. Jewels, the unofficial world's youngest sword swallower, from Russia, was fourteen when she started. But I don't think being a sword swallower is one of those things you can just decide to do. I think you have to be born to it. Still, it's hard to imagine how you would discover that kind of ability. Maybe one day you choke on your straw and you think, well, that's not so bad.

I wonder what it feels like, the first time that cold hard steel travels down your throat. Is it like the icy feeling of a shot of vodka burning its way toward your stomach?

When I was seven I used to have this thing about swallowing Lifesavers. I can't remember exactly how it started, probably by accident. Maybe the first three times were by accident,

anyway. And then, I think, Eddie Sawyer dared me to swallow one in the playground during recess. After that it was kind of a thing; if allowed time alone with my Lifesavers and my thoughts, I would start playing this little game with myself. I'd unwrap a Lifesaver from its roll and rub it against my lip. Then I'd pop it in my mouth, hold it on my tongue to taste the flavour, and swallow it. It always hurt and I cried every time. Eventually, my parents put a ban on Lifesavers.

It was highly possible, according to Eddie Sawyer, Ms. Fraser (my first-grade teacher), and my parents that I could die doing this. And yet ... I had not. I found that infinitely interesting. Both that they were wrong, and that I was still alive. Maybe I myself was curious as to why I did it, and kept doing it because I had no answer. Either that or I was just a S/M brat.

The person who appeared the most disturbed by this obsession was my mother. It used to make my mother gag, the idea of me doing this inexplicably gross thing. You could tell that there was a part of her, a large part, that wanted to run away when she found me clutching my throat in the den. And yet clearly she could not, because, well, what if something were to happen to me?

I could quite easily, as we said, die.

And yet I did not.

And so the cycle continued.

My father said that eventually all the Lifesavers I'd swallowed would stack up in my throat so I'd only have a teeny tiny hole to breathe out of. After he said that, I started scavenging Lifesavers and holding them over the o of my lips. I'd suck air in and out of the hole, and imagine the tiny blowhole in my throat.

I figured it was just enough space to breathe, so long as I didn't swallow more than six at a time. (My record at that time was two.)

Yeah, I'd think, I can handle that.

Then I'd swallow the Lifesaver.

And burst into tears.

IDENTIFIED

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO I WAS STARING OUT THE window of the mega-complex where I work, waiting for my shift to start, when someone approached me and asked me if I knew who I was. More accurately, she asked me if I knew who Mariko was, or at least *where* she was. It took me a second to realize that she was talking to me, staring at me, and not knowing that I was what she was looking for.

(Which, frankly, a lot of women don't know right away.)

I told her I didn't know who Mariko was and walked away. It was kind of liberating.

My name is not usually something I can hide from. Since early September 2002 I've had the misfortune to work at a job where I wear a name tag. I've never felt the weight of my own name as keenly as I do now, partly because, at the moment, I'm wearing it on my chest.

Like most name tags, mine is a plastic square—in my case, a red one—worn clipped to my shirt, with my company’s name embossed on the top and my name, MARIKO, below. Kind of like a “Property of” type situation. The fact that my name is embossed is probably the only permanent part of my job, although it does not, in any way, imply that I am anything less than replaceable. Up until two weeks ago the name on my name tag was JOSE, with my name on a sticker on top, MARIKO. I know that someday some other newbie will get my name tag and see my name embossed underneath their little sticker. Possibly they will wonder the same thing I did, whether JOSE was fired or, vengefully, quit, or perhaps was hit by a bus.

The very first thing I noticed when I started wearing a name tag was that customers really enjoy reading it. It’s the first thing people tend to notice when they meet me in the store. First my name tag, and then my boobs, where the name tag hangs. No one has ever actually *called* me by my name, but I’ve heard them mention it to other mega-complex co-workers.

I’m a customer service passer-offer, especially when I have headaches or any other kind of throbbing pain, especially the kind of throbbing pain that goes with fluorescent lights and selling out to “The Corporation.” I like to pretend that other staff members are experts and I do referrals.

“Go to that man over there,” I’ll tell the customer, who has just sneezed on the back of my neck to get my attention, “he specializes in Needlepoint. Big fan. He’ll find your book for you.”

Every once in a while I’ll walk away and hear a customer whisper, “Excuse me, sir? The Chinese girl over there told me you could find this for me.”

Right after that happened for the third time I stopped wearing my name tag out in the open. I wear the chain now, but I pop the tag part in my shirt for safekeeping, so if people are looking for my name tag they can look at the square bump in my chest instead.

When I take out my name tag for a manager who notices it’s missing, it’s gingerly. Like I’m taking out cash to pay a bill I can’t afford.

I’m developing a reputation in the store as a service rep with name tag issues. Like Lorenzo, who is six foot seven inches tall and always forgetting to duck when he walks into the warehouse, and who always wants to switch name tags with other clerks because he thinks it’s funny.

“Don’t you *like* your name?” a manager asked me last week.

My name is often a source of great interest for people. I've had a lot of people tell me that there's a lot to my name, aside from the literal translation, which is either "happy" or "shiny and bouncing."

People often tell me that I *look* like a Mariko, which is only a little ironic since up until my last year of high school I was a Karen. My middle name was Mariko, but I switched them on my way to university in an attempt to escape my past and a sea of Karens who seemed to be following me from grade to grade.

About eight times out of ten when I tell people my name, they want to know what it *is*, which typically means what country *it* and *I* are from. Often when I say that the name and I are Japanese—I'm half Japanese—they seem to feel that this confirms a suspicion they had.

"Oh well, you can see it in your eyes, of course," they'll say. "Of course."

Like, OF COURSE, you're Japanese. Sometimes they say it like they're mad they didn't get it earlier. As though this, my name, were a sort of game, like Clue or Sorry.

I suppose my name is something that makes me unique, which I should find exciting. There aren't a lot of Marikos around. I think the number of Cathys to Marikos in this country is like a

billion to one. The only time I've ever run into any other Marikos is when I've done ego searches on the Internet. I'm probably not likely to run into any of them in real life any time soon, however, since, according to the Web, all they do is play tennis and ski—in Japan.

Unfortunately, being unique does not always mean you will be perceived as being unique. Especially if you're an Asian chick like me, or maybe, more specifically, a Japanese chick who looks like an Asian chick, which means that if you're not paying attention, I could look like just about anything.

Three years ago I worked in a store with a Korean girl who was half my height and weight and wore glasses. Her name was Patti and, if I had wanted to, I could have rolled her up and shoved her into my pants for safekeeping, she was that wee. Unfortunately, Patti's wee-ness, and my non-wee-ness, did not seem to deter many customers from mixing us up. And for a long time, Patti was my second Asian mixed-nuts name. Patti, in turn, was often Mariko, or sometimes, disturbingly, *Marikah*. After a while, both of us stopped correcting customers, opting instead to refuse to sell certain items to those who couldn't identify us. I never had anything in blue or black for the people who called me Patti.

Eventually, after several discussions, Patti and I deduced that the clear difference between acquaintances and friends

was the ability to distinguish racial background, or, at the very least, not to assume that they could assume racial background. We labelled the phenomenon, a tool that could be used for or against us, “Asian blurring.”

Asian blurring was my saviour all through university. If I wanted to go drinking, all I had to do for fake ID was find an Asian who wasn't going out that night, which stereotypically wasn't hard. By the end of my first year I'd memorized all the Asian birthdays in my building. It was like being part of a massive Asian conspiracy with hundreds of code names. “My name is Mariko but tonight I am Pearl Wang. Born January 25, 1973.”

But like I said, it can be a curse, too, right, that little extra something that makes you feel like even less of a person, and even more of a nameless employee, a vague amorphous mass of Asian employee with an exotic name tag.

I guess it all comes down to identity politics—more specifically, at the moment, Retail Identity Politics.

Maybe it's especially hard to identify someone correctly when they're wearing an ugly corporate uniform and name tag. Maybe people are zoning in on my chest because they want to memorize my name to report my terrible customer service. Maybe I shouldn't give a shit who thinks I'm Korean

FAKE ID

or Chinese. Maybe if it really bothers me that much I should just correct people instead of passive aggressively denying them retail product.

Mariko does not know.

But in the meantime Mariko will be switching name tags with Lorenzo, who thinks this is terribly funny.

Everyone thinks Lorenzo is Spanish.

He is not.

GOD BLESS AMERICA

TOPEKA, KANSAS

USA

JULY 4TH, 2003

IN CITIES LIKE TOPEKA, KANSAS, THEY CELEBRATE Independence Day like they've just won the war or like they're on the verge of fighting a new one. They celebrate it like they celebrated it at the end of the movie *Independence Day*, after Will Smith and Jeff Goldblum blew up the aliens.

It's impossible not to know that it's the Fourth of July today: if the song "Born in the USA" on the radio doesn't tip you off, the fields of little American flags are a dead giveaway. I remember once my mother's neighbour turned fifty and his wife put fifty pink plastic flamingos in the lawn. My mom was really mad because she thought it looked ugly.

"Never do that to me," she said. "The last thing I need for my birthday is a lawn that looks like a Florida mini-putt."

Judging by the flags, America must be at least a thousand years old. It's as if the grass is somehow unpatriotic for being green today, and everyone favours the Patriot Blue sky.

Yesterday, in preparation for a celebration of American independence, we bought flag-shaped stars-and-stripes plates, bald-eagles tablecloths, baby flag toothpicks! Glasses, red, white, and blue straws, confederate hats, star-spangled-banner napkins (three packs for a dollar), and Pepsi (conveniently also red, white and blue). There's a whole section of the grocery store called the American Pride section, right next to the meat and the fresh veg. The kids call it the USA section. Patriotism to serve with your Grade-A U.S. beef.

On the way out I noticed a bin at the door where you could leave worn-out regular-size American flags to be properly incinerated. TREAT THE SYMBOL OF YOUR COUNTRY WITH PRIDE AND DIGNITY, the sign said.

I bought a pair of American Flag dillyboppers for \$2.99. By the afternoon I had little star-shaped welts on the sides of my temples. The only way to relieve the pain was to chant, "USA, USA, USA!"

Yesterday, under the recommendation of our American hosts, both Charissa, my partner, and I bought American T-shirts, which we are wearing today, not so much because a USA T-shirt is something we feel we might need in the long run, but because the short-term benefits of not sticking out like a sore thumb are hard to ignore. When we got here we were the only people walking around Topeka without

an American flag somewhere on our body. In Kansas, love of country isn't just something you wear on your sleeve, it's something you wear painted across your face, as though life were one big football game and everyone was on a team. It's your licence plate and the little decals on your long plastic nails.

Charissa chose a navy-blue shirt with a little surfboard that says "USA" on it. I wanted to buy a red tank top that said, DON'T MESS WITH THE US. But it didn't fit right. The "the" stuck under my boobs so it said, DON'T MESS WITH US—appropriate for some perhaps, but not necessarily for me. I ended up with a USA FOREVER T-shirt that had the word FOREVER in the middle of a stars-and-stripes iron-on that sticks to my chest like a big, heart-shaped, plastic pancake.

I can describe, but cannot do justice to, how hot the Fourth of July is here. People told me that Kansas would be hot, but in my defence, no one said how hot it would be, hot like the inside of a barbeque, hot like the wading pool feels like a bowl of soup, hot like everything's about to burst into flames. When we first hit Illinois on the drive over, I was afraid to stick my head into the hot air for fear my eyes would shrivel up in their sockets. I get a little better every day. I've come to see the heat as an educational experience. Like, I know now what the earth will feel like after the nuclear apocalypse: hot like street tar that's been baking in 105-degree weather. No wonder people

are religious in the southern states. If that is Kansas in July, imagine how hot they think hell is.

On every corner and on the edge of every cornfield is a tent set up for the express purpose of selling fireworks. The one on the corner nearest to us has a big blow-up cartoon American eagle out front—it looks like Woody Woodpecker. We've been three times in the past three days to get fireworks to add to the cartoon arsenal in the garage. Yesterday the kids set up their dolls and trucks next to the box and played there, almost reverently, like it was a Christmas tree.

By six o'clock in the evening the much-anticipated Fourth of July picnic is in full swing. Charissa and I start setting off smoke bombs in the grass, sending toxic plumes of colour into the air so the kids can run through them, coughing when the smoke gets in their lungs. The teenage boys quickly separate themselves from the rest of us, hiding behind the garage with their bags of firecrackers. Every ten minutes or so there's a fierce series of pops and snaps that makes you think little bits of flesh should be flying through the air.

No one wants to eat and we continue setting small fires and grabbing handfuls of Cheezies to keep up our energy. By dusk we have an army of explosives set up on the driveway. Elizabeth, who is four and has fat buttery blonde curls, clings to her daddy with one hand and, with the smouldering wick

in the other hand, sets off the first firecracker.

When we told Charissa's sister that we were coming she proudly told us that the Fourth of July in Topeka is like a war zone.

It's true.

By nine o'clock the smoke is so thick you can barely see the road; all you can hear are high-pitched whistles and explosions, all you can see are the bursts of fiery light. It's like war for people who have never seen war, I guess. It's like staring at the sun: even when you close your eyes you can see the after X-ray like a ghost in your irises. I spend most of the night frozen on the top of the driveway, holding a beer and a dead sparkler that a younger cousin has grown tired of, looking up at the sky the way a cat looks at the sky, like he's never going to look down. At ten o'clock the city of Topeka puts on a giant fireworks display that makes the explosions we've been setting off back in Canada look, well, Canadian. The Topeka fireworks are gigantic golf balls of celestial light set to "God Bless America," "Yankee Doodle," "Dixie's Land," "The Stars and Stripes Forever" and "The Star Spangled Banner" tuned in on the radio. They look like asteroids plummeting towards the earth, only to burn up before they hit the ground.

For the finale they play “The Star Spangled Banner” again and everyone puts their beers down so they can place their hands over their hearts. I cling to my sparkler.

I can’t stop thinking about that line from the *The Simpsons*, where the Apu look-alike sells Homer this gigantic firecracker and says, “Celebrate the independence of your country by blowing up a small part of it.”

THE TEA PARTY CHRONICLES

WARNING: IF YOU ARE A FAN OF THE TEA PARTY, please note that the following is not promotional or devotional. This is a story, not a T-Shirt (I LOVE [Insert whatever the lead singer's name is here]). I'm not a fan and this is not a fanzine.

The following is a bittersweet story for the bittersweet after-Goth girls of the Greater Toronto Area and its surrounding suburbs. This is for the survivors of the scene who still paint their nails black and dye their hair L'Oréal "Starry Night 21" but who are less inclined to line up for Goth star albums. This is for the Goths who remember, but do not mourn, the old Sanctuary Vampire Death Bar on Queen Street West in Toronto, Goth on the outside and now, surprisingly, corporate Starbucks on the inside.

Don't sing me your blues song about how Starbucks killed Toronto's former temple of Goth. How you, like, cried when it was torn down, the place where you smoked a thousand cigarettes and beat up a girl in the bathroom, NIN playing in

the background. *So sad!* I would hear your tale of woe but I am too busy drinking my recently purchased Starbucks java to care. My old Goth friends may weep eyeliner tears but I am a welcoming mat for progress and change. I'm dark purple instead of shiny patent black, ripening with age....

I am.

This is a love story, of sorts, a story about being sixteen written by a twenty-six year old. Bitter pickles with salty nostalgia chips on the side....

I am.

The year is 1995 and I am sixteen years old. I am a former nerd turned Goth superstar. I am unaware that I am still a nerd and happier for it. I am a recent graduate of five years of Dungeons and Dragons who has recently been asked by a friend to join The Order of Endora, a live-action role-playing troupe in Etobicoke. I think this means I am moving up in the world. I have no curiosity as to why it is that all this weird shit ends up going down in the suburbs, although I will consider this much later when I find out that most swingers are also fond of the burbs. While drinking with my friends at Sanctuary, I get my enrolment package from the girl who supplies the club with cheap contraband cigarettes.

THE TEA PARTY CHRONICLES

DEAR *[insert character name here]*,

*We are pleased to welcome you to the Legendary
ORDER OF ENDORA! IT IS AN HONOUR TO
HAVE A NOBLE SOUL SUCH AS YOURSELF
WITHIN OUR MIDST...*

“It sounds like The Klan,” my father notes when I ask him to borrow the fifty-dollar entry fee.

“Well, it’s not.”

“But you need a cape. Why do you need a cape?”

I tell my parents that the game is like Shakespeare in the park, a combination of Phys. Ed. and medieval history. I’m not sure if they believe me, but they agree to play along. My parents are far less gullible than I give them credit for.

“Okay then, have fun in the woods, dear!”

To get to Endora you go to the end of the subway line and take a bus, which is only hard because you have to do this wearing period costume, long robes that get caught in the subway doors, and fishnets that are not only “not period,” but chilly in the sub-zero Canadian/Endoran winters.

Part of this journey involves pretending that this kind of costume is entirely normal. Some Endorans make more of a show of it, appearing shocked by the strange costume of their fellow “modern” passengers. One girl jumps when she sees someone using something she hears is called a “pay phone,” and tosses a small pouch of birdseed wrapped in cloth, a “spell,” at the receiver. The Etobicoke businessmen, who remind me of my father, who paid for the cape I’m wearing, shake their heads behind their newspapers and try to ignore us. This is harder to do on the bus where there’s a whole stack of Endorans, in order of importance, Wizards, Warriors, Fairies and Dwarves. Wizards are the king nerds of the scene; Warriors, the jocks; Fairies, the girls who sit on the laps of the Warriors; and Dwarves, the majority. Endora is one stop past Kipling GIRLS GIRLS GIRLS on the 52 bus line. All the Warriors laugh when we pass it. “Yeah, I’ll be taking my spear over there later for a little joust,” they say, poking at the Fairies in their laps.

The rules for The Order of Endora, and Endoran society, are posted outside the lot on a plastic-wrapped cardboard plaque. Mostly they’re about leaving the modern world behind. Right under the WELCOME TO ENDORA sign is an ominous message: HEAR THIS, ALL YE WHO ENTER! LET NOT THE VESTIGES OF THE MODERN WORLD PASS THROUGH THESE GATES! Right under that it says, NO ALCOHOL.

This turns out to be the only rule any of the Endorans refuse to enforce.

The “city” of Endora is essentially a lot of grey rubble, the kind that kicks up a ton of dust when you walk on it, with a ring of grass and thin trees surrounding it. It’s a little like a parking lot except there’s no real reason to park there that I can see, unless you’re coming to Endora. The Crest of Endora, a dragon clutching a staff in one claw and a sphere in the other, hangs on a tree.

Underneath the dragon is a banner.

BELIEVE.

If my parents imagine my Endoran life as one involving carefree ambles across a cornfield, swinging a cardboard bow and arrow, they’re sorely mistaken. I mean, first of all, no cornfield. Not a lot of room to run either, really. Secondly, The Order of Endora is a live-action role-playing game but it’s more role-play than actual action. Mostly it’s a lot like Sanctuary, except that in Endora I’m a Dwarf, and dressed accordingly (not really all that different from the stuff I wear to Sanctuary).

The loudest and boldest citizens of Endora are the Warriors, who, as a tribe, are violent and boastful, given to

bouts of shoving. They talk a lot, and loudly, about war and victory. Technically, having never lost a war, you could say that the Warriors have the right to be a little arrogant.

You would have to point out, though, that it's a success story that is entirely hypothetical, since, technically, as this is a game of make believe, no Endoran war has ever actually been fought.

This, ultimately, is the basis of role-playing games: hearsay. You are what you say you are, because you said so. In a world of make-believe, there isn't a lot more to go on.

Ergo....

Tholoni can say he's killed a family of giants and—just like that—he has, even if it's a little hard to believe because *Tholoni* is asthmatic.

That's it.

You can see why the underdog high school population flocks to this game.

I remember the battle of Etobica. Ah, it was a harsh winter that year. Snow up to your eyeballs.

On the west side of the lot, next to the fence, is a small garage, or “lodge,” which has been filled with ye olde outcast furniture of many an Endoran parent. The lodge is where you can usually find *Archamedus*, Endora’s grandest Wizard.

Archamedus is one of the founders of Endora, the one responsible for both the logo and the rules. *Archamedus* is the one who gives me my “character” or role-playing name, *Tabitha*, on my first day at Endora. It is the first time I am ever told I look like anything other than me.

“You just LOOK like a *Tabitha*,” *Archamedus* says, and I scrunch up the piece of paper that had my list of possible names.

At twenty-five, *Archamedus* is Endora’s oldest player, its “intellectual.” He’s a bit of a Gothic mastermind, someone who is self-described as being “too smart for his own good,” something he can boast without ever having to prove it. I think that possibly he could look a little like John Cusack, if John Cusack ruled the underworld and wore eye makeup.

Of course, *Archamedus* isn’t always *Archamedus*, that’s just his character name. In the real world *Archamedus* is Paul, a pimply and mild-mannered manager at a local Casey’s Restaurant. Paul has a ponytail and, when I meet him, by chance, on my way to work, a bit of a stutter. *Archamedus*,

on the other hand, has long flowing black hair and talks ENDLESSLY, a smooth and continuous line of talking. It's kind of like a superhero's split personality.

Archamedus's joy of talking has a lot to do with why he is such a KING in Endora. Endora, as I said, is all about talk.

The thing that distinguishes *Archamedus* is a complete lack of interest in war and battle. *Archamedus* isn't a Warrior, he's a Wizard, whose interests lie in Love and Valour. Once or twice he scripts little Endoran romances, focusing on a love story between his character and a Fairy named *Erosia*—in real-life, Laura. A lot of these plots revolve around rescue, likely because this is the easiest thing to recreate, easier than, say, an attack on a nest of Dragons (hard to enact in a low-budget make-believe adventure).

Always set to the music of The Tea Party, typically the hit single "Sister Awake," the rescues become more and more elaborate as the summer goes on. It seems like every week *Erosia* is getting lost somewhere and falling asleep, like she is suffering from an ancient form of narcolepsy.

Archamedus has a portable tape player, and it is my job to carry it around for background music when he awakes *Erosia*. I spend the summer in robes lugging the heavy boom box around Endora and standing over *Erosia's* sleeping body with the thing held high above my head.

At the end of the night I ride back into Toronto with *Archamedus*, in *Erosia*'s car. Eighty percent of sex and making out has to do with geography (something even the Internet cannot change), and in this case, *Archamedus* and I live close enough that we can get dropped off together. After a couple of weeks, *Archamedus* invites me in to his apartment for a drink. I accept.

Pretty soon I'm a frequent guest at *Archamedus*'s lair, a sparsely decorated uptown bachelor apartment. It is very wizardy, with walls covered in Dungeons and Dragons cards, The Cure posters, and sketches from the movie *The Crow*, all dated and signed. *Archamedus* has a pirate copy of *The Crow* that we make the pretense of watching, but mostly we just talk. That is, mostly *Archamedus* talks, and I listen.

I curl up on his smelly futon for hours and watch his ink-coloured lips as he rambles on about the importance of trust and honour and loyalty. The Casey's job is never mentioned, but I imagine this code of honour got him promoted to Manager after only one year.

Archamedus says he could tell immediately that I would understand him, he could see it in my eyes.

Beware anyone who says they can see anything, other than their reflection, in your eyes.

What happens next happens fast.

I fall for him, and I don't mean Paul, the person, but *Archamedus*, the Wizard, who I envision to be a sensitive, romantic sorcerer, because I have seen him being that, rescuing *Erosia* while The Tea Party plays on.

It's like all of the sudden, I believe in him.

He is really sweet, I tell myself, and, like, really honest, I can really respect that. I'm not going to sleep with him, or anything, but, I don't know....

I do sleep with him, and not necessarily because he is sweet or honest but, possibly, because one night, as The Tea Party croons, "... twilight souls/anguished ways/lost adrift/severed seas/I await you/come to me," *Archamedus* gets up off the floor and the cloak he is sitting on and starts mouthing the words to me.

"Oh, *Tabitha*," he pants, between lyrics. Years later, whenever I hear The Tea Party, I will still see myself on the futon in my black dress and little red dwarf cape, watching *Archamedus* crawl towards me, his rings clicking on the tile floor.

"*Tabitha*, would you do me the honour?"

He's bite-y, chews on my ears and neck before pulling me down to the futon. His body is bony, hard and kind of bumpy, kind of like a futon. He shakes the entire time so that he's hard to hold onto. His shoulder blades rattle in my hands. When it's over he offers me leftover birthday cake from Casey's.

Happy 1_
Birth___
Mich___

My stomach hurts and I take a cab home even though it's only a couple blocks. I feel weird.

It's like I can feel the end of the story in my gut, churning around with the stale chocolate cake.

A month later, I find out that *Archamedus* is sleeping, not only with *Erosia* (which I should have guessed), but three other Fairies as well. I discover this during a weekend Endoran retreat in Orangeville's Camp Amochee. The second night, while searching the forest for my car keys, I stumble across the distinctive narrow white bum of an *Archamedus* in the midst of receiving a blow job.

Does a wooing to the lyrics of The Tea Party give one the right to be outraged when she finds out that there are others being wooed?

I storm across the field, slipping and sliding through the wet grass in my pointy toed boots, and check into a Warrior whorehouse where I drink a bottle of Captain Morgan's with my friend Trish, who is surprised to hear that I knew nothing of *Archamedus's* conquests, which turn out to be legendary.

“Man, *Tabitha*, he's slept with EVERYTHING!”

I spend the rest of the night behind my tent, heaving up what tastes like Coke and toilet water. As my fingers grip the grass for support, it occurs to me that while I saw *Archamedus* as a sweet romantic, a boy caught up in a game of make-believe, clearly he thought I was an easy lay.

Oh God, I pray to the God of Late-Night Drinking Binges, please let me not get any horrible diseases from having slept, through *Archamedus*, with the entire population of Endora. Please let it be true that Dwarves are immune to catching those sorts of things, while Wizards aren't.

The next day I, in my parent's car, angrily skid out of the birch gates of Amochee, leaving *Archamedus* and a pukey ball of my dwarf clothes behind. The next week I get a bill for my unpaid Endoran player fee, which I never pay.

So that's my story of why I hate The Tea Party.

THE TEA PARTY CHRONICLES

I won't tell you why my friend Sarah hates "In Your Eyes,"
but you can guess.

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

I. SALLY AND JOHN

Sally and John are my married friends, my only friends joined in holy matrimony who went to the trouble of actually having a wedding (creamy white and pink), and who could then also afford a honeymoon (biking across France). As of three years ago they became my only friends with a kid (Bobby, now almost four).

Sally and John love each other and love their son Bobby, but they also love bikes, a lot. Sally and John love bikes in that borderline uneasy manner in which some gay people love their pets. It's who they are, "bike people," streamlined in stretchy spandex and comma-shaped helmets. They're fast on two wheels, often with Bobby caboose behind them in a little nuclear-yellow zip-up tent, staring at the endless rotation of his mother's back wheel through a triangle-shaped mesh screen window.

You have to wonder what that does to someone.

Both Sally and John, whom I met during their one-year stay in Toronto, are always hassling me to come to Vancouver. Every time they call me it's raining over there. Finally last year I had a seminar in Victoria, so I went for a visit. Sally picked me up at the airport.

I half expected her to show up on a bike.

Sally is a much happier person in Vancouver than she was in Toronto. She says Vancouver agrees with her, the ocean on one side and the mountains on the other like an anchor.

In addition to a fleet of bicycles, Sally and John have a Tonga Green Landrover, the only vehicle big enough to house their enormous bike rack. It's the same colour as the moss that clings to the trunks of the giant trees in their neighbourhood. Ironic, when you consider that the smog this vehicle produces will soon put those fabulous mossy trees in jeopardy.

Did I just say that?

If Sally sees Vancouver as a geographical area lined with a series of paths that allow one to conquer that geographical area, either by bike or by Landrover (presumably with bikes strapped on top), I see Vancouver as a geographical area rampant with Asians. Both in the suburbs and in downtown Vancouver, the streets are crawling with Asian teenagers. They're part of the

backdrop, like the trees and the green and the corresponding excess of oxygen: impeccably dressed boys and girls wandering around in groups. You don't want to notice it, but you have to. You want to think "teenagers" but you have to think "Asians." The percentage is too big and too obvious to deny.

I couldn't help but gawk at them from Sally's monster ride while Bobby slept in the back and Sally zipped through her SUV tour (shortly to be followed by a bike tour when I felt up to it). We were at a school crosswalk when Sally stopped to explain why they had moved to a neighbourhood farther from downtown Vancouver in order to send Bobby to pre-school.

"Well, you can imagine," she said. "I mean, the Oriental population is HUGE here. For obvious reasons. Bobby would have been one of the only white kids in his class, which would have been pretty uncomfortable. For obvious reasons."

I sat quietly, watching the water at the horizon line. Having been the only Asian in a class of white students my whole life, I silently agreed. That would be uncomfortable. Sally looked at me and bit the top edge of her lip. Her forehead appeared pinched.

Five minutes later, when we reached her driveway, she turned and put her hand on my shoulder. "Not that there's anything wrong with that," she said.

2 . ME

If it's true that you are who you are because you are, that it's a genetic code, untouchable, then the problem, I suppose, is in knowing who you are. This should be easy but I don't think it is. The outside world has the advantage when it comes to defining identity. It sees what we can't see, and there are more of them.

Technically, of course, it is you, and not the outside world, that is responsible for deciding who you are, but even this is only true to a point. There are limits. Like.... Well. Like you can't be Spider-Man.

You can try to be Spider-Man. If your aunt in Calgary, who has never met you, sends you Spider-Man pajamas, you can wear them to bed and be Spider-Man in bed. Or you can wear them all the time, like underwear. They'd be a secret, a second silky, sometimes pilly, skin under your jeans and T-shirt. You can tie your mother's knitting yarn to your wrists and pretend you're projecting it onto the tree in your backyard, making that *petuuu* sound when you do it.

Typically, you can be Spider-Man until someone older finds out that you're trying to be Spider-Man. If you ask to be called Spider-Man at the dinner table, or wear white shirts so your mother notices the Spider-Man insignia on your chest, or, say, tie your web too tightly to the top bar of the swing set, so that

you end up dangling by your purple wrists, and someone has to come out and cut you down.

Well, then you can't be Spider-Man any more.

You are who you are, and you aren't who you aren't, as much from the outside in as from the inside out.

Along that line, despite the obvious genetics involved, until I went to grade school, I wasn't Asian. Technically, I was. From the outside in I was, and to the people around me I was. But from the inside out I was just me. It never occurred to me that "me" was anything particular other than brunette, or that my dad was anything other than taller than my mom, with bigger eyebrows. I didn't think of "bigger eyebrows" in racial terms, like "Japanese." If you had asked me to compare myself to someone, I probably would have chosen another little girl with brown hair, like Laura Ingalls of *Little House on the Prairie*.

This started to change after I got to Mrs. Fraser's first-grade class. The first day, this girl Katie and her friend Josie chanted a rhyme:

"Chinese" [move corners of eye upward]

"Japanese" [move corners of eye downward]

"In between" [move corners of eye toward ear]

And repeat.

That night I went home and showed it to my mom.

“Mom!”

“What?” Still with her hands in the soapy dishwater, she turned her head to watch me do my little routine.

“Chinese! Japanese! In between!”

My mother, a white woman married to a Japanese man, a woman loose in a soft swamp of racial politics, frowned and returned to her dishes.

“HA HA!” I shouted, throwing my hands in the air jubilantly.

“Oh, I don’t know,” my mother said, “I don’t think it’s very funny.”

Aware of my already strong sense of pride in my sense of humour, my mother chose to avoid the racial issue and focus on the matter of humour, which I suppose she, rightly, knew would mean more to me.

At the end of that year, Ms. Fraser’s Grade 1 class sang “It’s a Small World.” Jacob, who was black, Carrie, who was Irish with red hair, and I stood at the front of the stage and held hands. At the end of the song we were supposed to raise our hands.

Hooray for the small world! Backstage, when the song was over, Carrie made us hold our hands under the light.

I remember staring at them under the hot lamps of the stage. Katie said Japanese people's skin was yellow like lemons. I couldn't see it. Carrie's skin looked like cream to me, though, with freckles the colour of cinnamon.

3. ERIN

When I was seventeen I went to see the movie *Talk 16*, a documentary by Lundman and Mitchell, famous Canadian feminists. *Talk 16* was supposed to be about the REAL lives of five Canadian girls, all turning sixteen.

One of the girls in the film, the privileged white girl, Erin, went to a private school that was MY school's "sister school." My friend Jennifer's friend Alex's older sister used to row with Erin.

In one of the interview segments, the directors asked the girls what they thought about different social groups. *What do you think of feminists?* (None of them liked feminists or were feminists.) *What do you think of Genos, Preps? What about skinheads?* At this point, Erin, white, upper middle class, smiled at the camera and said, "A lot of skinheads are really cool guys. They're ... I guess they're the kind of guys who would stick up for you no matter what."

In the movie theatre, everyone hissed disapprovingly.

I wondered what the documentary filmmakers' faces looked like when she said that—perhaps like they'd just caught a really big but really ugly fish. Like, *Ohmygod! Ew!*

“It must be nice,” my friend Tara, who was East Indian, hissed in my ear, “to think that skinheads are just this, like, really loyal, fraternal bunch of guys who are REALLY NICE despite their belief that every race other than the white race deserves to be treated like SHIT.”

I wondered if Erin's politically correct friends had been really bitchy to her after they saw the film.

Then again, maybe they didn't care.

I mean, she went to private school. Hearing someone say that kind of thing might be shocking, but not necessarily surprising.

I think there's a reason that people outside private schools rarely turn to private school girls for their opinions, especially regarding matters of social relevance. There's a theory that a private school education is superior because it's paid for. But there's also a slightly unflattering public perception of the girls who attend these schools that suggests they are socially retarded, sheltered and vaguely supremacist.

Like Archie and Jughead's Veronica ... sexy but mean. Smart but kind of stupid.

After we left the theatre most of us talked about the slutty girls. Except Tara, who was furious. "It just goes to show you," she muttered, "how it's still okay to be racist."

Nobody mentioned that the girls in the movie were also incredibly homophobic. We weren't ready to defend that kind of thing yet. As mad as Tara was, I was kind of jealous.

It must be nice, I thought, to live in this pearly world where you could have opinions like that and not have them affect your life. To have the privilege of thinking that skinheads are this nice group of guys, because you're white and no one hates you.

4 . PAUL

My last summer before university I had a job at Grey Corp., a giant corporate conglomerate stationed in a gigantic concrete paperweight-like building just outside of Davisville station, on the periphery of downtown. I was one of about three hundred students working there that summer, in this corporate monster whose specific purpose I never determined. On a good day, about seven of the 2,000 people in the building would recognize you. On a really good day, one of those seven was your employer. Every day I would bring the same guy his faxes for the morning and he would introduce himself to me like I'd just

walked in off the street. If you were a sensitive person this might cause you mental stress. Lots of people quit the first week, or just stopped showing up. If you were smart you saw this identity gap as a way to do as little as possible.

Mostly I photocopied.

The photocopier on the third floor had giant silver fingernails that sorted the copies for you, flipping them over and making neat little piles in the out-tray. It was one of a legion of machines that would eventually make people like me, a temp, superfluous. But back then, for \$12.50 an hour, I leaned on the machine, warming my ovaries by its green light.

I didn't notice Paul until my second week. Paul was tall and thin, almost ghostly, permanently hunched forward like a *Star Trek* alien. His skin tone blended almost perfectly with the oatmeal-coloured office walls. He had a shaved head that peeked over the top of his accounting cubicle like the cottony head of a Q-tip. If you squinted, you could see his head from the elevator lobby, through the accounting-room doors, glowing under the fluorescent lights.

The rumour around the office was that Paul was a skinhead. Katy, who was also a photocopy clerk, told me this like a warning one day while we are outside having a smoke. I was the only non-white person Katy knew working there, with the

exception of a couple of women on the cleaning crew, and the manager, who was Korean. Katy was a born co-conspirator. I'm not sure if she was outraged so much as pleased to have something juicy to tell me while we smoked our Player's Lights.

"Do you think he would get violent?" she wondered.

"God, I hope not."

I mean, it's not legal, right, to assault Asians, I thought, just because you're a skinhead.

Shortly after that, I started following Paul around, lurking a half block behind him when he went to the mall every afternoon for Kentucky Fried Chicken. At first it was like spying, like keeping my eye on the enemy. It was also something to do over lunch, instead of smoking myself into an iron lung. I'd perch myself at a high table by the A&W, nibbling on limp french fries while I watched him eat. Paul was always reading from a little red book. *Mien Kampf*? I could never get close enough to see.

I had this overwhelming urge to know him. In my mind I had already formulated our exchange. He would be cold and quiet, more angry than rude, like the mean vice-principal that's really just lonely and wants to be friends. We would talk about his theories. I would be unshaken by his racism. Eventually he

would come to enjoy debating with me. I would talk him down off the roof of his hatred for me based on the colour of my skin. Ultimately, he would come to accept me.

Like meeting a skinhead on *Degrassi*.

I watched too much TV.

After a month of observing Paul eating greasy breaded chicken for lunch (upon further reflection, what food could possibly be more white-power-friendly than KENTUCKY fried chicken? Eaten with *Mien Colonel* lately?), with no confrontation in sight, I started leaving the house early in the morning so I could stake out the front gate of the office with my coffee and cigarette. Paul was an easy person to track and stalk. He was always on time.

“Hey, Paul.”

It never occurred to me that he might be just this really shy guy who had caught head lice from his roommate and shaved his head. I didn’t find that out until the end of the summer, shortly after Paul started using the back entrance. I thought he was avoiding me because I was Asian.

Eventually Paul found out that I thought he was a skinhead, likely from one of the accounting guys who smoked with Katy.

I guess he was pretty mortified, a justifiable response when you consider what he was being accused of. He sent me a long e-mail talking about how much he hated racism of all kinds, how he was sorry if he had made me uncomfortable or nervous.

Katy told me later that she'd heard that Paul and I had "had words" outside the building. News of Paul's defeat spread like a sore throat. Before I knew it, I'd become something of an accidental hero. I guess the word was that I had been brave, standing up to Paul's racist rhetoric. At the company picnic that August, Paul cornered me by the chip bowl and made nervous small talk. He spent the afternoon getting me Cokes and telling me about his ferret.

I probably should have been nicer to Paul, but by then I had lost interest. Nowhere in what I had pictured was Paul a nervous close-talker with cinnamon-gum breath who spent \$50 on a harness for his ferret, Simon. Simon?

By then it was August and I was tired of photocopying. I started skipping out of work early. No one bothered me about it, either because they didn't know me or because they did and they thought I'd already been through so much that summer—dealing with the skinhead and all. I had no interest in correcting them.

The last day of work I called in sick so I wouldn't have to say goodbye.

5. THOMAS

I went to university resolving to find out who I was. That task was on my list of things to do, along with getting a boyfriend and an education. People always talk about “finding yourself” like you have to go somewhere to do it. If yourself is you, you should technically be able to find it no matter where you are, even sitting on the couch watching TV and eating curry. But for some reason it never works out that way.

As soon as I got to McGill I started to wonder if I had maybe made the wrong choice in location for the goal of finding myself, or any other goal for that matter. Most of my memories of that year involve sleeping. I slept through all my classes, my face pressed against the cold metal rings of my binder. It would be cool if I could recall what else I was doing that year that made me so tired.

I lived in the only all-girl dormitory on campus, a vaguely '70s-style, Lego-like, nine-storey building at the bottom of the hill, the kind of place private school girls' parents sent them when going off to school and getting away from mom and dad was a thing to be accomplished in safe stages. It was a dorm full of girls whose idea of a night out was sitting around peeling grapefruits like oranges and leaving the white flaky skins behind in the hallway to dry. The Grapefruit Girls. All of them had private school boyfriends at Western or the University of Guelph who called on Friday at 9 P.M. (clearly before they went out

partying for the evening). This was before 80 percent of these girls realized that they were ultimately going to leave these boys, when it was still worth waiting around, eating grapefruit and painting your nails, because what was the point of going out drinking when you had a boyfriend. Whom you loved!

The only guy I got to know, on any level, that year, was a boy named Thomas. Thomas used to hang around my dorm all the time.

I was never sure where or how Thomas fit into this dorm scenario. One day, at the beginning of the semester, he just showed up. He was at a film club orientation and someone brought him home. After that, he was always there, doing nothing the way you do your first year of university when you're not paying for it.

I think The Grapefruit Girls liked Thomas because he was big and geeky and harmless. He had chubby cheeks and wire glasses, a soft rounded Pakistani accent, hair like the black bristles on a cat brush, always sticking straight up, ill-fitting tan pants cinched tightly at the waist and shiny shoes. He had no facial hair and, therefore, posed less of a threat than the big burly hippies we bumped into in the hallways at school, with full beards and lecherous stares. Thomas kept his lecherous stares to himself. He brought cheese-less pizza over on Friday night and watched movies, a cuddly sofa cushion in the TV

room that always went obediently home at the end of the evening, disappearing into the rain while I watched him from my window.

It wasn't until I met Thomas's roommate, Brad, in my Poli Sci 101 class that I gained some insight.

"Oh yeah. Thomas," Brad said, when I mentioned him. "Yah, he's a big rich-chick freak. He LOVES your dorm. It's like, his playpen, all these girls running around in their Tommy Hilfiger pajamas. HILARIOUS!"

It turned out that harmless Thomas had been drawn into our dorm by a vision of well-financed beauty, one propagated by actors like Molly Ringwald in *The Breakfast Club*, pink hair and lips and sushi for lunch ... grapefruits for dinner.

After that I felt kind of sorry for Thomas. It aggravated me, these girls calling him when they got off the phone with their boyfriends, getting him to bring over wine, go to the video store, lend them his textbooks and help them with their papers.

When he left they'd giggle about his nervous hands gently shaking when they leaned on him on the couch. Kind of creepy, huh, they chuckled.

Thomas was in my film studies class and sometimes we

would sit together if there were no other Grapefruit Girls around. The week before March Break the class watched the documentary *Talk 16*. When we broke off into pairs for discussion, Thomas mentioned that he'd liked the part where Erin said that thing about the skinheads.

"It displays a kind of innocence," he said. "It makes you think, you know, those girls that go to those schools, what do they know of the world? Right? They don't know anything."

Something about the soft grin on his face, like the smile the bread of a sandwich makes when you grab it with both hands, twisted a metal bolt lodged somewhere deep inside me, near my stomach.

"Well," I said, "it's a stereotype, right? One that Erin just happens to fit into. It's not necessarily true of all private school girls, right, that they're these fluffy white girls who know nothing about the real world. I mean, I went to private school."

Thomas stopped and looked down at the notes he was writing, clearly unwilling to envision me with my pizza face and green uniform. I don't know what I wanted him to say.

"Well," he admitted sheepishly, "you would be the exception to the rule."

I suppose Thomas was under a Billy Joel “Uptown Girl” influence, deluded by visions of cashmere sweaters and expensive perfume. Not that he had the (mis)fortune of seeing this fantasy in action, having never dated any rich, private school girls, not even the girls he bought pizza for almost every night, who studied with him and watched movies with him but never asked him anywhere outside of the dorm.

Why? Well, because, as we mentioned earlier, these girls were, largely, but not exclusively, elitist, and sometimes kind of mean.

You can be attracted to a stereotype and not have it work for you. In fact, I think that’s how these things usually go.

Sometime around midterms Thomas stopped coming around. The Grapefruit Girls phoned him for a Chinese food run and he never returned their call. Or so they said. I like to think that was true.

Maybe he found a girlfriend, I suggested to them one day while they sat using protractors to peel the thick white skin off their grapefruits.

None of them thought so. No one would say why.

HUMP

ON YOUR BEST DAYS, THE WORLD SHOULD BE LOUD and Technicolor, nonsensical but cool, like the text in the Korean greeting card I bought in Chinatown for my cousin.

**HAPPY SUN FUN TODAY FOR YOU!
YOU ARE BIRTHDAY BOY YOU ARE GLORY
IN A WORD!**

The neon-pink letters likely meant nothing to the people in the country they were produced in, exuberation without any specific meaning. When you don't know the language it's just the sounds and the feeling, a foreign experience spelled out with vowel sounds and exclamation marks.

It's 5:30 A.M., a crisp sunny morning in Sunnybrook Park, the only time a city this populated feels squeaky and new, right out of the Cellophane. I'm standing in a baseball field, on the line you would normally cross rounding second to third, my hands

stretched up above my head. Just breathing in the air feels intense, like Freezie-breath minus the cuts in the corners of your mouth. Everything looks like the sharp and overly defined background of a video game, too blue and too green. At this hour I can hold onto the high that goes with a feeling of accomplishment, eyes wide and letting in the light, pupils rapidly adjusting.

I'm supposed to be pretending to be a tree, surrounded by other Torontonians also pretending to be trees, but I'm actually pretending that I'm reaching to touch the Windex-blue sky. I'm imagining that this is actually possible and making that my small goal for the day. Carl, long like the sunrise shadows of the maples behind him, stands on the pitcher's mound, droning out instructions to the crowd standing in scattered rows in front of him.

“Okay now, so, we're like trees, and we can, like, feel the wind through our fingers.... And now I think we're going to bring our fingers down, you know, take your time, just like fall....”

Like, you know, take your time.

Everyone takes in a deep breath, not because we're told to but because it just feels like the right time to do so. Bending down I can smell the dewy grass squitching beneath my feet.

Carl.

In regular life, Carl is my coffee guy, brown puppy-dog eyes and a gentle voice, somewhat underdeveloped looking but sweet in a way that compensates for it. Carl works at The Bean, an arty coffee house in downtown Toronto that sometimes holds poetry readings and political meetings, although it really shouldn't because it has no room. The only thing I really know about Carl is that Carl is a self-righteous vegan with a severe distaste for all things dairy. If you ask him for cream for your coffee he'll warily point to a table several feet away, a table he never touches. Before I met Carl I never knew that cream, white and smooth, could feel dirty. Now whenever I try to drink cream it takes like old butter, wrong.

Being in the park, stretching and pretending to be nature are part of Carl's alternative master plan, also known as HUMP. HUMP happens every Tuesday and Thursday at five in the morning, weather permitting.

I've been coming here for three weeks.

The idea behind HUMP, according to Carl, is not so much exercise as physical expression, the willingness to let your body do things that feel good, like stretching and being outside, rolling around in the dirt, being a tree. Art. It's all about energy, says Carl, the energy in the earth and the energy

in our bodies working together. Movement. Movement equals power.

Humans
Use
Movement for
Power

Free yoga organized and led by a man whom I suspect doesn't really know much about yoga.

Not that I mind.

If this was *Bridget Jones's Diary* I would probably be doing this either to lose weight or get over a boyfriend. Fortunately for me it's not and I'm neither. I hated that book.

I've given myself a bunch of reasons for coming here, a lot of which have to do with the fact that this is outside and I'm almost never outside, and I probably should be. Carpet is not grass.

Then there are my thighs, which, while comfortably plump, are pulled so taut they squeak when I walk. Sometimes when I walk my ass and hamstrings are so tight and sore that I actually have to grab my own ass to relieve the pain. It's because I pinch my bum together when I'm nervous. You could bounce a dime off my hindquarters, but there's a price to pay for that.

Mary in accounting has a stone of stress that lives in her left butt cheek. Like George Costanza's wallet on *Seinfeld*, it keeps her permanently tilted to the right when she types. She looks like that old V8 commercial about people being unbalanced because they don't have enough veggies in their system.

I talked to my doctor about it and she told me I need to relax. Get some exercise, she said.

I tried going to proper aerobics but proper aerobics and me are not really compatible. Susie, my aerobics instructor, was very pushy. She kept telling us to get our knees up, very weird. She spent the entire hour blowing this whistle dangerously close to my ear. Deafness is not the quickest route to stress-free bliss, I don't care what the YMCA tells you.

I like this much better. Carl is anything but pushy. Carl is too content and stoned to be pushy.

I bet if you saw me in the park right now, curled up in a ball on my side pretending to be a rock, my nose pressed to my knees, you would think I was crazy. I am not so worried about that because when I was sixteen years old I *was* crazy. Several days after my sixteenth birthday, my parents put me on medication because I was sad all the time and hid like a dust bunny in the corner of my room, avoiding all human contact. The meds made me happy but they also made me run. It was like speed

coursing through my veins, white light blasting out of my ass and propelling me forward. I ran like I was a cat on fire. I ran in my oxfords and boxer shorts because I didn't have any proper running clothes. It wasn't long before I realized I couldn't stop. I started pulling muscles and straining my ankles. Eventually, three weeks after I became the fattest kid on the track and field team, my parents took me off the meds.

And I stopped running.

There are all different kinds of crazy.

For the second half of HUMP we dust the dirt off our track pants and gather in a circle. Carl starts us off clapping and stomping. Clap clap clap, stomp stomp. After a couple of rounds, pairs enter the circle and “socially interact” using body movement. This is probably the loosest and strangest part of the morning, if only because you're actually touching strangers, something you rarely do in Toronto unless you happen to lose your balance in the subway. Unlike in *Fight Club*, HUMP has a No Hurting rule. NO hair pulling. NO hitting. There are those who break the rules but they are few and far between, as I understand it. Last week I wrestled this girl with really long white dreads. It was probably my least pleasing HUMP thus far. She kept pinching me while I was pinned down. Fortunately she's not here today. Instead I end up wrestling a fuzzy guy with a face like a teddy bear, wearing

cut-off track shorts and a March of Dimes T-shirt. We clap hands onto each other's shoulders and spin around, taking turns pushing and being pushed. I dig my toes into the dirt and use all my strength to get him to move. I'm sure he's humouring me; it's like pushing a Buick. He smells like cedar. Eventually, after several back-and-forths, he pushes me away and does several long kicks over my head. I squat, noticing suddenly that, as he kicks, I get a bit of a view.

At the end of our fight, fuzzy man extends a paw to me. I accept it and he pulls me into him, wrapping his woolly arms around my torso and squeezing me tight, pushing my face into his T-shirt. Eventually he lets go and everyone claps as I return to my spot and two other people enter the ring.

My girlfriend says the thing she finds the most amazing about this chosen activity is how little I think about it. I have vague notions, but I'm not really into explaining this, and if I were called upon, I might not even be able to do so. As I take my place in the circle I feel squeezed but strangely energized, like somewhere inside me, under my lungs and beneath my heart, there's a soft buzz of electricity.

After we've wrestled for a while, Carl gets us to lie down on the ground and stretch out, to practise breathing and letting the air into our lungs. I've heard some people say that when they're lying down they can hear the earth *hum*.

Sometimes, if I listen really closely, I can hear something that sounds like traffic.

On the way home I pass the Tai Chi class that practises a good distance away from us so as not to be associated with our strange movements. I'm growing fonder and fonder of Tai Chi. It might end up being my next morning activity; I bet they have someplace to go if it rains. Tai Chi looks like a bunch of people all slowly pushing an elephant. They all have the same look of quiet concentration on their faces, like they're in a library instead of a park. As they move in sync to point themselves west, a flock of seagulls erupts behind them, almost unnoticed.

Off in the distance Carl walks his path home, surrounded by a small group of wrestling types. Every time I come here there are a few more that leave with him to help him open up the Bean and drink milk-free lattes. Today one of them holds his hand.

Three months from now I'll find out that Carl has abandoned HUMP to start another group that will eventually move into a commune and grow apples. I'll hear this through rumour. Once or twice I'll come to the park and find only joggers.

I'll wonder if being in Carl's new group involves sleeping with him, and take up Tai Chi.

E. RIGBY

IT'S WINDY AND FREEZING OUTSIDE, AND OLD LADIES are clinging to the telephone poles to avoid being whipped away, frozen ankles in baggy flesh-coloured nylons, hands clutching hats and chests. It's either cold-head or heart-attack weather, depending on how old you are. The old guy who sits with the smoke in his mouth at the café near where I work is looking worse for wear, like he's recently been airbrushed with salt. The Budget toque squished onto his head looks too small, and the flattened fake-fur collar on his coat only comes halfway up his neck, leaving his chin and ears pink from exposure. The students of the local high school buy him coffee and place it on the little foldout table in front of the café where he sits. On an average day there are usually three or four cups in front of him, like he's waiting for company that's not coming.

As soon as I pass him the lyrics inevitably pop into my head: "All the lonely people, where do they all come from...?"

The city.

The first time I heard the The Beatles' "Eleanor Rigby" I couldn't believe anyone could sing anything that depressing,

lyrics that inspired roughly the same feelings as the cancer warnings on the cigarettes my parents smoked in the summer. When I was little, the idea of being that old, and the possibility that I would die and no one would come to my funeral, possibly because I kept my face in a jar by the door, was a distant nightmare, like thoughts of car accidents I would probably never have, because I always wore my seat belt and didn't even drive yet.

Rounding out the last of my twenties, old people are my newest obsession, something to keep an eye on like a wasp buzzing around your pop can. Inevitably, looking at them makes me wonder what I will feel like when I'M old, the day when wearing little-old-lady hats and carrying little-old-lady purses will no longer be arty, only expected. Mostly when I picture myself as an old lady I'm on a bus, because if I'm a terrible driver now, I'll likely be even worse when I'm older. They'll probably come and take my licence away from me, impound my LeBaron. I've started to imagine my tiny apartment, my little TV and my doilies, the shuffled path in the carpet from the kitchen to the couch. The old lady smell I'll develop. My pilly slippers. Crusty feet.

I'm absolutely afraid of being old and lonely. Face it, I think between sips of scotch, people drift in and out of your life all the time. Most likely, when you're old, you'll be alone.

I've started thinking of ways to deal with this potential old-person loneliness. My best plan so far is to join some sort of born-again Christian group. Born-again Christians are very

stick-together people. So long as you purport to believe what they believe, they HAVE to hang out with you. Maybe I'll learn to play the organ and get invited to their born-again Christian hymn-singing parties.

Then again, maybe I'll get a dog and hang out with the old-dog people. I'll be Fluffy's mom, walking around with a Loblaws bag on my hand, making small talk about bones and picking up poo.

Then I think, Well there are all these golden-oldies dyke things now—maybe I'll fish out my rainbow rings and join one of those.

Maybe I'll get me a trailer and go live on WOMYN ONLY land. I'm make my own preserves and grow thyme in a little flower box on my windowsill.

Possibly if I was rich I could pay a harem of blondes to hang out with me, like Hugh Hefner.

I make these plans in my head, temporary corks to stem the flow of insecurity. It's working less and less lately, since my grandmother developed Alzheimer's.

When I was twenty my roommate threw out all our pots and pans, silver nail polish and hair-glue stuff. All gone. Alzheimer's could happen to anyone, she said, aluminum in your blood like mercury.

My grandmother's illness has reinforced my nagging suspicion that there are no sure paths, no guarantees. My grandmother, who has been married to my grandfather for over fifty years, now doesn't know who he is. One day my grandmother

knew everything, the next day she was wandering around looking through people's newspapers, suddenly someone who could no longer look after, who had to be looked after, and wasn't particularly happy about it.

Imagine this for my grandfather, who now, periodically, lives with a perfect stranger, conceivably someone my grandmother once was, long before she met him. Sometimes she's happy he's there. Sometimes she thinks he's breaking into her room. Sometimes he's just this guy opening doors for her, talking to her, making her watch the news or the History Channel. Last week, for a break, my grandfather started going down to the gym to work on the exercise bike, which is impossible to explain to my grandmother. My grandmother says he's going to visit "the other woman."

Last week we were in a restaurant and she told me she was all alone. Imagine, at a restaurant, surrounded by her family.

The air feels colder after I pass the old man sitting outside the café, round the corner to work, humming softly to myself, trying not to think about those things I cannot change.

TALE OF TWO CITIES

I'VE SPENT AN UNSPEAKABLE AMOUNT OF TIME lately talking to ten-year-old boys. That's because I'm currently in the throes of a pre-thirties age crisis that required the purchase of an Xbox© game system.

The original idea was that it would be a stress-reliever gift for my girlfriend; although, now we've as much as admitted that it's probably causing more angst than it's relieving. For reasons we're hesitating to relate to AGE, neither my partner nor I is particularly skilled when it comes to actually playing with the Xbox©, which is sort of vexing. So we end up spending even more time playing, gripping the joysticks with our junkie white-knuckled claws. Last week my brother sent me an email about these cheat sites, which are essentially online game cities run by little boys. Now I spend all my time trying to goad kids with online names like Deathstalker into telling me, say, how to get into the extra skate park in Tony Hawk's Pro Skater.

Last week I was instant messaging with this kid called "Megadestroyer," who was giving me codes for making the

games super slow and, therefore, easier to win. Megadestroyer is from Las Vegas, which is apparently much better than Toronto.

We have a pyramid here in Las Vegas.

We have a Dome.

We have a roller coaster.

Us too.

We have a moving sidewalk.

We have the tallest freestanding structure in the world.

WHAT?

A tower.

O ya. We have the Eiffel Tower.

See, you learn something new everyday.

Eventually it was Megadestroyer's bedtime, but he had one reluctant parting shot.

I guess Toronto is ok?

Gee, thanks.

About a week later I was watching TV and I saw an ad for the *Toronto Star*. Do you just live here, a concerned voice asked, or is this where you live? I suppose if you just live here you can read the *National Post*. If this is where you live, you should read the *Toronto Star*. Since I do, in fact, get the weekend *Star*, this must be where I live, although technically my partner and I were

bullied into this purchase by an overenthusiastic telemarketer who caught us on the dirty end of a hangover. I'm not exactly sure what five pounds of paper on my porch each Saturday says about where and how I live, though the cat pee it's usually covered in says something about the number of cats in our neighbourhood. I don't even really read the paper. Mostly I just look at the comics and the TV listings, periodically scanning the Arts and Entertainment section for my name.

I'm just not really a municipal-pride kind of person, to be honest. I rarely think about the city I live in as something worth thinking about. I'm not what you would call residentially invested, fused to the belief that the place where I live is either #1 or one of a kind. Whether or not where I live is #1 doesn't change my rent, if you know what I mean. About the only time I entertain civic thoughts is when I'm in the process of defending the place where I live from what I see as senseless negativity. It's something I end up doing a lot, not only because of kids like Megadestroyer but because I happen to have a lot of friends from Montreal.

And Montrealers hate Toronto.

I'm not clear why this is. I have a friend who says it's a matter of language, a long-nailed, hair-pulling conflict between Francophone and Anglophone. I can't but think, though, that whenever a Montrealer asks me how I can stand living here the question has little to do with English.

Besides, half the people I know in Montreal are from Toronto.

My friend K is the worst for this. K lived in Rosedale for eighteen years, and now he acts like a European tourist whenever he's here, lost in a fog of mild disdain. He acts the way my parents acted in my first Montreal apartment, like he doesn't particularly want to sit down.

I take him for coffee and he sits hunched in the corner, stirring his latte with his wooden stir stick, staring at the busy flow of business suits outside our window, all the while with his left eyebrow crooked up like it's saying, *Can you believe this?*

Toronto cafés are so depressing, he says without explanation

Oh please, I counter, they're not depressing, you just want to be depressed by them. There are lots of cafés like this in Montreal.

This whole city, K says, throwing his arms in the air, is insane.

Like how?

Like take granola bars, K says. What is it with this Toronto *thing* about granola bars?

Like what?

In Toronto, K says, granola bars are called "cereal bars." Torontonians eat them instead of breakfast. They're *breakfast on the go*.¹ It's like you don't even have time to have CEREAL here, the fastest breakfast there is, K says. What could be so very important that you can't even have cereal? Or toast? K

¹ K hates that phrase, "on the go." It implies, he says, that we aren't already in constant motion.

says cereal bars are the anti-breakfast, typical of Toronto's tendency to take a good idea and mash it up into something convenient and ultimately way less enjoyable. K is especially disturbed by the fact that our cereal bars even have fake marshmallow milk. In Montreal, K says, granola bars are square cookies. As they should be.

It's interesting that you would say that, I tell K, because the worst diet I ever had was the diet I maintained when I was in Montreal. The whole time I lived in Montreal, I had this nagging feeling that I was going to end up starving. It was like living there made it suddenly difficult to keep track of food, or even buy food. The housing areas where the McGill students lived were lined with cafés and bars—that was where people went, to cafés and bars. I spent my first month there thinking there were no grocery stores. No one I knew went to grocery stores. It made me wonder if the whole city wasn't existing on a diet of alcohol, caffeine and nicotine, a population of sleek, hard-body engines that ran on liquid fuel, cutting through the city like modern French *anime* figures. The only food-selling places I could find within walking distance of my place were *dépanneurs*, little variety stores with beer and candy and cheap hamburger buns, and shelves of dusty tins lit by fluorescent lights.

When I had money, and when sobriety was my comfortable fuzzy cardigan, I would burrow over to my local *dépanneur*, right next to my local bar, and buy bags of extended-shelf-life foods. Like shopping in a bomb shelter. The whole store was below sidewalk level and no one talked. It was a weekly

soundless transaction. I bought baskets of canned soup, canned pasta and granola bars. That was the one thing the store always had in abundance: S'Mores bars.

Oh, I like those, K says.

One time my roommate and I got in a fight and, that night when I was sleeping, she went into my cupboard and tore the labels off all my cans. I opened my cupboard the next day and all I could see was this unbroken wall of silver. I almost had an aneurysm. The very idea of it hit my stomach like a ball of white light....

K says he has actually been hit in the stomach by a ball of white light, back when he was a sorcerer in high school and some kid sent a ball of bad energy over to his room. The ball of white light hit him in the stomach. He couldn't walk for days.

Now K momentarily looks over to the counter of baked goods and adds, You know what else is terrible here. BAGELS.

I won't even hear the argument about how Toronto bagels suck because, frankly, I'm tired of it. I like Toronto bagels. I know people say they're like donuts but I personally don't see anything wrong with a fluffy bagel. You can eat your shriveled Montreal bagels if you want but I want a bagel that makes a good sandwich. You can't even make a sandwich with a Montreal bagel, the hole's too big. It's like making a sandwich with a soft pretzel covered in uncooked sesame seeds.

(As an aside, I think K secretly likes Toronto bagels too, because he always orders them when he's here.)

Either that, or he's just ordering them to dis them.

Sometimes I wonder why I hang out with K. It can be a trying exercise at times. Talking with K is like talking to my parents about my weight or my tattoos, a perpetual dialogue of disappointment. When I told him I was moving, K wrung his hands, not understanding why I would move back to Toronto after four years of living in Montreal. It seems a great waste to him, to move to a city where you have to work harder to pay the rent.

K sees my apartment, my IKEA couch, lamps and tables all in gentle greys and blues, as a store-bought letdown. Toronto housing, he tutts, has no imagination. K's apartment is the top floor of a warehouse, the bottom floor of which manufactures leather harnesses for rich Francophone swingers.

Très chic.

K has some stuff from IKEA in his apartment too, but it's not as PREVALENT in Montreal, he says, as it is here, Swedish minimalism all over the place. It's like Toronto wants to be a store, he tells me, inside and out, and everyone in Toronto is buying. Whereas Montreal just wants to be a city. And Montrealers just want to live.

Do you drink wine in the park? he asked me the last time he was here.

I think the teenagers do, I said.

About a month after I moved to Toronto, K came for a visit. It was his mother's birthday but he stayed at my apartment, because I was still a Montrealer, a quasi-neutral terri-

tory, like Switzerland. I tried to make his stay kind of spontaneous and weird, artsy and cool, as though to prove that I, too, was still spontaneous and weird (despite living here). I gathered a milk crate of wine bottles and glass jars and took K to the abandoned transit station behind my house. We spent the night lobbing bottles at the wall, drinking and smoking. It was cool—until the next day when the glaring sun hit our mountain of broken glass only a hundred feet or so from my house and I felt guilty, and wondered if my neighbours would notice. As soon as K left, I went and cleaned it up.

Eventually I got tired of trying to pretend that I was living some bohemian lifestyle. Now, when I go to meet K, I make an active effort NOT to hide my apparent burgeoning Toronto conservatism.

Is that the Gap? he asks.

Yes. Yes, it is.

Sad.

You think so?

I can't believe you moved here to become a Gap girl.

Okay, two Gap shirts! I have two Gap shirts!

It's funny because I think that the reason K hates Toronto is that, when he lived here, he was a huge geek. K doesn't advertise the fact that he used to live here, but I know for a fact that he did. I also know that when he lived here, his big claim to fame was that he was a highly acclaimed flutist. K wasn't even just a flutist, K was a flute prodigy. They did a story on him in the *Globe and Mail*, something that doesn't

happen to a lot of white kids, and this, of course, made all the kids at school hate him even more. I met K's sister once over a bowl of sangria at one of K's parties. She told me this story about when K was fourteen, about how some bully in the strings section of his Grade 10 band class actually beat him with his own flute. I can't even imagine what that was like. I bet it hurt a lot. I mean, the flute's a pretty flimsy instrument but it's metal and bumpy. If you think about it, it's probably the deadliest of all the wind instruments, the easiest to swing. Perhaps this is why K doesn't talk about that part of his life. K went to McGill University in Montreal with the intention of studying music. But after a semester of Montreal, K changed departments and started studying film.

Something he still does.

Wondering if he will sympathize, I tell K that I moved to Toronto because I felt beaten by "Montreal." I just couldn't hack it. It was like this life I didn't have the energy or the smarts or the ability to handle. And I couldn't shake the impression that it was brighter here. When things got really bad in my second and third year of university, when I was, as my friend Dave would say, sinking into the mossy floor of the unstable wilderness of my own creation, when gin was the only and easiest thing to call on, I'd stay up late with my friends at the bar, then drag my knapsack to the bus station to take the midnight Greyhound home to Toronto, eating Gummi Bears and drinking Pepsi to stay awake. On the bus, I'd watch the city lights disappear and then slowly reappear

outside my window, listening to my *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* soundtrack (replaying the song “Finally” over and over and over again). The bus arrived in Toronto at 6 A.M., and I arrived home just in time to see my parents out the door on their way to work, before I passed out on the couch by the window, the white light of the sun invading my skull.

I started to get this impression that it was sunnier in Toronto, which likely had something to do with the fact that I was rarely awake during the day in Montreal. Maybe Montreal was just too crazy, too much of an allowance for being and going crazy, with grocery stores that not only sold wine but delivered.

K says that’s not fair. I mean, did you ever think that maybe Montreal wasn’t crazy at all? he asks. Maybe you were just crazy. Maybe.

And maybe it’s something like that saying, about how the things we hate in others are usually reflections of things we hate in ourselves. Maybe a city is like a mirror, reflecting our weaknesses and our pasts. And we hate that reflection the way we hate that part of ourselves.

Did you ever think that maybe Toronto isn’t uptight? I ask K. Maybe you’re just uptight when you’re here.

Maybe.

K and I have a tradition where I see him off to the station and wait with him in line until they call his train.

“*Toronto Oshawa Belleville Kingston Brockville Dorval et Montréal.*”

It's our parting of minds. He goes to his world and I sink back into mine.

Sometimes after K leaves, I go visit my dad, who works in one of the giant buildings just a couple of blocks away.

I tell him about K and my dad shrugs. He's very busy, in his office on the fortieth floor of a building that looks out over the city of Toronto, sparkling corporate glass reflecting the image of the other equally sparkly corporate buildings.

Montreal, you know, he says, full of punks and hippies.

I nod.

Just like you, he says. Punk.

THE FOREST FOR THE TREES

“IT’S TREE DAY,” MATTHEW TRILLS ON THE phone over the background conversation of glassware being shelved and washed. “TREE DAY!”

Matthew is a movie buff, so he’s coming off like Bill Murray in *Groundhog Day*.

“Get your wheels and let’s go! It’s seven o’clock and the woods await us!”

There’s a pause and mumbling in the background. “John says to wear boots. It’s going to be muddy.”

As he’s hanging up the phone, I can hear John laughing with glee in the background.

Driving theatre homosexuals around is something I’ve been doing for almost a year now, since last fall when I backed into the bike rack outside a local playhouse. What started out as a string of “favours” to pay off a bent back tire has blossomed into a part-time job. About the only downside, so far, are the latte cups and fancy biscotti wrappers I’m constantly finding in the back seat.

Other than that, it's not a bad gig. I drive them where they want to go, they pay me. It's like being part school bus driver, part FedEx girl.

The fact that I got this job because of, rather than despite, my accident should tell you a little something about the people I'm working for. As a writer, I'm often seen by my straight friends as a flake, but my theatre friends think I'm a pillar of stability. It seems no one there is as much worried about my crappy parallel parking skills as they are thrilled to bits that I (a) can drive and (b) have a car.

It's damn interesting work a lot of the time because it's THEATRE. So, we could be picking up lights and speakers, or just about anything under the sun. To name a few: a cotton candy machine, a pair of unicycles, a parachute, and two giant foam lemons that we strapped to the top of the car with bungee cords and twine.

It's like a car commercial: "WHAT HAVE YOU DRIVEN IN YOUR HONDA LATELY?"

Today it's "sad trees."

They are for the set of Matthew's new play about these four art school students who commit suicide in a national park, *Smells Like Pine but Tastes like Death*. Nickname: *Tasty*. John, the set designer, wants real trees for the set. I think they're going to hang them from the ceiling, or something.

Whatever, so long as they're not hanging them off my car, which already has a scratch in the roof from the suit of armour we crammed in the trunk in April for Matthew's other play, A

Suit of Armour for My Broken Heart.

For such a chipper guy Matthew writes incredibly depressing plays. I suppose it would be worrisome if not for the fact that everyone's writing sad plays these days. Like it's some new thing, being sad, or, I suppose, being THIS sad. It could be that I wasn't paying attention before, that plays have always been sad, but it seems to me lately that even the funny plays I've seen have been kind of depressingly funny, like the movie *Beaches*, if *Beaches* had been written by a boy. My friend Rocky, who recently opted to grow a soul patch, says the heart is the new frontier of the millennia.

One of the results of this emphasis on sad theatre, aside from the enormous amount of drinking that happens after these plays, is that theatre set designers are specializing in rapid decay, sets of weather-beaten wood, planks banged with hammers and rocks to look old, then painted to look chipped. It's like what my mother did to ruin my living-room table at home using something called "crackle," which looks like dry skin—only on a grander scale. You spend three hours creating something and then eight hours fucking it up so that it looks decrepit.

There's a larger metaphor there but I won't get into it.

This tree-hunting trip is a bit of a lavish expense in the interest of artistic integrity. The trees could be ordered over the phone and delivered, but John and Matthew want to go to the tree farm to pick them out. They want to make sure that the trees chosen are especially morose, rather than, say, smug

or just mildly disappointed with their station in life. Matthew, who also has a soul patch, spends the drive up to the tree farm sketching on a napkin, gesturing with his hands. He'd like five sad trees, all drooping towards the camp scene that will be constructed centre stage.

I'm supposed to have read the play but I haven't, so I say nothing, concentrating on the butts of the cars in front of me, which look like angry robotic faces with flashing red eyes.

John, who is from British Columbia, where everything is green and easygoing (and yet, inexplicably, he is not all that fun to be around), spends the entire car drive up to Milton bitching about how we're having to go outside the city to BUY a tree. Like, whatever. The very idea that trees in Toronto are so special that we can't just chop one down, he grumbles, periodically pulling at his blond dreads and making eye contact with me in the rearview mirror to further impose his point.

Last night John tried to organize a group to go to Eglinton Park and steal a tree, but no one would go.

Cowards.

I am trying to convince John that the city of Toronto does a tree count every night.

"Yeah, whatever."

"It's true, dude."

"Oh yeah. Who does a tree count?"

"The parking meter attendants."

"Shut up."

"It's true."

John pauses and looks at Matthew, who is scribbling ideas on his little notepad and does not glance up.

“Whatever,” says John.

You gotta love those West Coast hippie arts types. So trusting. “How would you even know something like that?”

Aha! “Oh please,” I say, “do you think that the city would pay a bunch of people to check just on cars? Who cares about CARS?”

Matthew, who is not big on sarcasm, jabs John with his elbow. “Don’t get her started.”

The Milton 100 Acre Tree Farm is a fenced-in lot surrounded by white gravel and an army of concrete lawn statues. Inside the log cabin headquarters is a small shop of glazed outdoor knickknacks and, interestingly enough, clay toilet-paper holders, exaggerated snobbish butlers with their pants down holding toilet-paper rolls on their fingers, and farmers with signs on their overalls that say BORN IN A BARN? WASH YOUR HANDS!

We march straight to the sales desk and ring the little bell on the clay lily pad.

Moments later we have the rapt attention of Mary, the tanned duchess of the trees. Adjusting her heavy green MILTON 100! apron, she gives us a raised eyebrow. “Sad trees,” she repeats, like she’s misheard us.

We smile expectantly.

Matthew, who is dressed appropriately in red gingham and jeans, leans on the counter and says slowly but without any extra information, “Sad trees.”

Looking away briefly to see where John is, he misses the clearly unimpressed look on Mary's face, like, *Who does this schmo think he is?*

It's moments like these that are indicative of the hazard of being an artist and hanging out with artists, who have a bad rap for being uninterpretable and/or unapologetically strange. If you hang out with artists enough, you know the rap is well deserved. The problem, I think, has something to do with the fact that artists spend such a large portion of their adolescence alienated by the world around them, a world that often doesn't appreciate poetry, say, or *Star Wars*. So when the artist grows up and discovers others who do appreciate art—their art—and all the art-speak that goes with it, they're so thrilled to have found this, their community, that they lose all interest in translating, or explaining, their artistic impulses to the rest of the world. Grad students are the same way.

That's my theory.

The effect of this rift on the artist's relation to the outside world plays out differently depending on what kind of artists they are; visual artists, because they are driven by a non-verbal medium, are virtually uncommunicative (even amongst themselves); writers are a bit better, although often pained by attempts at day-to-day socializing, preferring instead the cold comfort of journals, diaries, and intensely long e-mails.

Theatre artists are a wild card because they're so dramatic and attention craving, so even if they think you won't understand

what they're saying, they have to say it big or, at least, with feeling.

Then again, I know a lot of artists who feel that what separates them from the rest of the world, what draws these curious stares and, sometimes, this confusion, is that they have an intuitive emotional sense of sorts, that draws them, creates a need in them, to really experience. Something non-artists often find hard to deal with. It's a distinguished stronger heart muscle of sorts, so I'm told, a third eye. An extra EMOTIONAL FEELING third eye....

As Matthew and Mary speak, John is off in a corner on one knee, stroking the nose of a concrete bear lawn ornament, staring into its unpainted white eyes.

"Bears are such noble creatures, hey?" he says.

How embarrassing.

Thank God Mary is game for a challenge. She rolls her eyes and directs us through the back door to the outside yard.

"My little tour guide car," she explains, pointing us to a golf cart parked by the door. "It's a big lot and everyone wants to pick out their trees personally, so we ride in this."

Matthew smiles.

"I'm driving, though, so no funny business."

No sweat. We scramble into the dusty golf cart, which is practically cemented into the scorched dirt, the wheels surrounded by a pie crust of baked mud. As we skid out of the lot there's a distinct ripping sound as the mud and rubber separate, and we're off.

As we take sharp turns, we feel like we're riding a tiny streetcar, an aggressively rugged woman driver at the wheel.

At first Mary, apparently at a loss, takes us to a field of very small trees. Walking around there makes us all feel powerful and gigantic, as our palms stretch down to graze the tips of the trees in the tiny forest.

"Not very sad, though," John finally says, "the fact that they're small."

Everyone looks at me because I'm short.

"What?!"

"No, of course not," Mary hastily agrees. "Maybe we need to look for something ... skinnier."

So we all jump back on the cart and hook a left to a series of taller, thinner pines, standoffishly situated to one side, by the fence. They don't look especially sad. Even to me.

Mary decides to take us over to the birch trees. "Maybe birches are sadder than pines," she suggests.

The birches, which are spaced farther apart than the other trees, do look lonely, with their pale white arms stretched up and out. If you step back they kind of look like they're reaching up to the sky, heads tilted back all the way so you can't see them.

John hops out of the cart and stands beside one of the trees for a while, wrapping both hands around the trunk.

Matthew looks startled. "What is he doing?"

"I think he's trying to talk to the tree."

"Hmmmmmm." says Matthew, stroking his soul patch.

I read this book once that had a passage about how you can divine a lot of an area's history by cutting open a tree and reading the rings inside. It's called dendrochronology: the art of talking to trees by cutting them open. It's known as dendroclimatology if you're using the tree rings to deconstruct the climate of a certain place, like how much rain there was three years ago, or how much sun there was a decade before that. It's kind of curious, if you consider it: you have to kill the tree to read its insides, which is a high cost for reading into something or someone.

My friend Abi, who is not a tree lover but a deep thinker, has noted the enormous significance of this twist, a thing having to die so we can know it. I find it ironic that you're not even really learning about the tree itself, but killing the tree to find out about the world around it.

Now *that's* sad.

How come no one's writing plays about that?

John leans forward and pushes his head into the tree trunk, flattening his dreads against the white bark.

Mary, who has returned to her cart to sit sideways on the seat and stare at John along with the rest of us, is quiet and still. We're all a little stunned suddenly, like special-order concrete statues, lost in thought.

Personally, I'm half thinking about Halloween, have been on and off since Matthew called me two weeks ago and told me why he needed my car. Trees make me think of Halloween.

In my experience, almost every family has a thing that, for some reason, they will not buy. And the unwillingness to bend financially gets passed down from generation to generation. Matthew will not buy a car. My friend Katie would rather starve than buy canned soup. I come from a long line of kids whose parents wouldn't buy Halloween costumes, instead dressing us in theatric monstrosities that mom and dad lovingly created at home.

My father's reason was financial.

"I can MAKE you into a ghost," my father would say. "I'm not going to go BUY you something for ONE NIGHT."

My mother's reasoning was more whimsical. "I don't even understand why you would consider BUYING something this important," she used to tell me every year when I begged for a plastic Wonder Woman costume pack from Shoppers Drug Mart.

When my father wasn't paying attention, my mother would sneak out and buy reams of fabric that she would later "find" in the basement, then spend hours at the sewing machine making me my Dream Costume.

Either that, or *her* dream costume, I was never sure which.

Every year I braved October 31st in one of my mother's homespun eyesoers.

One year she made me a bubble.

"I don't WANT to be a bubble."

"You said you did."

"No, I didn't."

“Yes, you did,” my mother said, zipping me into the Bubble. “Tell your dad if you have to pee and he’ll unzip you.”

Of course my friend Liam, whose father was a carpenter, had it even worse. At least my costumes weren’t especially HEAVY. One year Liam got beaten up by a bunch of older kids while wearing the Boom Box costume his father had made him for Halloween. The costume was pretty cool actually, with silver matchboxes glued on as buttons and duct tape marking where the tape would go. It was also incredibly cumbersome, making it difficult to, say, escape a gang of twelve-year-old boys dressed as pirates. Possibly, if Liam had had any free limbs, he would have defended himself. Unfortunately he had to use both arms to hold up the heavy 4 by 1½ by 3-foot silver frame, or else he would fall down. Thank God his little brother, dressed as a break-dancer, was able to run and alert the authorities.

I remember the Boom Box because that same year my mother spent an outrageous sum making me into a Christmas Tree, complete with three tiers of heavy crinoline and wire that made it impossible to sit down.

I started to cry as soon as she put the star on top of my head, the very moment I realized the entire getup was not cool, as my mother had promised, but hideously ugly.

“I—I don’t want to be a treeeee!”

Too late. I had to lean on the science board all through class and spend recess kneeling in a makeshift graveyard of ugly Halloween costumes with Liam, the beat-up Boom Box, and

two other kids dressed as pop cans. What kind of parent dresses their kid up as a Coke can? Honestly.

I stormed home after school and started to tear at my crinoline skirt in a blind third-grader rage. My father pointed out that if I ruined this costume I wouldn't be able to trick-or-treat at all.

Sometimes little girls have to buck up and be angry trees, he said.

As I ruminate on past childhood events, John and Matthew are now throwing themselves into the tree search. John stands in front of Mary with one arm raised straight up, the other bent at the elbow so that his hand dangles just behind his head. Matthew reaches over and pushes John's spine so that his stomach sticks out.

It's tree charades and Mary isn't paying any attention, she's just staring at me with this desperate look on her face.

Oh dear.

"You know what?" I finally offer. "I think we need to think up a Plan B."

After a briefing between John and Matthew, who have finally taken Mary's toe tapping and engine revving as a sign that they are becoming less and less worth the effort, it is decided that what is really needed is a tree that they can *make* sad, which could really be *any* tree, preferably something not too pricey.

"Five that aren't too pricey," Matthew says.

This Mary can easily comply with. She tags five trees and zips us back to the head office.

“Hey,” adds John, as Mary tallies the invoice, “would you throw in the bear for an extra \$20?”

“Yes,” Mary says, not looking up.

John grins.

Done and done.

For the rest of the drive home, with the giddy twins in the back sniffing their sleeves for the smell of pine, I’m in an explicably bad mood, suddenly not interested in the plans John has for *Tasty*. After all this talk of looking for sad trees, it now seems brutal to *make* a tree sad. Like we’re going to buy a perfectly content tree and then take it outside and give it a beating, tell it we killed its puppy.

Matthew says he wants to strip the needles off a bunch of the branches, the nervous-cat method of tree saddening.

I tune out and turn up the radio, miffed because the tree-saddening all sounds a little morbid.

God, I think, turning onto Highway 401 to head home, who’s the hippy-dippy now, huh?

Shakespeare said that all the world was a stage, but for a myriad of reasons, some uglier than others, some of us are more active and aware participants in this artistic farce than others.

TO H, WITH LOVE

ON FEBRUARY 4TH, 2003, MY PARTNER'S MOTHER PASSED AWAY.

She was fifty-four when she died from the tumors in her head, the final stage of a long battle with cancer that had begun almost exactly one year earlier. It might sound strange, but I think I was lucky to be there when she died, holding her hand with my partner and her sister and her aunt. Sitting on the bed while two of her dance students stood quietly in the shadows behind us, all of us crying and some of us shouting, as if her mom were on a boat leaving port, like in the 1950s, when that kind of thing happened more often. And we were all standing on the dock, yelling and waving our handkerchiefs, because we were not going. We were staying behind.

In a crisis, I can't help but scan the horizon for details, like I'm trying to anchor the situation with things that I'll remember. It's my writer's response to trauma. I remember the Y part in the hair on the back of my mom's head when our car ran into the back of a bus on Laurence Avenue when I was twelve; I remember my father's thin courier-font-like handwriting on the note he passed me when I was sixteen, the day they put me

in the hospital after I tried to kill myself. I keep a Polaroid of these things in the back pocket of my brain. I can open my hand and stare at the details projected onto my palm with my mind's eye—the curve of my mom's brown hair, the hook on the bottom of my Dad's y. Similarly, I remember that, at the moment my partner's mother took her last, soft, breath, I looked at the digital alarm clock beside her bed and the clock turned from 10:05 to 10:06 P.M.

Later on, at the funeral, my partner's uncle would say, with that sense of authority afforded older people, that the time had in fact been 10:05. Ten-oh-five P.M. Every time he said it, I felt my tongue move over the numbers like they were rough Scotch mints in my mouth, *ten—oh—six*.

Sometimes, and more often lately, I wonder if this habit of attention to detail is some kind of avoidance. I don't, you'll notice, remember the intricate details of my partner's mother's face, I don't remember exactly how long I was in the mental hospital after I was first admitted following the suicide attempt, I don't remember the details of my mother's car hitting the bus. And yet I cling to images related to those moments and this, in a way, forces me to cling to those memories. I can't help but wonder if these pinpoints are supposed to serve a purpose, form a path. I suppose that someday I'll be taking my last shallow breaths, grabbing onto those little memories like knots on a string, pulling myself out of my body and away. Hopefully it won't all be sad things....

FAKE ID

The pastel-plaid pattern on my first bedspread.

The curve of the back of the first horse I ever rode.

The pug face of my E.T. doll.

The chipped black nail polish on my fingernails during
Grade 13.

The bouquet I carried at my graduation.

The sun rising over the city of Montreal.

My cat's curled-up body on the bed.

C's blue eyes.

My mother's hands.

Ten—oh—six.

My father's y.

DIARY OF A BROOM GIRL

IT WAS DECEMBER 2002, AND I WAS DOWN BY THE harbour on Cherry Street, helping fix up a warehouse for an opera company. It was cold and dirty work, partly like working in a barn and partly like working in the diseased closet of a very old person, dust like talcum powder covering every surface and old sweaters and shoes tucked into corners. The whole place had to be swept and sanitized so that the opera singers coming in to perform in the space wouldn't get sore throats.

On one particular day I was sweeping and mopping all morning, accumulating a layer of soft dust molecules on my clothes that I shook off by stamping around outside, leaving dusty o's in my wake. I had developed a system with my broom and a green mystery cleaner, toxic sand that helped with the dust but left drag-queen emerald crusties in my eyes every morning. Kind of gross. That day I was content to spend the afternoon sweeping things into piles, thinking about what my "must have" for spring that year would be. Someone had

asked me earlier what it was and I didn't know. I wanted to have an answer by the end of that day.

I was thinking about shoes when I heard it, this somewhat taunting squeaky man-voice coming from above.

“HEY, BROOM GIRL!”

The voice belonged to a guy named Dwight. I hadn't spoken with Dwight since I had correctly guessed three days earlier that he played Dungeons and Dragons, a guess I hazarded not because Dwight had said anything to me about it but because I could just tell—indication number one being an excess of dragon-themed jewellery. That should tell you a little about Dwight, although admittedly nothing bad.

“HEY, BROOM GIRL, you want to pass me that cord?”

I picked up the cord and passed it up to him.

“Manko,” I said.

“What?”

“Manko,” I said. “That's my name.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Five minutes later, as Dwight wove his way among the floor lamps to get out for a coffee, he winked at me and pointed his finger at my broom.

“What’s up, Broom Girl?” He chuckled.

“Hey, Dwight,” I said, “if you call me broom girl one more time I’m going to shove this broom up your ass.”

The problem with ass threats, although they sound sweet and trip off the tongue like sucked Smarties, is that they are largely meaningless. Very rarely is a threat you make about someone’s ass something you plan to follow through on.

Dwight laughed, “Okay, Broom Girl.”

After that, only to Dwight but always to Dwight, I was Broom Girl. I started sweeping in uneven circles so that I could avoid him. I ate my lunch alone, away from the rest of the crew, chewing on a bitter cucumber sandwich and thinking about revenge. I abandoned my “must have for spring” and thought only of what I would say or do to Dwight before the job was over.

If you’re a feminist, you’ve had a feminist speech moment like this. The moment when you encounter what is undoubtedly sexism and your brain is suddenly flooded with a lethal

mix of politics and rage. If you're like me, however, this rage is often tempered by an oily residue of desire to say something with impact, something other than "FUCK YOU."

"FUCK YOU, ASSHOLE!"

It's the desire to say something that will define the confrontation as what it isn't, a bar brawl, and what it is, a clash of politics. It's the will to assert yourself as right, which is often infinitely difficult to do when the moment strikes you, even if you have had time to think about it.

Six years ago, when I was just out of university, I ended up at a dinner party with a bunch of old friends, among them this girl Marjorie. Marjorie Graham. If you don't know Marjorie Graham, her name is not significant to you. It's significant to me because I do know Marjorie Graham. I hate Marjorie Graham. Not thirty minutes into the evening she and I got into a fight about sexual harassment at work. I think we were talking about someone at a friend's office who was a bum patter and whether or not any of us had a problem with it.

"What women have to realize," Marjorie said, "is that reporting sexual harassment doesn't make you look STRONG, it makes you look weak, like women can't look out for themselves so they have to get the teacher involved. It's like snitching."

Of course, I knew all about what Marjorie Graham thought about snitching—because I went to high school with her.

One day, when I was in Grade 7, one of Marjorie's best friends, Sarah Church, and I were playing dodge ball. There were more players involved but we three are the only ones I remember, probably because, just when we were near the end of the game, Sarah threw the ball at my face. It bounced off my cheek and into my hands with a *THWACK*. It felt like a rock. I remember having my eyes closed as I gripped the rubber in my hands. The girls on my team gathered around me, putting their hands on my back and asking me if I was OK. I was on the unofficial Asian/ethnic team. We always got clobbered, possibly because we were ethnic and possibly because we were tiny. I was one of the tallest girls in the group at five feet tall. From somewhere inside the circle of girls gathered around me, I felt a tug on the ball. It was Sarah.

"It's my ball," she said. "You're out."

"You hit me in the face," I said, my one cheek getting hotter and hotter like an electric burner, heat spreading in a coil from the inside out. "It's a foul."

"You jumped at it," Sarah said. "It's not my fault it hit you in the face."

“I didn’t,” I said.

“Did,” said Sarah.

“Did not,” someone behind me piped up.

Sarah stepped back and let go of the ball. She had a tiny bird-like face, smooth and small, and her lips were always twisted into a perfect knot. Everyone was feeling bad for Sarah that year because her dad was getting remarried. I didn’t feel especially bad about it. Sarah was never that nice to me. This time Sarah cupped her hand and swung it forward, like she was knocking something off a table, her wrist locked and stiff as her hand connected with my face. It felt like she’d snapped my face with a rubber band. I dropped the ball and Sarah scooped it up, swivelled, and walked back to her team. I turned and ran into the school, colliding with the soft silk chest of our vice-principal.

Clearly, I did not have a problem with snitches or snitching. “Sarah hit me,” I screamed. Sarah was given two weeks’ detention.

That afternoon Marjorie and two of her friends called me at home, hissing into the line with their lips close to the receiver. “FINKER,” they whispered, “You’ll wish you were dead.” For three weeks after that, Marjorie and her friends followed me from class to class, walking only inches behind

me, their hot breath in my ears. Eventually Sarah's detention was over and all was forgotten.

But six years later I watched Marjorie smugly take a sip of her beer.

At the time, Marjorie hadn't aged at all. She had the same Grade 7 chubby cheeks, the same thick brown hair held up high off her head by a black ribbon. I remember I took a big sip of my Caesar, the Tabasco burning down my throat, my eyes watering.

What I meant to say at that moment had something to do with justice and power. About how using the word *snitching* was really a bully's way of making the people they picked on feel even less powerful. That sexual harassment was against the law for a reason, because its victims are often women, often employees who feel like they have no recourse for the way they are treated. Who put up with it because they feel they have no choice. Reporting sexual harassment, I wanted to say, wasn't snitching any more than was reporting vandalism or robbery, or assault. It just felt like that sometimes.

Instead I stood up, knocking over my Caesar into Marjorie's lap.

Everything I wanted to say blended into a dull Morse code

in my head. Why, I wondered later, don't politics line up like eggs in a carton when you need them? Instead all I got was:

Power.

Take for.

Granted.

Victim.

You.

Take me.

None of which made any sense.

So instead I grabbed my purse. "You," I spat, "are a bitch."

Of course it's true, right—she is and she was. But calling someone a bitch is not the kind of victory you picture, six years after getting hit in the face for no reason.

My friend Katie says feminism, sometimes, is like the ground in *Super Mario Sunshine*, Level 8, with the sands that funnel out from underneath you. In order to survive, you have to wrench your joystick and jump really high and really fast

onto the next pillar, and keep jumping until you hit that big yellow crown that lifts you up into the air. It's all about patience, and timing.

On the second last day of work Dwight was running down a flight of stairs and he tripped. I was near the bottom when it happened, watched him plummet, not in slow motion, but quickly and assertively, the way a body should fall. He landed in a heap of Dwight at the bottom, quickly rolling over onto his side to grab his ankle and swear.

I waited patiently for the crowd of concerned boys in tool belts to disperse and let Dwight get his footing before I quietly approached him.

I asked him how he was, and he frowned and growled, "Fine."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said.

"Okay," I said, "because if you were really hurt I wouldn't say this."

"What?" he said.

Gripping my broom in one hand I leaned in close to him.

“That’s what you get,” I told him, “for calling me Broom Girl.”

A doubly powerful statement, you have to understand, when the person you’re talking to plays Dungeons and Dragons and knows that a role of the dice could mean losing a limb.

After that, Dwight didn’t call me Broom Girl anymore.

Rightly so. Because a girl working in a warehouse with an otherwise male crew is not a Broom Girl, any more than she is “just one of the boys.” She’s a tough woman doing her job.

Right, Dwight?

Maybe feminism is like any other politics that way: sometimes it’s not a matter of what you say or how you say it, but timing and patience enough to wait for the fates to bring you the justice you deserve.

FOUR RUN
DOWN A HILL

IT IS THE UNMISTAKABLY THUNDEROUS SOUND OF FOUR homosexuals running down a cobbled road in Old Montreal.

The word you're looking for is *deafening*.

Two in drag, three in heels, one in army boots, two stewardesses, one local, one international, one Oscar Wilde and one Jorge, who is dressed as Jorge in a killer red pleather dress.

“I’m a fucking drag-queen bitch. We don’t get dressed up as other people, we get dressed.”

Scott says Jorge is dressed as love: gay and sloppy love. Drunk love.

Under the influence of a sum total of one bottle of vodka, one half bottle of gin, eighteen beers, three Peachy Keens, and four shots of tequila, every heel-strike on the road is a gamble, a dare against the inevitability of shattered ankles. I

can actually feel my joints grinding out of place every time my heels hit stone.

Around the corner, on the steepest part of the hill, Scott opens up his mouth and lets out a yell, “AHHHHH!” And his vintage Air Canada scarf whips off his neck, suicidal.

Rachel drops her beer, which I hadn’t even realized she was still holding, and it shatters, foam splashing onto the legs of her velvet Oscar Wilde pants.

Understanding that we cannot stop, that I, at least, cannot stop, has led to the pale notion in the back of my head that this running thing is probably ... what? ... unsafe—which has led to wondering why we are running.

Are we late?

Running away from something or someone?

I can’t remember.

All I can be sure of is that Jorge is speeding up behind me. I can hear him wheezing, peach schnapps saturating his lungs.

Eventually it is Rachel, ironically, the only one not in heels, who trips on a stray cobble and flops forward onto her belly,

palms smacking the pavement, chin held awkwardly up like she's a seal diving into a pool of concrete.

And suddenly, we're all stopped and we stand around Rachel, panting uncontrollably in constricting polyester, too drunk to help up she who is lying face down on the road, groaning.

It's 2 A.M.

Where are we going?

"My wings," Scott shouts, holding out the blue lapel of his stewardess outfit. "I've lost my goddamn wings!"

An hour later Rachel and I rub hands in a cab, her body hot against mine, a tiny, extra pulse created wherever our skin touches. At the club we find a sufficiently dark corner and kiss, lips sealed by a thin layer of vodka and cranberry, but lose each other when the DJ plays "100% Pure Love" and the crowd, smelling distinctly of CK One, swells. At the end of the song, Jorge, his wig askew, his lipstick still perfectly intact, grabs my hand and, over the bass, yells, "We're going home."

¶

Scott is my first fag. I am a new lesbian so I do not know the rules yet, I just copy whatever I see my other gay friends doing.

This leads to some conflicting results as I ricochet between the gay and lesbian community. My lesbian friend Celeste makes me listen to Nina Hagen, shaves my head and feeds me hummus, Scott picks me up at the Metro station and takes me dancing at KOXXX, a bar where the drag queens survey you outside to make sure you're gay. It is about that time that I start calling everyone "girl." All the boys at the club call each other "girl."

"Hey, girl!"

"Hey, bitch."

My first night out Scott fills me with as much alcohol as I can physically stand to consume. It's like an experiment, a test of my limits. My first blackout. Somewhere between Saint-Laurent and Sherbrooke, on the way home, a brutal mixture of hummus and gin squeezes its way up my throat. Scott holds the cab door open while I puke my guts out at every red light between the club and my house. He sits with me on the porch until I stop seeing smears of red and orange, rubs my back while I retch miserably.

"No more shooters for you, girl!"

The next day I find out I have acquired the nickname "Kitty," not because I have a kitty but because, at some point in the

evening, I drunkenly began to searching for my kitty in the bar, crawling under tables, dragging my purse across the floor.

The other story I hear, from Scott, is that sometime later I lay down on the dance floor and purred while some big butch-dyke rubbed my belly.

2

Jorge wants nothing to do with Scott's "you go, girl" ways. Every Saturday he sits at the bar, in full drag, all night long. Lazily batting his giant feathery eyelashes, he talks to the bartender, smokes, and drinks martinis.

"Hey, girl!"

"Shut up, you bitch, I'm not a fucking girl, I'm a LADY, bitch!"

Jorge is a lady because he's had his heart broken too many times.

"Nobody wants a *lady*," he says, then swallows the last of his martini. "These fucking girls, they'd rather fuck their thumbs than fuck someone with fucking class."

Before I knew Jorge, he was infamous for hanging out with this dyke named Joss, a big butch with a head like a shoebox

and a taste for watery beer. Jorge and Joss used to sit on the bar and hold court, drinking until the bar closed, going home with the bartenders ... or whoever. There was a dent in the wall at the bottom of the stairwell from the night Joss tripped on her way out of the bar and fell down the stairs. Other queers had made dents as well, but Joss's was pretty big as far as dents go.

“Did she have to go to the hospital?”

“Who, Joss? No way. She's got a head like a brick.”

“Hard?”

“Stubborn.”

When they weren't holding court Jorge and Joss fought. A lot. Over boys apparently, because Joss never liked Jorge's taste in men, or boys, or “girls.” Jorge has a scar on his leg from a fight with Joss, a jagged crescent that runs from the underside of his knee to the middle of his thigh from where Joss pushed him and he fell on a broken wine bottle. I thought that kind of stuff only happened with straight couples—like the kind you see on *COPS*.

Jorge waves it off with a flick of his bejewelled wrists.
“That's fucking NOTHING.”

Jorge knows that falling on a piece of glass is not a tragedy, only a pain in the ass.

When Joss comes into the bar now, it's with her girlfriend, Tina, long like a champagne glass. They hold hands and don't talk to anyone else. They sit at the far side of the bar, across from Jorge, sipping Diet Cokes because Joss doesn't drink anymore.

And because I'm with Jorge now, because Jorge is the one who mops up the bloody messes of my broken hearts and bakes me quiches when I'm not at the bar, I find this sad.

3

Rachel is the first lesbian I suspect to be in love with me. She's small and geeky with huge wire-rim glasses that fall off her nose when she's drunk or serious. She's smart and composed, she loves poetry. She's probably the only person in Montreal, our age, who loves poetry but doesn't write it, only reads it.

Rachel is in love with me and I am in love with everyone else. She waits patiently for me at the bar while I chase girls in that lesbian, shadow-the-one-you-love kind of way, a process that can take hours and yield little to no return.

Rachel buys me drinks, walks me home and listens while I talk endlessly about the ones that got away.

We kiss twice, once at the club on Halloween and once during a game of Spin the Bottle at Charlie Daniel's Valentine's Day Party. The second time we are in the middle of a circle of our friends when we kiss, friends who are clapping, hooting and hollering, and I am enjoying myself, feeling bold and sassy with my kissingness, when I feel Rachel's hand grab my arm.

A clutch, her little fingers digging into my flesh, like she's trying not to let me go.

And because I'm stupid, and selfish, it's only then that I know that Rachel likes me, that there is a reason that someone is a Marcie to your Peppermint Patty. Maybe it's friendship, but probably, if you're a lesbian, it's because they like you.

But I don't like Rachel, for no specific reason but *really and truly*. Maybe because Rachel reminds me of something I already know and I'm desperately searching for something different, something new. Maybe someone with a shaved head and an eyebrow piercing.

That night Rachel is cupid in a white toga, paper wings stapled to her back and a gold laurel pinned to her short brown hair. I'm a stripper in a flashing red-sequin bikini and go-go boots, with Jorge's rice-in-a-nylon-sock boobs added to my boobs so I'm Chesty La Rue with double D, sparkling red bowling balls jutting out of my chest. Everyone takes Rachel's

and my picture that night, with her cardboard arrow pushed into my cleavage, piercing my non-existent heart.

For the first time, that night, Rachel gets drunker than I do, chasing me through the narrow halls of Charlie's house while I run screaming. I won't kiss her again, inexplicably unable, although I kind of want to kiss someone. But not someone looking at me the way Rachel is looking at me, like I owe her something huge. By the end of the night we're fighting, her wings ripped, my one boob lost somewhere in the living room.

“What is your problem?”

“I don't have one.”

“You *so* do.”

“You, then, you are my problem.”

When Rachel passes out, it's Jorge who picks her up and carries her to the bathroom, kicking the door closed behind him.

4

My bed is a crumpled oasis, surrounded by a thousand coffee mugs with a thousand crusty hangover cures dried to the bottoms.

There's something intensely depressing about the complete and utter death a fabulous costume dies the morning after. I'm home alone with Rachel's limp arrow still stuck in my bra, the one boob of Jorge's I have left has leaked little grains of rice all over the sheets, and my red hair dye has worn a red smear into my pillow.

The scene might look sexy and cool later, but right now, with me stuck in my hangover, it looks awful. My stomach feels jagged and hollow and distinctly angry with me.

I'll probably never drink, or eat, again.

I'm lying perfectly still and feeling more out of control than ever before, the potential for catastrophe flying by my eyes in slow motion, frame by frame.

HOW TO SAY GOODBYE IN
SO MANY WORDS AND WITH
WHAT YOU DO

IN THE TV MOVIE *BEFORE I SAY GOODBYE*, BASED ON a book by Mary Higgins Clark, actress Sean Young plays a promising businesswoman who hires a detective and a psychic to investigate her husband's mysterious death because he was involved in some shady dealings that threaten to sully her name. Although this movie has its moments, it is not a good film to watch if you're doing research for a lecture on how to say goodbye. There aren't all that many goodbyes in the movie.

Mind you, I stopped watching about halfway through, so it could be that there were better ones towards the end, but, honestly, once I realized Sean Young wasn't going to die, I lost interest.

More interesting movie goodbyes would include:

- *Last of the Mohicans*, where Hawkeye screams, "You stay alive, no matter what occurs! I will find you. No matter how long it takes, no matter how far, I will find you. I will find you!"

- *Dances with Wolves*, where Wind in His Hair screams, “Can you see that I am your friend! CAN YOU SEE THAT I WILL ALWAYS BE YOUR FRIEND!”

After seeing several films as research, my conclusion was that while watching movies is a bad way to examine and study almost all social behaviour, it's an especially bad way to learn how to say goodbye. This is because goodbyes, in movies, are often dramatic focal points and so they're framed as crisis. In a film, no one ever just waves goodbye and gets on a train, they hang off the side of the train while it's still moving (which, by the way, you're not allowed to do). They wave and tears run down their cheeks. They encourage people to chase the train. People do chase the train. Catch up to the train. Get on the train.

Embrace.

It's almost inevitable that someone's heart is getting broken when someone says goodbye in a movie, which is one of the reasons why a movie goodbye is almost never even a goodbye, but an extended pursuit: one person says goodbye and then walks away and then the other person screams....

No! No!

Never say goodbye.

Which of course brings to mind the Jackson 5 lyrics....

Tell me why is it so?

Although it is true that each of us will, sometime in our lives, have to say painful goodbyes, these should be few and far between.... Unless you are leading a very sad life or you are an adolescent.

For the most part, though, saying goodbye should be one of many transactions we encounter and overcome on a daily basis. The worst a goodbye should be is awkward, and even this is avoidable. Goodbyes, like foreign pornography, are only awkward and upsetting when we don't understand them and are, therefore, taken by surprise by their nature.

When we take the time to learn the language of a goodbye, we are more likely to come out of them unscathed. At Chapters, when I worked there, saying goodbye to a customer was really like opening the door to a future hello with a customer ... which somehow equated to a sale.

I'm not really sure.

The most fruitful approach to understanding how to say goodbye in person involves a dissection of the two key elements involved.

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1. What you do
2. What you say

WHAT YOU DO

In the physical arena, there are roughly three levels of body contact involved in saying goodbye:

1. No Body Contact: see wave, peace sign, salute
2. Limited Body Contact: see handshake, high-five, euro cheek-kiss, straight girl A hug, one-arm hug
3. Intimate Body Contact: see embrace, full body-to-body hug (any combination thereof)

Typically, the degree to which your body will come into contact with someone else's varies according to your familiarity with the person involved as well as your level of comfort with being physical. Obviously, the level of body intimacy will also be affected by context: cultural, professional, and sexual.

It is a given, for example, that one would never kiss one's employer goodbye (see level 1), especially if that employer were to wear a tie, or loafers.

On the other hand, it is also a given that one will almost always kiss a homosexual goodbye (see level 3), especially a homosexual wearing loafers. If, however, the homosexual in question is your employer, it is often wise to downgrade your

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physical contact to an extensive handshake (see level 2), possibly a two-handed, low-slow pump handshake or a Montrealer's peck on one cheek.

It is exquisitely more complicated when one is in Montreal where the No Body Contact level is obliterated and replaced by the level-two peck on the cheek. At this point level three, the embrace, moves to level two and level three becomes the extensive "let's not say goodbye" (*on peut pas dire au revoir*), which, typically, evolves into the early morning "oh hello, did I sleep here?" (*est-ce que j'ai dormi ici hier?*)

There is, of course, also leeway for those squeamish folk whose comfort level is outside what is generally understood to be the standard of touchingness. The important thing to remember, in these cases, is to set these boundaries in advance, so as not to leave an unexpecting party hanging in half an "A" hug. The best advice is to avoid one kind of body contact by suggesting another. If you don't want a hug from someone, be the first to offer a handshake. If hands are scary to you, offer a wave. A less advisable tactic involves putting distance between you and the person you don't want to touch. It is important to note, however, that it is difficult to control whether or not you will appear to be running off or simply running away.

WHAT YOU SAY

A larger and more complicated element of saying goodbye

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involves what we say at goodbye. The language we use can play a vital role in whether the transaction runs smoothly.

A common tactic in saying goodbye involves an offer of future communication. As in,

So, I'll call you tonight,

or

So, I'll see you Tuesday.

Typically this is a perfectly valid offer to make at the end of the evening, but only if the person in question wants to see you again. If the person in question isn't planning on having any future contact with you, then a phrase like

See you next week

could be construed as a threat or concrete evidence of stalking.

Another option is to end the evening with a description of what has already transpired, with a positive twist and an expression of your appreciation. As in,

Well, that was a lovely movie and dinner.

Thank you for a lovely evening.

The only potential downside to this kind of statement involves the feelings of guilt you may harbour if this statement isn't true. If, say, the evening was not, in fact, lovely, but disappointing.

There is always the option of just saying that.

Well, that was an upsetting evening.

Or you could opt out and just say,

Well, that was interesting.

But statements like these are not conducive to a goodbye transaction, if only because they seem to inspire contradictory remarks like

You're impossible to please,

or

God, Mariko, it's like you want to hurt my feelings.

The most fail-safe approach is to forgo any details and instead offer some form of best wishes.

Certainly,

Take care,

or

Get home safely

are generalized statements comparable to the written “Sincerely,” or “Yours truly,” but there’s something to be said for sometimes using these fail-safes as a means of avoiding the awful truth. Not all the time, but some of the time.

Along that line I’d like to end with an anecdote about a friend of mine, whom we will call Jennifer, who is exceptionally difficult to get off the phone. Saying goodbye to Jennifer on the phone is like flipping a pancake for the first time. You timidly slide your spatula under the lip of the pancake and think, *This is not going to end well*. Two minutes later you’ve got a gooey spatula and a sad pancake that’s burnt and broken in half.

The problem is that Jennifer sees almost every reason for getting off the phone as an excuse for you to stop talking to her. Like you don’t really have to go anywhere, it’s just that her end of the conversation has become tiresome and you are sneakily, passive aggressively, electing your option to end it.

Which is not always true.

So the intended goodbye ends up going something like,

Me: *“So I should probably get dinner started....”*

Jennifer: *“This late?”*

Me: *“Yeah.”*

Jennifer: *“Oh.”*

Me: *“What?”*

Jennifer: *“Forget it. I guess I’ll talk to you later.”*

More often than not, people who talk to Jennifer on the phone hang up the phone feeling accused. Jennifer’s friends think she thinks they are liars.

It’s not presumptuous to seek to end a conversation by suggesting that there is another activity that calls you away. That’s not to say, of course, that one activity is any more important than the other. On the parallel plane of things getting done, as a fortune cookie once told me, we are all standing in the same circular line.

For a long time the end of my conversations with Jennifer were *really* long because I would try to backtrack and, mostly out of guilt, backpedal on my attempt to end the conversation, which of course simply made me even more of a liar.

Me: “*Never mind. Forget it.*”

Jennifer: “*I thought you said you had to go.*”

Me: “*Oh well, I’m not hungry.*”

Jennifer: “*Then why did you say you had to go make dinner?*”

Me: “*I can’t remember.*”

Jennifer: “*Interesting.*”

Finally one day, in person, I broached my concerns.

You are very hard to get off the phone, I said. I feel like I’m being rude to you when I don’t think I am. It makes me not want to talk to you sometimes even though you are a lovely person.

Let us remedy this problem.

I think a lot of people are afraid to address these kinds of social issues with their friends and colleagues, because they’re

afraid the exchange will explode in their faces. Baggage, as a rule, rarely explodes. At the very worst, you get to find out icky things about someone you know. Hopefully, though, these icky things are at least helpful.

It turns out Jennifer has a mom who used to use little white lies to get off the phone. Like her kettle was boiling or her laundry was ready.... It used to drive little Jennifer crazy, listening to her mom talk about a kettle they didn't even own. Now she can't help but see the rest of the world as making cheap excuses.

It might seem silly, but it's upsetting for her so you have to respect it.

Okay, I said, I got it.

Now, whenever I want to get off the phone with Jennifer, I don't offer any excuse for ending the phone call. Typically, now, I end our conversations in an aggressively kinetic manner.

“Okay,” I say, “so I'm going to go.”

This story illustrates a final overarching point I'd like to make: there are three reasons for saying goodbye. One, you have nothing left to say to someone; two, you have to go and do something else; and three, you don't want to talk to someone any more. All of these are legitimate reasons to stop talking to

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someone, but, in the best scenario, the person you're talking to should never be mindful of your particular motivations for letting them go.

There are those, of course, who will say that this philosophy and the effort that goes with it bends to social pressures of politeness. For me, though, this masquerade is only an extension of my theory that everything you keep to yourself makes you smarter than the people around you.

I have to go now.

Thank you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mariko Tamaki is a Toronto writer and performer. She is currently a graduate student at York University.

Tamaki co-founded and performed with The Corporate Wet Nurse Association, Pretty Porky and Pissed Off, and the theatre troupe TOA. She has appeared on stage at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in *Strange Sisters* and *Hysteria Festival of Women*. Tamaki has also appeared in “FemCab” and has participated in the following festivals: RHUBARB! Festival (Buddies in Bad Times Theatre), Summerworks Theatre Festival, Vancouver International Writers Festival, Calgary Folkfest, Mayworks, and Spatial Poetics (the Powell Street Festival). In 2004, Tamaki toured with the “Perpetual Motion Tour” through Canada’s East Coast.

Other publications by the author:

True Lies: The Book of Bad Advice (Women’s Press, 2002)

Cover Me (McGilligan Books, 2000)

“Angry Naked Fat Woman” in *Fireweed Magazine* (1999)

“Do You Practice Stupid Sex?” in *Blood and Aphorisms* (2000)