

OF THE INVISIBLE

>> CRIS COSTA

It's 10:39 a.m. when she wakes to the Laugher, an older Asian man who holds a baby doll and laughs and points in a fluctuating radius outside the CAM-H on Queen. She is sore. She fell asleep at 5:30, the entire night spent listening to people coming and going from bars, and then the afterhours nearby. They float outside her basement bachelor, trying to figure it out. Sometimes she opens the window and tells them. Then silence, and a bit of rain.

Morning now, but it hardly makes a difference. No light comes through the small mesh-barred windows. She likes the Laugher, the way he laughs and points when the streetcars pass—the people looking out—how he points at them, then remembers the doll and pulls it close. It's almost touching. Then a burst of laughter, first at the doll, then at you.

Another night rearranging the pillows. She thought she felt an emptiness swallow her, seep through, and let her go. She listens to feet tread on the cement by her window. When the sidewalk is busy she sees their legs pass, getting on with life, to the bus stop, to work. She imagines the mesh is there to stop her from grabbing their ankles and pulling them in. She would say, Watch where you're walking asshole, you never know who's gonna cut off your legs.

She looks at the alarm clock. Next to it is a framed memorial card of her friend, Ava, who drove her car down a hill at one hundred and sixty clicks, into the rail of a bridge, flipping the vehicle. They had worked together for a few years at a bar before it changed management, which created circumstances that forced both of them to move on. Then Ava gave up and moved to the suburbs with her mother. A couple of months later she got a call, from some guy named Mark, about the accident.

Her phone flashes. The ringer is off. She doesn't remember. Judy.
Hello.

Anne, where the hell are you?

In bed. Where the hell are you?

At work, covering your shift.

I'm not supposed to work today.

You're scheduled.

I don't work Mondays.

It's Tuesday.

You're shitting me, shut up.

I'm serious. Are you okay?

Uh.

Look, I can't talk, I'm on the cell.

Dead. The phone shows twelve missed calls, three messages, two text messages.

Dismiss. The main screen says it's Tuesday. It lights up again with the work number.

Hey.

Are you alright?

Jude I don't know, I went to bed Sunday night.

How could you possibly...

I don't know. I had dreams.

Mike is pissed. You better call him with an excuse.

No, I, I don't know... I couldn't fall asleep Sunday night.

Did you take those pills I gave you?

Ya, I took half of them.

Half! What, are you kidding me? I said take half a tablet, not half of the bottle. Holy shit.

I gave you like 10, right? No wonder you slept all day. Dude, those are Clonazepam, that's strong shit.

But, they're so small.

They give them to crazy people or people who have seizures. You need half, even a quarter to start out... I can't believe you took five.

So what should I say to Mike?

Say what you want. Say I gave you sleeping pills and you took too many. Say whatever.

Alright.

I gotta go.

She flips the phone shut. Three missed calls from Joseph, only minutes apart. A

stomach pain. Text messages. One from him. Anne? That's it. They must have spoken. Voicemail. Anne, why did you hang up? Okay, you sounded tired. Call me when you get a chance. I'm worried now. I'll come by tomorrow to check on you. A rush. Then numb. She wants to throw the phone. Joseph. Joseph Abel. A belle. Able. Fable.

Her room smells. She can't really tell. Breath, sweat, farts. Ashtray. She moves to the window and slides it open. The rain falls lightly. Sounds nice. The moist air rushes in. She turns on a lamp, picks up some clothes and puts them in the hamper, empties the coffee grinds sitting in the basket, half-heartedly rinses the pot and makes coffee. She walks up the stairs to the door, opens it. The one-legged bum is sitting by the lamppost.

Hey bud, what are you doing out here? It's raining.

I need a shower.

I don't got anything today, you want a coffee?

I love coffee.

Give me a few.

She picks up two issues of the *Toronto Star* in pink plastic bags, shuts the door. 38 killed as terrorism returns to Moscow. She sits at the round pine table found on the sidewalk and pushes over a pile of marked up manuscripts, so red that the work is barely legible. She waits.

Terror returned to the heart of Russia with two deadly suicide bombings on the Moscow subway at rush hour, including an attack at the station beneath the headquarters of the secret police. At least 38 people were killed and more than 60 wounded in Monday morning's blasts, the first of such attacks in Moscow in six years.

The coffee is ready. She finds a used paper cup, washes it and fixes a double-double. Brings it up the stairs and outside. He's gone. Go figure. Back into the apartment, she pours the coffee in a mug and takes a few sips, then moves into the bathroom to wash her face. She thinks she looks old, that the bags under her eyes are permanent. She thinks she was still young when she met him. She acted it, and he acted like he saw something in her, something unique. Things could be worse, I could be in Russia.

She remembers sitting with Joseph in the Brass Taps on College, holding hands across the table. They were there so often the staff thought they were married. He was with her almost every day—they just assumed. When he wasn't there, they'd refer to him as her husband—she didn't bother correcting them, there was no point. He's not my husband, he's someone else's. She remembers talking with him about her lack of diplomacy. He said she didn't have a superego, that she was all ID, and that it was charming. Better that she decided not to pursue school after her bachelor degree. They would eat her alive. It's all hypocrisy. It's not worth it, there are no jobs anyway. You can't be socially conscious and also work for the man. A waiter set the pizza on the table. Roasted red pepper and feta. Joseph sipped his beer. Working in colleges is shit, there's no job security—that's why I went into arts administration. You should get involved with the groups that hang around the anarchist bookstore in Kensington. Then use the Copy Centre against itself—you have distribution potential. There are tons of things you can do—you don't need a degree. You

need a flexible job so that you can be active, and you have that. His phone rang—he forgot to shut it off. He quickly silenced it. He took her hand again—Hi, beautiful. Joseph, enable.

Months later, not long before they broke up, she complained to him that the restaurant industry was taking a toll on her. He agreed with her, and said that it was counter-intuitive to her being. He suggested that she ask for full-time hours at the copy centre and only work the bar occasionally when they needed extra people. He said that she didn't need to worry about money, he could help her with any extra expenses, she just needed to cover the basics. Then they broke up. She pushed him—said that he had to make a move—and threatened to expose him. He said that he couldn't do it, so he left her. He refused to speak to her again, she tried to repair things for months, but he went on with his life.

She picks up her hair elastic from the washroom counter, crumples her dirty blond wavy hair into a ball and secures it. Her freckles are prominent in this light. She splashes her face with warm water. The break up was devastating. They had been together for three years—they had gone on vacations, he had met her family in Vancouver when her half-brother married. She remembers being in Edmonton. They stopped there for a few days on the way to Vancouver so she could reconnect with her father who works as a Construction Manager for Suncor in Fort McMurray. Her father sounded enthusiastic about flying down to Edmonton for a day to lunch with her. They had made arrangements over email, and Joseph thought that it would be good for her, that it meant a lot to her, so he arranged the trip. She decided that she wanted to go for lunch alone, knowing that this also gave Joseph some time to find a gift for his daughter without making things awkward. She arranged to meet her father at Lux, a downtown steakhouse for the business class, on 101 Street at Jasper. She was nervous that morning. Joseph kissed her and said it would be great, then he went out for the afternoon. She wore a modest black dress with a red belt. She wanted to look attractive, but not too sexy. She wanted to show him that she had grown into a woman. She tied her hair back in a ponytail, then let it down. No make-up. She resented him, but wanted to impress him. She didn't agree with his trade, but she wanted him to feel responsible for her, even after all these years. The sun was beating down that day, so she left her jacket behind. Walking down Jasper she fantasized about the conversations they were about to have. They would start with small talk—how are you—then some catching up—she would talk about growing up without him, she'd tell him about her half-brother, she would ask why he left. He would defend himself, he'd say it wasn't his choice. Then he would tell her things about her mother that she never knew. Or, maybe, not this at all—maybe, he would admit to all of his failings as father and a person, and he'd beg for her forgiveness. Whatever happened, she would be understanding, because that's what grown women do. Then conversation would get emotionally lighter, but still intense. They would talk about politics and the tar sands—she'd try to convince him to go greener. He'd use lame redneck arguments to defend himself. They'd laugh in the end.

She arrived at the restaurant. The walls were a deep red wood, the overall colour scheme was burgundy, brown, beige, and some black. She entered the bar area, walked down toward the tables at the other end, and sat at a high-top next to the opened doors leading to an

outside walkway. Four business men stopped their conversation and watched her as she passed. She looked at them, one man winked. She ordered a pinot noir, told the waitress she was waiting for someone. Her drink came. She pulled out her notebook from her bag and stared at the page. She wrote, *Waiting / your aura is / red*. She scratched it out. Then she wrote, *Where, Here*. She scratched that out. Then, *Addictions / replica*. Again, she scratched that out. She decided it was better to read. She pulled out a book Joseph gave her. *Daniel Jones, 1978*. Fifteen minutes passed, the waitress came back and asked if she wanted an appetizer while waiting. She said, *No thank you*, but ordered another glass of wine. When the wine arrived she ordered the calamari. The food arrived seven minutes later. She looked at her phone, he was a half hour late. She hadn't thought to take his number with her, though she had sent hers. She ate the calamari, then waited another fifteen minutes hoping that maybe he confused the hour.

She felt like she was burning red. *Don't let it get to you Anne. Fuck it, forget him, you want nothing to do with him anyway*. She looked for a lingerie store in Edmonton City Centre. *Night Owl*. She picked up a black lace-up teddy with straps that attach to thigh high nylons. Then she stopped by the supermarket and bought crackers, three kinds of cheese—smoked gouda, applewood cheddar, and brie—olives, strawberries, and chocolate. She made one more stop and picked up a bottle of wine. On her way back to the Matrix, she called Joseph to see where he was. He said he was browsing bookstores on Whyte. That gave her an hour at least. Back in the suite, she prepared a platter with the food, then put on the teddy under her dress, wore heels, and put on makeup. She opened her laptop and played Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*. Joseph arrived. He looked at her, then the spread, and gushed with delight. *I love cheese. I know you do*. He tried to ask her about the meeting. She said she didn't want to talk about it. They chatted for a couple of hours, the sun fell low in the sky. Then she changed the music to Mogwai's *Young Team*, directed him into the bedroom and performed a 20-minute strip tease, over and around him, while he lay on the bed. He wasn't allowed to touch, she said. *It was the best they'd ever have*.

Walking down Whyte the following day was nothing short of bliss. The sun came down hot again. She wore a white linen halter-top dress he bought for her. He wore jeans and a t-shirt. They ate lunch at an Irish pub, she had a glass of white, and he had a lager. She ordered a steak with veggies; he ordered a veggie burger with fries. They decided to browse the bookshops he had already visited. She told him that her father stood her up, that she found an email that morning saying something had come up at work and he couldn't leave, that he was sorry he couldn't contact her sooner. They finished eating and left the pub. He held her hand as they crossed the streets. When they got to the other side she squeezed it tightly and said, *I love you Anne. This made her so happy she almost cried*.

She notices her reflection in the mirror. She's frowning. *How long have I been staring at myself? Snap out of it*. She notices crow's feet next to her grey-blue eyes. *Stop it, Anne. Fuck it. He's not worth it. It's over. You're an idiot for listening, but it's too late now—it doesn't matter anymore*. She pisses, washes her hands and notices that the mirror is spotted with toothpaste. *It must be two weeks since she last cleaned it. She takes out the*

Windex and sprays everything, the mirror, the taps, the sink—the ammonia will work for now—wipes it down with paper towels kept under the sink. Then she notices the toilet—dust and hair have collected on the back of the rim. She takes out the Old Dutch, lifts the lid and sprinkles it inside and on the rim. Scrubs it with the brush. Then decides she might as well clean everything properly. She collects the bobby pins on the counter and throws them in the drawer, then tosses the mousse under the sink. She reaches for the Lysol and sprays the sink again, the toilet seat. She damps a paper towels, sprays some Windex on the floor and wipes up the dust and hair. Then she sprays the bathtub with bleach. Rinses the toilet seat, the sink again, then wipes the counter. Over to the bathtub with the bathroom rag, scrubs it down, rinses and wipes. She wrings the rag and hangs it to dry on the faucet. Finally it's clean. I can breathe in here now. Back to the bed. She stares at the phone again. Calls Mike. Judy picks up. Transfer me.

Copy Centre on Bloor, Michael speaking.

Mike, it's Anne.

Anne who?

Come-on, I'm sorry, let me explain.

No Anne, let me explain. Head office happened to be in town and decided to stop in. Instead of finding a bright-eyed morning staff, they found a sweaty graveyard worker sitting on a box with his eyes half-closed because he worked a double.

Uh.

What the hell happened to you? You better be dead and calling from hell, because if you're not, I'm gonna kill you myself.

Mike, come on, let me explain.

Let you explain? Let me explain. I was embarrassed in front of head office. Your irresponsibility put my job on the line. I'm sitting with your termination papers.

Mike, don't fire me. Please. I can explain.

Are you sick?

Well, sort of.

I don't have time for this. If you want your job, explain in person. ASAP.

You want me to come in?

Is there a problem?

No. I have to shower though. I'm not feeling so hot.

Make it fast.

She folds the phone. Ass. I just begged for a shitty job. She remembers the first time Joseph came into her bar. What did he see in me? There was a book launch. It was obvious to everyone that he had a thing for her—was it love?—it pained her to watch him watching her, coming up with excuses to talk to her. He took out a book and said he brought it for her because she might like to borrow it. This embarrassed one of the readers, who walked away. She told him to cool it, but he didn't see anything wrong. Later that night, when he said goodbye, he stood at the door to look one more time. She caught his gaze, goofy and glazy. She thought it was love.

She peels off her sleeping shorts and t-shirt and tosses them at the erupting hamper.

She walks over to the bathroom and turns on the shower, sits naked on the edge of the tub, first to test the water's temperature, then just watching the water fall over her arm. She moves into the tub, pulls her legs up under her chin and closes her eyes, her head against the tiles.

It has stopped raining. She heads east on Dundas, then north on Bathurst, passing Toronto Western Hospital. A woman on the sidewalk is furious with the *Toronto Sun* dispenser with the word *Lies* marked on its window. The box has done something horrible to the woman and must stop following her. It must go away—right now. The woman is sick of its stupid shit. If it keeps coming after her, she's gonna give it a real shitkicking. It's over between them, and the dispenser needs to get it through its thick red skull. She hits it with her black cane umbrella. Men and women in white jackets arrive on the scene and grab her arms. This place is starting to remind me of home, the only difference is that no one in Vancouver would have bothered her. Let her be, man, it's a free country. Why did I come here? At least the mountains put things into perspective. She notices cars pulling into the funeral home across the street. Nothing like a shameless buck. At least someone's making money.

She stops before the Copy Centre's door. Through the glass she sees Judy leaning on the counter, reading a magazine, out of eyeshot of the closed-circuit cameras. She opens the door. The entry alarm beeps.

Hey ho! Look what the cat dragged in.

That bad?

Kidding. So you alright there, skipper?

As good as it gets I guess. Mike around?

In the back.

Hey sorry about this.

No worries, I was scheduled later anyway. By the way, you're in front of the camera.

Shit. That thing gives me the creeps.

Yeah, man—she leans over and whispers—come on, how many times does he lock himself in there forever. What else could he be doing?

She starts walking to the office.

Think about it while you're in there. I can see you smiling.

Knock.

Come in.

Mike is seated on his leather chair with his back facing the door. He swivels around. There's nothing on the counter behind him. On the desk next to the computer sits a calendar covered with blank paper, and a Bettie Page figurine acting as paperweight. She notices a new print on the wall to her right, framed in cheap plastic. It's of a woman sitting at a table in what looks like an empty café at night, wearing a green jacket and a yellow hat. She has blushed cheeks and rouge lips, she looks down at her coffee, and her face is sad. Her legs can be seen under the table. The name Hopper is printed with large capital letters in the white boarder below the image, she can't make out the title. She thinks about

hats, then the lover of Dostoevsky's underground man, who grabs her hat and coat to save herself, and runs from the underground man as he calls out to her—this is she. No, no it's not. It's Nora, from Ibsen's play—she's gone to America, hoping that her cloak and hat will make her invisible.

Sit.

Mike, I'm sor-

Ah ah ah. Me first. Before you say anything, you must realize that you're expendable. Lots of people can do what you do, it's not a hard job. And to top it off, you're unreliable, you always call in sick, and customers complain about your unfriendliness.

Customers complain about everything.

You're right, but that's not the point. I've let you keep your job because I like you, you're a nice person and I saw a spark. That doesn't mean I haven't taken issue with your work habits. In fact, I've been exceptionally generous for the very reason that I have nothing personal against you. And I know you're in a tough spot. I've tried to help, but I can only turn a blind eye so far.

She glances at the surveillance monitor, and shivers.

But my generosity has worked against me. Much to my disbelief, your employment has contributed to my demise.

Wow, I didn't realize it was so serious.

It is serious.

Sounds like it.

Are you mocking me?

She clears her throat.

How dare you come in here begging for your job, and have the gall to-

I came to explain, but if you expect me to sit here and listen to your petty little shit, you can fuck right off. Sign my goddamn papers, and while you're at it, get a fucking dictionary.

She charges out of the office, passed the counter. Judy looks up.

Hey, you okay? Wait.

She's already outside. The temperature has dropped, but looks like it might clear. She zips up her sweater.

Excuse me?

What.

Could you spare some change?

Could I spare some change?

Yes. Could you spare some change?

I just lost my job and the first thing that someone asks me is can I spare some fucking change.

Well no one said you have to get all huffy, bitch.

The bum walks.

She begins walking toward Spadina. She walks a block, but changes her mind and decides to go to Gazelle's for samosa. She crosses the street in traffic and waits on the

meridian for the cars to pass. Someone stops. She waves thank you. She walks west and looks across the street. She changes her mind and decides she will get a falafel at Sarah's. She crosses again. When she reaches the other side, she decides to go to Future's instead. What she needs, she thinks, is a coffee. She enters the café. It is loud and busy. The washroom smell wafting up the stairs is more poignant than usual—in competition with the fried food. She stands in the coffee line, looks at the cakes and pies. Waits. The apple pie looks good. I should get that. That's disgusting, you haven't eaten yet, don't get pie. I deserve a pie. It will make you depressed. Decide.

Hi, what can I get for you.

I'll have a large coffee.

To go?

Yes—I mean, No. Uh.

For here?

Yes.

Anything else.

Uh, I was thinking about pie, but I think I'll get a cookie instead.

So you want a cookie.

Yes. That one.

2.70.

She finds a seat along the window bar, looks through the Star again.

An upset and angry 23-year-old woman insisted Monday she was “absolutely” sexually assaulted by a Mississauga couple in the strangers' apartment in February 2009. “It happened. It absolutely happened. I know for a fact it happened,” she told a Brampton court during her third day of testimony. “I was bleeding from my vagina. I was raped.” David Vant, 39, and his wife Marcia, 30, are accused of drugging and sexually assaulting the woman and her boyfriend over 24 hours ending Feb. 9, 2009. They have pleaded not guilty to numerous criminal offences in the judge-alone trial before Justice Silja Seppi. The woman, whose identity is protected by a court-ordered ban, was reacting angrily to suggestions by defence lawyer Edmund Chan that it was her boyfriend who convinced her a day later, when they were being medically examined, that she had been sexually assaulted. “It's my body,” she told Chan. But she agreed she told no one, including police, until she went to hospital to be checked the next day. She testified she still has flashbacks of the traumatic events.

She stops reading the article and half-heartedly looks through the classified section, in vain. Picks up an *Eye Weekly* and reads the music reviews. She also finds this futile. She takes out her notebook and decides to write a poem. She writes, *Fired*, scratches it out. Then, *Sicko*, but scratches that out too. Then, *Loathing*, followed by, *Now what?* She closes her notebook, finishes her coffee, and leaves.

She walks over to Bathurst, thinks about going to Suspect for a video, but decides she should figure things out. She walks south, then notices the traffic has stopped at the lights. A man is walking toward her from Harbord. He has short black hair, blue jeans, a red

sweater, and a brown leather jacket. He reminds her of someone. She panics. She crosses the street suddenly. A car, which has made a right, honks. She turns and walks north, then west around Honest Ed's to Markham. She goes into Suspect. Two guys inside—one behind the counter and a customer dressed in leather. The guy behind the counter says hi as he walks passed with an armful of cases. He's wearing a black and grey striped long sleeved tee over washed-out skinny jeans. Converse shoes. His glasses are thick, black square rims. He wears a faux-hawk with emo-style long bangs swooped to one side. He heads to the foreign section.

Hey, how's it going?

Pretty good. Yourself?

What do you have there?

Fellini's *Satyricon*.

I've never seen it.

I know, it shows.

I've seen *La Dolce Vita* and *8 ½*.

This is different.

Okay, I'll take it. ... make it easy.

Meet you at the counter.

It'd be nice to have someone to watch this with. Keep trying to convince myself. Man, I miss him—this sucks—shouldn't even be renting a film. Shouldn't be spending money. Not like it'll make a difference. I'll either get a job or I'm screwed. Can I go on unemployment? I bet this Goth has a girlfriend to watch his films with. They probably rent S-M. I bet she works for a marketing agency. Maybe I can get a job.... Come on, you don't want to work there. Why not?

What's your phone-number?

416-693-3932

Anne, right?

Yup.

How was Delicatessen?

It was awesome. Uh... and sick.

Yeah. Your password.

Barred.

Right...

You smirk.

You can change it.

How could I change it? You can't change it.

That'll be 3.50. Due in a week.

She walks down Markham, pulls out a smoke and sparks it up. She notices the maples have pathetic little buds on them. It starts spitting again. She calls Judy, gets her voicemail. Hey Jude, I just had some coffee and rented a movie. Gonna see if I can get my old job back. Oh you know, trying to take a sad song and make it better, right—she laughs—rented

Fellini's *Satyricon*, let me know if you feel like watching it. Call back.

She trips, but catches herself and lets out a girlish yelp. Not like her, she thinks. A quarter of the sidewalk is missing. A hole. Inside is gravel, ants, and the remains of a bird. Nausea. She thinks she smells poo. Checks her soles. Clean. She notices caution tape wrapped around a tree, then running shoes hanging from electrical wire. Continues walking, turning right on College. Reluctantly, she arrives at the lounge.

They are cleaning up after lunch. Joe and Rob are at the bar having an afternoon beer. Moretti. They only drink the Italian beer when the other staff are not around.

Hey, hey! Look what the cat dragged in. Perfect timing.

Why is everyone saying that?

Figure of speech. You look great. And good timing.

Hey there sweetheart, how are you?

I'm fine. I mean...

Can you work tomorrow?

We were just talking about you.

Yes. I was going to ask if I could pick up some shifts.

What happened? First you don't want to work here anymore, now you're coming back looking for a job.

Honestly, I'd rather not talk about it. But as many shifts as possible, anytime. Anyway, why are you looking for someone, what happened to the new girl?

Alright, I'm going upstairs. Eh Dom, Anne's here, fix her something. You want some pasta? Uh.

Look at you, you're too skinny. Eat some pasta. Dom, fix Anne some of that vongole. You're gonna eat. Rob, make her a drink. I'll be upstairs if you need me. Anne, I'll put you on the schedule.

Alright Annie-fanny. What'll it be?

Glass of red, I guess. Still have that 2008 Chilean Cab?

No, all gone. Here, have a glass of this. O-six Chianti. Don't tell Joe.

So what happened to the new chick? She fuck him?

You got it.

Didn't you guys warn her?

Hm, well, ya, she annoyed me the second night, so I didn't bother.

Too bad ... for her.

A bell rings.

It's up. Hey Anne. How are you?

Okay. You?

Same shit, different pile.

Thanks for the pasta.

My pleasure.

Dom turns, grabs his jacket and walks out the back door for a smoke. She turns her attention to Rob. He grabs an olive from the garnish dish and tosses it in his mouth.

It's good to see you again.

Thanks.

So how's it going with you, for real?

Oh. You know.

Are you done at that—what was it—a copy place?

It's over. I don't want to talk about it.

I told you that was a dumb move.

What can I say? I was tired of the industry.

Tsk. Come-on, doll, how could you be tired of the industry? Everybody needs a break sometimes, but you're like me, you're in too deep. There's no getting out.

Oh well that's reassuring. I always wanted to be thirty and working in a bar with no other prospects.

Fuck prospects. You think it's better anywhere else? Whaddaya gonna do? Work in an office? You gonna be a writer and starve to death? Haven't given up that dream yet?

Whaddaya gonna do, make copies of your poetry to hand out on the street?

It's not like that.

Come on, snap out of it. Make the most with what you got. You got freedom here. Nowhere else are you gonna make so much cash in a short period of time. Flexible hours, you're on your feet, always something new. You're still hot, you can make coin. It's the truth. You're lucky... Hey, I'm getting off in fifteen. I still have your DVD. Come by, I have something else for you too.

What?

It's a surprise.

They walk over to his apartment at Ossington and College. It's raining again. They take the stairs. It smells like bleach. The cement had been freshly painted grey, but someone scrawled the word peace on it in black marker, someone else crossed that out and drew an anarchist symbol, then someone else wrote, freedom is just another word..., and off to the side, in blue, someone else wrote, you're all idiots—get a job.

This fucking artist kid below me had a party two weeks ago—look at this. It was just painted.

They reach the top floor. He opens his door. He repainted one wall a darker shade of beige. New furniture, a new couch and coffee table—Ikea. New TV—wall mounted. New art—reproductions.

You like it? Looks good, eh.

It's been a while.

Ya, where've you been?

Trying to be good to myself.

He reaches under the counter, fumbles around, pulls out a bag with a white rock in it, half the size of a golf ball.

Here, be good to yourself.

Is this the surprise?

This is the cleanest you'll find. Guaranteed. You can thank me later. Break it up.

You're kidding? Now? It's the middle of the day.

Right now.

Alright. Here we go again.

Can't believe I'm doing this again. Well, that's a lie, but... I need to keep it cool this time, not go overboard. Control, it's easy. It's been long enough, just needed to clear the head. Those late night shifts. This time: distance. Won't hang out all the time, won't go out after. I'm lucky they still like me. Don't want to alienate myself. I need this now. This is my life, there's not much I can do. Mistakes were made.

She pulls over the customary glass dish, takes out a credit card and breaks off a piece, working at it with the side of the card until it's fine. Rob walks over to the stereo and puts on some acid jazz—*Tourist*. Skips the first track. Six thin lines. She pulls out a five and rolls it into a thin tube.

Do the honors.

No, you first. I want to see your expression.

She lowers her face to the counter.

Holy, shit. No kidding. Where'd you get that? Here.

Thanks. It's good eh. I told you. Want a beer?

Ya sure. Corona?

You got it. Welcome back. It's good to see you.

Ya, thanks. ... Wow this stuff is good.

You want some.

Uh, I don't know.

Take some. ... So how's everything else going?

Oh you know.

You still hung up over that fucking... fifty year old.

He was forty-five.

Whatever, he's married.

Common-law.

Same-shit.

No. I'm not still hung-up over him. It's been a year.

Come on, you were talking about it what? two months ago?

Not since my mother.

...

Funny that you asked, he called me yesterday.

Oh ya. What happened?

I don't know.

What do you mean, you don't know?

My friend gave me these pills to help me sleep, and I accidently took too many of them. I don't remember talking to him.

What were they?

Little orange pills. For anxiety or something. I don't know.

Clonazepam?

Ya, that's it.

How many did you take?

Five.

Crap. You must have slept like a corpse.

Is that dangerous?

Thank-you. Naw, they just knock you out. Is that what happened?

Ya. ... Hey, I just rented *Satyricon*. Have you seen it?

A long time ago. It's the one with all the weird shit, in ancient Rome, right?

You wanna watch it again?

We could. ... So, you look good by the way.

He walks around the counter and puts his hand on her hips.

Oh, come on Rob. We said we wouldn't do this anymore.

Ya, but this is a celebration, doll. It's a welcome back party.

He pulls her towards him. St. Germain is on its third track, "So Flute". He starts kissing her neck, puts his hand up her shirt. She lets it go, and starts kissing his mouth. She can feel him getting hard. In two minutes she's holding on to the side of couch, and he's behind her, pushing. Her pants are down, one leg hooked around her ankle. She can hear her phone ringing. Her bra is half off. He groans.

It has stopped raining, but it's damp and cool. Dusk. Judy called and left a voicemail. She doesn't check it. A text: call me back. She doesn't. She takes Ossington down to Dundas. She can feel herself beginning to crash. She checks her pockets, then her bag. Oh crap, did I forget? Yes, it's here. What am I doing, I shouldn't have taken it. I had to. I won't do it all right away. I'll save it. Have it around for a few weeks. I can lock it up and keep it for when people come. This is the test. Damn-it, I have no self-control. Yes you do. Oh shit, my keys. They're here, what a relief. Did I get my wallet? Yes. I left the five. Whatever, let it go. Let it go. This is easy, you can do this. You must. It could be worse. The Dakota Tavern ... god, what's wrong with that guy? I wonder if I look that sketchy. TD. Turn here. Need smokes.

She turns left into the convenience store.

Hi, can I get a pack of Belmonts.

We're out of Belmonts.

Then can I get a pack of du Maurier light, small, regulars—uh, distinct, whatever their called now.

Can I see some ID?

You're kidding right?

I need to see some ID.

What are you, blind? ... Here.

Thank-you, ma'am. ... That'll be 10.50.

What a rip-off.

I don't make the prices ma'am.

Right.

Have a nice night.

Lakeview. You dirty little greasy spoon. Brunch with Joseph every week. Lakeview my ass. An affair haven in the city's former armpit. Bellwoods Optical. Opera Bob's Public House. When the hell did this place open? Huuha, what was that? Nothing. You're losing it, Anne, get it together. BMO. Roxton. Excuse me. Stupid bikers. A1-Foreign Domestic. A-Nails & Spa. My phone. Should I look? Probably Judy. Can't talk now. What if it's Joseph? What if he's watching me? Pretend you didn't notice. Don't look. Just get home and get inside. Walk faster. Come-on lights. Shaw Flowers. Park is quiet tonight. Rained all day. That couple with their dog again. Never fail. Always there, always cuddly. He probably cheats on her. Shit, my phone again. For the love of god, Anne, just look at it: don't be paranoid. Don't do this again, don't get crazy. Get it. Fuck, it's Joseph, I knew it. Answer it. Don't. Just fucking answer it and get it over with.

Hello?

Anne. It's Joseph.

I know who it is.

You okay?

Ya, what's up?

I'm here.

What? Where?

I was at Lakeview. I saw you walk by. I passed by your place earlier but ... I left you a message yesterday.

Oh, I didn't get it.

That's what I thought. I was worried.

What did you say?

I said I was coming by to see if you were okay.

Well, I'm okay.

Okay, well, I'm here.

What?

On Crawford. Turn around.

She turns. He's crossing the street.

Hi.

Hi.

So...

How are you?

What's up?

Uh, nothing. I just got worried about our last conversation. Yesterday. You didn't sound so good, it gave me a panic attack. I had just called you because... I mean. Sorry if this is weird. If I didn't come checking I would have phoned the police. I didn't want to overreact. You didn't sound so good.

Ugh. It's starting to rain again, you wanna come inside.

Please, actually. That would be nice.

It's right here. But you clearly know that.

Uh, sorry I saw you the other day.

She walks up to her door and unlocks it. They step in and descend the stairs.

How long have you been living here?

I don't know, eight months.

Why did you leave the place on Gladstone?

Couldn't afford it. ... Do you want coffee or something?

Sure, whatever you're having.

I need a regular coffee. I know you don't like regular coffee at this hour, but—

Regular coffee is fine.

Alright. Please, sit. Just throw your jacket on the bed.

You keep it nice.

It's a fucking mess, what are you talking about?

No, no. For what it is, it's nice.

She prepares the coffee maker. Washes some mugs.

Anyways, stuff has been a bit crazy. I hate to be curt, but I don't need this right now.

Wasn't it enough? Are you coming back for more? Don't you have a family to attend to or something?

She washes two plates, a bowl, then collects a couple of wine glasses from the table. She mutters, Might as well.

I didn't come here to fight.

So why did you come here?

She wipes down the counter quickly with soapy water, then adds more soap and washes out the sink.

I told you, because you didn't sound okay. I called.

Why did you call?

She wipes down the stove and rinses the cloth.

I called because I was with my daughter at Bellwoods the other day—Friday. I saw you leave your place. You walked down the street. Then you came back with grocery bags and went inside. I figured you lived here. I wanted to call out to you...

She rinses all the surfaces with the rinsed cloth. Wets it again, wrings it, and hangs it on the side of the sink. She takes out the broom.

It's been over a year.

...but I didn't because, well..

She sweeps around his feet.

Because you were with your daughter right. The whole reason why we broke up. All that bullshit. Do we have to go through that again?

Anyway, I thought about you that night, and I thought it would be good to see how you were. Then I called you, and, I didn't know what to think, you were saying all this weird

stuff, and you sounded like you were sleeping, but worse... I got worried. Look, I'm sorry. I just reacted, I wanted to make sure you were okay. I went looking around for you today. I went by your work.

She stops.

What? Where?

The Copy Centre. This girl behind the counter said you didn't work there anymore. She said she hadn't seen to you in weeks.

Well, I'm alive. Do you still take milk?

Yes. Thank you.

She pours the coffee. They are silent.

I don't know what to say.

I don't either.

I accidentally took too many sleeping pills, that's why I couldn't talk on the phone. I wasn't awake.

Oh, that makes sense.

....

Are you still working at the bar?

Yup.

How's your mother?

Dead.

Anne. I've told you this before, that's not funny. I don't like it when you do that.

I'm not joking.

You're kidding.

No.

God, I'm sorry. Are you okay?

Well.

When? What happened?

She was in the Rockies, skiing with her new boyfriend. There was an avalanche.

Oh god, there were a lot this year. Anne, I'm sorry to hear this. That's horrible.

What's horrible? We never spoke anyway. She didn't care about me. You know that.

That's not true. When was this?

I don't know. A couple of months ago.

Your dad?

You know I haven't spoken to my father in years.

Yes, but, I thought maybe you'd call him. He can help you.

I don't want his goddamn tar money. And anyway, he doesn't even know about it. If he does, he hasn't tried to contact me and he didn't show face at the funeral.

Why didn't you call me? Why didn't you say something?

Why in god's name do you even think I'd call you?

Do you need help?

What do you mean?

Do you need money?

I don't want your fucking money. I've never wanted your stupid money.

Okay, okay, but it's not stupid when you need it, so the offer stands.

For chrissakes Joseph, this is how you always do it. I don't want your fucking money—she picks up a copy of *Ecce Homo* left on the table and whips it across the room. It knocks over a glass sitting on the nightstand beside the bed, breaking it. Ava's frame falls too, the corner of the frame bounces and it lands face down, but doesn't break. Her heart races. She's ashamed. He stares at her. She can feel him cringing.

You see. I'm fucking crazy, Joseph. That's why you chose her and not me right. Because I'm too fucking crazy, too volatile, too fucking violent. Well, now I just proved it.

Please don't do this.

Yeah, well I guess I should have just used you, just like everyone, maybe things would be different.

I'm trying to be nice.

Nice? Right. I forgot. I have to go to the bathroom.

She walks over to the washroom. She shuts the door and looks in the mirror. She has a pimple. She's starting to feel a post-blow headache. There's also a cramp. She can hear him trying to clean up the broken glass. That's just like him. I wonder if that's what he does at home.

She sits on the toilet and looks at her panties. There's a substance. Wipe it. Brown. Damn. She wipes her crotch. Red. That's right. That explains it. She laughs though her eyes swell. Her face turns hot while she looks for a tampon. I wonder if Rob noticed.

Did you say something?

He's outside of the washroom door.

Sort of.

Do you need something?

I laughed.

Oh.

Do you remember when were in Van for my brother's wedding, and finally snuck away to that restaurant, just us two, in Yaletown?

Yes.

Amarcord.

Yes, I remember.

That was nice, huh?

She flushes the toilet then opens the door, pulling up her fly.

It was.

Do you remember Edmonton.

Yes. That was a long time ago.

Well, sometimes it feels like yesterday.

Anne.

I rented Fellini's *Satyricon*. Can you watch it with me?