SCRIPTS FOR MISFITS:
A CREATIVE THESIS COMPRISED OF SHORT FICTION

by

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Scripts for Misfits is a creative thesis comprised of three short stories set in Prince George. Thematically, "Crazy Old Birds," "1957 Taylor Dr." and "The Box-Shaped Man" are linked in their separate explorations of the positive and negative impacts that popular texts (cinematic or literary) can have on female characters. Ultimately, my thesis pushes the reader to examine how these fictional women come to not only navigate the largely negative socio-political ideologies that popular culture prescribes as appropriate gender roles, but also, Scripts for Misfits illustrates how individuals can work toward self-actualization by deconstructing the messages that have previously worked to contain them.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Collective Construction of Influences:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Making of <em>Scripts for Misfits</em></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crazy Old Birds</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957 Taylor Dr.</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Box-Shaped Man</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Stewart ii
A Collective Construction of Influences:

The Making of Scripts for Misfits

It is troubling for me as the writer to try to explain the myriad of different influences that have permeated my consciousness throughout the process of writing this creative thesis. As an artist, an advocate and an academic I must acknowledge that the streams of information that imprint my mind on a daily basis undoubtedly meander into my narratives. Because I see the world through a feminist lens, I am biased to the many structures within society that I deem to be oppressive. Psychological oppression as it plays out in Scripts for Misfits is a narrative backlash away from the norms of beauty and femininity as maintained by the media, television and film. Within this cultural climate, my observations in 'real' life have lead me to believe that popular visual texts work to exacerbate the mental well-being of women, because most women do not fit into the confining representations of femininity portrayed in popular culture. Television and film are very much the predominant texts of the masses and I see these texts instilling views in women (most noticeably with the media's extreme emphasis on a particular sort of bodily beauty) in a systematically oppressive way.

This great prominence placed on appearances thereby insinuates that a woman's personality and/or intelligence hold little or no importance. Conversely, within Canadian women's literature there are many texts that explore the emphasis placed on women's bodies while also magnifying the inner complexities of female protagonists, therefore creating more round and relevant experiences for readers today. By taking into consideration the many themes and tropes in Canadian women's texts, one might approach Scripts by asking whether or not I too successfully bridge the prominent gap between constructed notions of femininity (perpetuated by

Stewart 1
popular culture) and the realm where more accurately portrayed, complex women exist (see literatures by Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Miriam Toews and Aritha Van Herk).

In treating media culture as an omnipotent text that must be scrutinized and rejected because of its predominantly sexist and/or misogynist messages, I have attempted to explore how my female characters can or cannot negotiate the various images and narrative structures that have imprinted their minds. While theory did not play an authoritative role in the production of this thesis, there are various streams that I must acknowledge as influencing the themes, tones and actualities that are active within *Scripts for Misfits*. In no way did these theoretical premises limit the scope of my writing trajectory. My primary concentration has been in Canadian's women's literature; I will later discuss the aspects surrounding this discourse that have most significant had an impact on my writerly inclinations. More secondary focuses that have, in part, informed and influenced (but not restricted) my work are the concept of the gaze, as explored by Laura Mulvey, as well as an introductory look at body theory, discussed by Judith Butler and also 'écriture féminine' as described by Hélène Cixous. My three pieces of short fiction "Crazy Old Birds," "1957 Taylor Dr." and "The Box-Shaped Man" are very much a progressive continuum that work from, in tandem with and as complementary accessories to, the ideologies explored by these three feminist theorists. There are also instances where these theories are contradicted or rejected by the characters in my tales. The most overt aim of contributing to these discourses is to further demonstrate the complicated subject position of contemporary women, how it is difficult for them to navigate within certain debilitating and unhealthy paradigms that surround femininity as a construct particular to a certain type of Western cultural climate, and to offer alternative means for many femininities, feminisms and agencies to actualize within this

*Stewart 2*
reality. As a woman living in this environment that I am critiquing, I posit the role of an artist, as a political one.

Initially, I yearned to provide predominantly positive tales that emphasized how to emerge from these formidable constructs of gender in healthier ways. In the end, this proved to be a hefty and seemingly unreasonable task as I created environments that very much resembled the patriarchal, social, cultural and political realm in which we live. "The Box-Shaped Man," as the concluding story, offers the strongest of my female protagonists because Emily manages to inscribe a middle ground in an arena where the messages that surround her accentuate and elevate an emphasis on her body as her most valuable asset.

Dominant narratives in popular culture as they appear in some cinematic texts (be it media or film) perpetuate static and destabilizing ideologies concerning femininity. For instance, a female character's value, on screen, is most often based on her outward appearance; her body is deemed beautiful under certain rigid ideals. While progress has been made for the status of women in many contexts, predominant representations of femininity remain pervasively patriarchal very often through sexist and/or misogynist messages within popular visual texts. What appears on screen within these narratives can have constricting effects on the psyches of women, particularly young women, who perhaps have not been taught the analytical skills needed to reject the troubling messages that are continually working to oppress them. It is no mystery why this trend of privileging certain types of bodies within media occurs. According to Jean Kilbourne's documentary *Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women* in 1999 in America, advertising was a one hundred and eighty billion dollar industry per year; the backlash of how this industry influences contemporary society, particularly in how women view themselves, is one of damaging proportions. *Scripts for Misfits* explores and illustrates the
complex psychological landscapes of women who try to negotiate their subject positions within this hostile cultural environment. Kilbourne's film (an excellent example of media analysis) shows "how images of our lives affect the realities of our lives" (Killing Us Softly 3); all three of my stories deal with this idea in implicit and/or explicit ways.

Contained within "Crazy Old Birds," "1957 Taylor Dr." and "The Box-Shaped Man" are themes and concepts that are directly related to the messages that popular texts perpetuate. These pieces of short fiction explore the psychological landscapes where female protagonists attempt to escape restrictive cultural representations. "Crazy Old Birds" illustrates how two sisters, Vero and Mirna, become recluses in old-age, in part because of a personal tragedy, but also as a reaction to representations of elderly women who have been labelled unstable by the society in which they live. Reclusive, intellectual, older women are allocated a particular place in dominant tropes, out of the eyes of society, hidden within their eccentric lives—a trope apparent not only in cinema (see Grey Gardens) and literature but also an aberration and a cautionary tale told within society to possible 'spinster' types. "1957 Taylor Dr." showcases Marleen, a new British immigrant to Prince George, as a woman who is ensnared by her own view of what femininity ought to be, as depicted and dictated to her in Marilyn Monroe movies. The celebrity culture of the Hollywood star system transformed Norma Jean into Marilyn Monroe, making her into a sex symbol. Marleen is impressed by Marilyn Monroe's power even though Marleen was educated at Oxford and should be able to see how Marilyn has been exploited. Eventually, Marleen stops respecting Monroe and realizes that Monroe is not someone she wishes to emulate. "1957 Taylor Dr." illustrates how even 'educated' women can fall prey to idolatry and imitate gender stereotypes of women as sex objects. In "The Box-Shaped Man" the protagonist, Emily, is granted the most agency (in comparison with the other two tales) as she acts and reacts to two
pieces of art that have been produced by male artists who view her body and her person in a defining and confining way.

Progress away from dominant narratives about femininity in popular culture, as it unfolds in *Scripts*, is no simple matter, for it could be that in (fleeting) moments of meditation a character might access, if only temporarily, her agency. In realizing, on whatever minute level, that she can disengage from the repressive constructs that she has inadvertently adopted, then for our purposes here, we can label that as progress. However, those moments, may not carry the weight or impact that she needs in order to detach herself completely from the cultural and psychological paradigms she previously subscribed to, and herein lies the crux: noticing the troublesome construct, in how it has been adopted into one's own life, does not eliminate the more habitual inclinations that are constantly propounded by these cultural markers that dictate how women see themselves, how they respond to such conventions (that have, unfortunately not become destabilizing, but rather entirely familiar) and eventually, how they can, if not escape, then at least survive under such pervasive psychological regimes. Not a single of the characters within my stories is able to reject every single cultural imprint, or marker of ideal femininity. It is up to the reader to decide whether or not these cultural influences will continue to stain these characters in the future. *Scripts for Misfits* offers no easy or cohesive answers or endings but rather aims to illustrate how women might self-actualize.

Considering Laura Mulvey's article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," my thesis work purposes that certain social formations (as trumpeted by mass media) have moulded women insofar that they seem themselves through the lens of multiple male gazes. My protagonists grapple with seeing themselves in the roles that exploit them, without always recognizing (yet working toward cognition) that they are identifying with that which ensnares

Stewart 5
them. In using the third person point of view throughout, *Scripts for Misfits* illustrates how some 'real' women come to see themselves as players on a cinematic stage in part because so few empowering women present themselves on screen. While film (and technology in general) has made great advancements since the publication of Mulvey's initial text, the triple gaze of the patriarchal camera lens, the male hero and the male audience seems to have changed very little. Taking Mulvey's conceptual framework of these gazes, I want the reader to bear in mind that in contemporary society women are all too aware of their bodies being viewed. By including overt and covert cinematic allusions, contemporary writers inadvertently point towards Mulvey's theory and in turn, this theory can be used as a lens through which to analyze fiction.

During the process of writing my stories, I came across *Blonde*, a novel about Marilyn Monroe by Joyce Carol Oates and also a short story by Montreal writer, Neil Smith, "Funny Weird or Funny Ha Ha?" which is about a female recovering alcoholic who was influenced considerably by Lucille Ball's life and by the *I Love Lucy* episode in particular where Lucy gets drunk while trying to sell cough syrup in a commercial. By noticing the notions of performance for Monroe of Oates' novel and for the unnamed first-person protagonist of Smith's story, a reader can perceive a range of media influences determined by the agencies and choices made by these individual characters. This triple threat of the male gaze, as delineated in Mulvey's first "Visual Pleasure," can be a force that translates, transposes and even regulates contemporary narratives. While this was not my intent writing these stories, I can now see that these cinematic

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1 There are many actresses who chose to play dynamic, complex roles. Jodie Foster, Natalie Portman and Meryl Streep favour more realistic female characters (as opposed to emulating stereotypes), as well as Canadian actresses Ellen Page and Sarah Polley.

2 "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure'" addresses the criticism that Mulvey received (for "Visual Pleasure") in casting the collective audience in the male third person. Alternatively, in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure,'" she chooses to focus on "women who are unable to achieve a stable sexual identity" (123); the characters of *Scripts* grapple with (and arguably overcome) issues concerning passive and active representations of women in cinema raised in Mulvey's essays, both of which have proved to be formative in feminist film discourse.

Stewart 6

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tendencies and theories (continually consumed by the artist in her leisure time) have been unconsciously woven into these tales.

My thesis illustrates some of the ways women internalize phallocentric ideologies often represented in film, popular culture and texts on social, interactive levels and how they can navigate within these socio-political constructs. If "traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the [male] characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the [male] spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen" ("Visual Pleasure" 15), then what are the implications of these gazes for the female viewer who identifies with the woman on screen? Is it possible for the woman who relates to the character (the erotic female object) not to internalize this paradigm of desire? Can she remove herself and realize the detriments of relating to static constructions of the female lead in this disempowering scene? In certain standardized types of films (most romantic comedies for instance) the female leads are often offered limited agency within the constructs of the genre, thereby eliminating possibilities to become more developed characters and thus more active agents within the narrative. While this is certainly not true of all films, in terms of what is deemed most popular, stereotypical and archetypical female figures still reign at the box office. There are exceptions to this as well. Sophia Coppola and Wes Anderson have produced films where women are far more complex and well rounded. Quentin Tarantino's films also have tendencies that are (most often) more sympathetic towards the status of women.3 Especially with these possible alternatives appearing, complicating the subject position of women on screen

3 Conventionally, women have been cast into stereotypes reflective of a binary system that represents appropriate and inappropriate female behaviour (the virgin or the whore, the princess or the spinster, and other stereotypical dichotomies.) More recently, screenwriters and directors are trying to challenge these gender stereotypes. Even when filmmakers try to subvert these roles, however, they sometimes end up perpetuating them.
becomes absolutely essential for the post modern female viewer, so that she can reach towards a more positive psychological position in terms of how she views herself.

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" calls for an "alternative cinema" that breaks away from the "dominant ideological concept" seen in mainstream film (15). Thirty years after this article's publication Mulvey's analysis and criticism of the dominant order is, unfortunately, all too relevant today. *Scripts for Misfits* offers alternative narratives that grapple with the still dominant order of objectifying women's bodies. It is critical to recognize Mulvey's "[discussion] of the interweaving of that erotic pleasure in film, its meaning and, in particular, the central place of the image of woman" (16). Further, my narratives question, reject, or at least point away from these dominant lenses that have codified women's bodies and minds. In tandem with Mulvey's introductory (albeit hopeful) argument that "the alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without simply rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, and daring to break with normal pleasurable expectation in order to conceive a new language of desire" (14), I would like the reader to ask whether or not the female protagonists within *Scripts for Misfits* manage these alternatives and to what ends? Are new languages of desire formed that lead the protagonists to more fulfilling lives? It is also fundamental for discussion and analysis for the reader to ask how and why scopophilia (pleasure in looking) and scopophobia (intense fear of being seen) play out in the realities of the protagonists within my thesis. Do these women ever implicitly or explicitly escape multiple gazes? One of Mulvey's concepts that ought to be called into question here is whether or not "an image that constitutes the matrix of the imaginary, or recognition/misrecognition and identification, and hence of the first articulation of the I, of subjectivity" (15) can allow an individual to escape from this complicated sign system? The cinema, as a text, implicitly presents the quandary of the image of
the female lead influencing the self-image of the female viewer. Audiences are left to their own
devices to build on or construct their identities accordingly. Mulvey addresses, in particular, how
the heterosexual gaze of the male audience relates to the gaze of the male protagonist onscreen,
without considering how this self-formation produces debilitating effects for the female viewer.
Specifically, she can sympathise (and in turn, without always knowing, mimic) the actions of the
female erotic object. For Mulvey, and for the purposes of the reader of Scripts, these are
"formative structures" that have significant and dangerous meaning when "attached to an
idealisation" (15), for what agency can a woman who identifies with these sexualized, static
images of womanhood (desired to be consumed) have? If "pleasure in looking has been split
between active/male and passive/female" (17), then what are the larger ramifications of these
ideals to individuals who have consumed these cinematic images? My characters attempt to
break away from the passive female role and move into a more active position, with more
agency. However, navigating binary oppositions (passive and active) is never an uncomplicated
endeavour. Ultimately, these three narratives (contained in Scripts for Misfits) illustrate social
ramifications of media. These stories also work as a political commentary foregrounding the
challenges each of these women faces as she seeks alternatives. Each attempts to cast off narrow
identity constructs. The endings of these tales are deliberately ambiguous because no individual
can exist completely outside the social formations that have moulded them.

At the advent of my graduate studies, I became concerned with body theory as discussed
in Judith Butler's initial chapter ("Bodies that Matter") of Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive
Limits of Sex. While this text is expansive and extremely complex in its examination of how the
body initiates itself in accordance with discourse, the author poses numerous queries that are
helpful in placing the stories in Scripts for Misfits. Consider Butler's question "if everything is
discourse, what happens to the body" (28), in relationship to these tales, for the bodies of my characters do not exist out of a larger dialogue about the status of women and their seemingly meaningless materiality in the presence of so many larger issues and contexts. The Poirier sisters ("Crazy Old Birds"), Marleen ("1957 Taylor Dr.") and Emily ("The Box-Shaped Man") deal with issues of the body that relate to a significant conjecture made by Butler: "is materiality a site or surface that is excluded from the process of construction, as that through which and on which construction works?" (Bodies that Matter 28). In the context of the world in which my characters live (not so different to the one that we inhibit), these concerns about corporeality and construction warrant an investigation. As earlier discussed by Butler, ancient philosophers have positioned femaleness to be synonymous with the body, or matter, while positing maleness as synonymous with mind, soul and/or intelligibility (32). In connecting this aged paradigm with Mulvey's considerations and in turn with the developments of my own characters, I suggest that these ideologies are very much with us today, as they mark the minds of women in terms of how their physicalities may be valued and/or devalued (through varying patriarchal judgements). I want to point to the effects that all of these issues have for the psyches of young women, for it is not beyond contemporary women's grasp to negotiate these ideologies.

Hélène Cixous' 'écriture féminine' has also had an influence on how I have approached my narratives, which in a way, contrasts with Mulvey and Butler. In creating my characters, I kept the notion of Cixous' writing the body, as a new site of empowerment. Consider Cixous' claim that "by writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display—the ailing or dead figure which, so often turns out to be the nasty companions, the cause and location of inhibitions" ("The Laugh of the Medusa" 250). For our purposes of analysis alongside Scripts for

Stewart 10

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Misfits, one must evaluate whether or not these female figures manage to reclaim their bodies, away from prying gazes, cultural imprints and even the ideologies that make them view their corporeality as a shameful shell. Further, one might address how my choice of point of view could be seen as a sight of ensnarement, for their bodies are not their own through third person, but at the whim of the narrator. It was my attempt to grant these female characters as much agency over their bodies as their development would warrant. Through crass language about their bodies ("Crazy Old Birds"), through control over their bodies ("1957 Taylor Dr.") and also through re-appropriation of male bodies (a contentious choice, in "The Box-Shaped Man"), these women do not return to, but rather re-inscribe the cultural and political meanings and representations of their bodies in ways that are meant to disturb and delight the reader.

Through literature in print we are given more complex female figures. In reading what I deem to be Canadian feminist fiction, I have come across numerous destabilizing narratives about complicated female characters. Texts by Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Carol Shields, Miriam Toews and Aritha Van Herk have been significant to me as a literary scholar and as a writer because all of these authors, in various ways, place value on subjective experiences that are often devalued by patriarchal society. Domestic issues and the prevalence of repressions that emerge because of these issues, for instance, women experiencing psychological breaks, and/or a sense of displacement for being unconventional (under certain social scripts of definitive femininity) are tendencies that are at the forefront of these narratives. Atwood, Munro, Shields, Toews and Van Herk offer their protagonists alternative means to find solace to that which holds them back, be it popular social and cultural paradigms, or just as valid personal circumstances in which these characters feel confined. Finding alternative ways to seek comfort in a place of alienation when an individual does not feel that she can meet certain norms, often means that

Stewart 11
these female characters (by these separate authors) are granted the right to deconstruct expected status quo behaviour or ideologies so that a continuum away from static constructions of femininity can be enabled. In placing value on the familial experience (as the first four authors do) and in asserting that value can be found for those who do not necessarily relate to domestic issues (as Van Herk does) a new, more round, representation of the experience of complex women comes forward. Themes, tropes and trends shared by these authors can be seen in the way that they creative positive possibilities for their characters who encounter (what many would label) negative circumstances. That in-between space that exists in finding alternative means and realities produces a tension that I have very much been interested in while creating *Scripts for Misfits*.

Atwood's *The Edible Woman* has had a significant impact in shaping many of my own ideas because it features a figure who becomes entrapped by early advertising culture and gender-based socio-political contexts. Marian McAlpin is (arguably) released from her disassociation and discomfort with the manufactured woman she feels expected to become. Published in the late sixties, *The Edible Woman* is very much indicative of this rise of consumer culture. Marian's increasing sense of discomfort, with the various roles she feels society demands she play, illustrates an anxiety that has grown to magnified proportions within today's culture. In reading and rereading *The Edible Woman*, a question raised by Atwood in a 1978 lecture "The Curse of Eve—Or, What I Learned in School" comes to mind as applicable to the texts that have informed my own narratives; Atwood asks about the role of fiction and wonders "should it tell us something about society? Can it avoid doing this? (217). Undoubtedly, it would be extremely difficult to leave out the social, political and cultural markers that saturate contemporary reality.

Another text by Atwood that has significantly influenced my thesis is the collection of short
stories Bluebeard's Egg. These tales seem like a continuation of the social, cultural and bodily malaise seen in The Edible Woman because even though the diverse women characters have depth, in certain ways they remain static. Even when they recognize the misrepresentation and oppression that continually confronts or silences them, they often remain paralyzed in their inaction. Atwood's characters exhibit a wide range between passive and active roles illustrating the complicated subject position of women today.

Alice Munro's body of work has informed my narratives in terms of the breadth and depth the short form can provide for the reader. While I have read nearly the entirety of her texts, The Love of a Good Woman has most predominantly held an influence on my writing of Scripts for Misfits because the stories (most notably "The Children Stay") have a tone that is reminiscent of earlier feminist writers, encapsulated by the quiet rejections of restrictive norms while dealing with difficult circumstances. Munro's prominent use of intertextuality to demarcate multiple anxieties that are simultaneously occurring in Pauline's life in "The Children Stay" creates an expansive richness that warrants emulation. In harkening back to a Greek myth and a modernist play, and with the complicated position of the protagonist, Munro unsettles what might be seen as a conventional narrative that documents the trajectory of a disintegrating marriage. Intertextuality, as it appears in Scripts, works to build layers in a similar manner employed by Munro in "The Children Stay;" however, the master narratives that inform and challenge my characters are predominantly cinematic.

Carol Shields' The Stone Diaries has influenced my work in its implicit questioning and its explicit mockery of the strength of the non-fiction movement, particularly in the opening of "Crazy Old Birds." I am interested in how narratives that focus on women, who are deemed conventionally domestic, unfold. By integrating many opinions and speculations about the life of

Stewart 13
Daisy Goodwill, according to the relatives, neighbours and community members that had the fortune to cross paths with the protagonist, the reader is taught that information regarding the reality of any subject of a narrative is fluid, changing and often very unlike any sound structure that may or may not metaphorically stand for the actualities of one's life. In using multiple voices, analyses and printed matters to reveal the various veins of Daisy's life, Shields points to how subjective experience is unreliable. She illustrates the existential implications that this can carry for the reputation and representation of someone's life. It is a prominent trope within Shields' many narratives to weave in various 'womanly' endeavours, such as gardening, quilting and journaling. By drawing on diverse arts, the final outcome is a more rich, more personal narrative to which more women might relate. In including the domestic, feminine experience a writer can spin a so-called minor narrative in a way that inadvertently leads the reader to enter into a discourse that questions the authority of master narratives.

Miriam Toews' characters also struggle with the domestic, standardized version of femininity. Most of Toews' texts deal explicitly or implicitly with the mental health of her characters. In particular, she depicts the repression of feelings and activities that plague some people in strict religious settings. All of Toews' body of work circle around mental health issues. By negotiating 'real' life experiences, she conveys the dangers and challenges of labelling a personal a misfit. In turn, constructions of self are no longer static, but fluid and multiplicitous. Individuals who cannot adhere or adapt to societal conventions often meet insatiable demands to conform to standards that ignore their reality. Toews' narratives enabled me to see how the notion of self must be constructed according to each individual's unique circumstance. In A Boy of Good Breeding, A Complicated Kindness, Summer of My Amazing Luck and The Flying Troutman's Toews presents characters who deconstruct the elements in their lives that are
restrictive while slowing building upon their unsure self-worth. Ultimately, they reject outside contexts (be it based in religion, society, culture or gender) that work to diminish their quality of life through disabling and manipulative means. Toews' narratives offer an enabling space for protagonists in a confining environment, all the while questioning and acknowledging the place from which they emerged. There is a subtle, understated solace that creates a more palatable, less controversial middle-ground for women who bravely negotiate the society which tries to limit them.

If I were forced to use one word to qualify the themes and characters in Aritha Van Herk's work I would choose 'fierce.' While writing this thesis, I tried to imprint the tone and realities of my characters with a similar fierceness as seen in *No Fixed Address: An Amorous Journey* and *Restlessness*. I consider these texts to be fierce because Van Herk takes no remorse, particularly in contemplating and finally rejecting the domestic and the familial lives that the appropriately constructed female in popular culture inscribes. My characters try to accumulate or maintain a similar fierceness, despite the various contexts (be it social or familial) that try to belittle such courageousness. Fierceness, in the way that I've learnt it from Dorcas of *Restlessness* and Arachne of *No Fixed Address*, is acted out in *Scripts for Misfits*; it signifies the dismissal of greater society for the Poirier sisters, the dubious yet definite rejection of a starlet appropriation of femininity for Marleen and finally, and probably with the most impact, in how Emily chooses for her agency to be displayed to the public. The troubling aspect of this fierceness is to what ends Arachne and Dorcas achieve this emulation of the courageous. I say emulation simply because they are damned by that which makes them brave; they reject a broad qualitative sense of the feminine and are lead to an indefinite future because of it (be it a
disappearance to the great white North, or the ambiguous dénouement of a reverse Scheherazade tale).

The theorists and writers and the many arguments, themes and ideologies addressed here have had an impact on my writing in various complicated ways. As I stated in the beginning, it is a destabilizing position to try to explain in a linear cohesive fashion the direct and indirect manners in which these things appeared during the writing of these stories. I cannot purport to be an authority on any of the issues raised, but rather, I can claim to be an expert in how some of these streams of thought penetrate the minds of fictionalized women, particularly in terms of mental wellness, body issues and popular culture. The common thread that weaves throughout "Crazy Old Birds," "1957 Taylor Dr." and "The Box-Shaped Man" is how past influences and tendencies in popular culture (media, film and literary texts) perpetuate debilitating patriarchal trends (through representations) and how eventually there can exist a movement away from these oppressive constructs. *Scripts for Misfits* allows for unique emergences of self-worth to be materialized in subjective and specific terms that are acclimatized to the circumstances of each individual character.

In offering three separate glimpses into realities that circle around these varying, complex themes, I hope to expand the discourse about possible avenues for women who question limited gender roles depicted in popular culture. By creating stories where characters chose to deconstruct (and arguably reject) the limiting representations that have been imposed on them, it is my aim for *Scripts for Misfits* to inspire contemporary women to discover their own positive meanings of what femininity ought to be.

Stewart 16
Crazy Old Birds

The Poirier sisters outlived nearly everyone they knew. They had overcome a lot together. Their amalgamated experiences could fill a library. A few writers had attempted several books (two biographies and two novels, respectively); however, not a single of these texts even adequately pleased these nonagenarians. In the privacy of their brick home on the Nechako river, sometimes including Cecilia when she is willing to entertain them, Mirna and Vero Poirier revel in detailing the magnitude of what they have, together, survived: A combined seventeen long term relationships that spanned over sixty-five years and two unplanned pregnancies, the same year, when they were both in their twenties. Mirna did not have the thing and Vero’s daughter, Cecilia, now at the ripe age of seventy, lives in Vancouver, a comfortable distance away from Prince George, where the sisters’ never-ending eccentricities seem to sharpen like aged cheddar.

Mirna is well aware of how her niece speaks of "them." Some thirty years ago, when Cecilia appeased her mother’s request for a visit, she sat down in the 'phone room' to place a call to her lover in Vancouver. Eavesdropping, Mirna overheard Cecilia’s real opinion of her mother and aunt:

Cecilia’s smoky voice lowered an octave, forcing Mirna to lean in closer,

—Oh. Them. They’re just fine, crazy old birds. Especially with me here as referee.

Disgusted with her niece’s penchant for using sports metaphors, an occupational hazard, surely, for Cecilia had chosen to be a broadcaster for crying out loud, Mirna holds this natural moment of familial irritation against Cecilia. Adhering to nearly every yogic commandment, Mirna’s unable to practice detachment from this rooted resentment towards her niece, even though she and Vero are often quite glib about their separate institutionalizations. It is

Stewart 17
unacceptable for Cecilia to make light of her mother and aunt’s mental instabilities, no, her insensitivity won’t be forgiven. If only she’d heard her mother describing solitary confinement, then she’d be sorry.

Vero sometimes wonders about the tension between her sister and her daughter, but never gathers the courage to broach the subject. Mirna has a way with honesty. Sugar coating is not one of her specialities.

These days, at ninety-three, Vero has to hold herself back from calling her daughter every instance she thinks of her. Sometimes Vero takes advantage of that one hour in the morning when they have an internet connection and sends an email:

Piano tuner three days late. Am sure you’ve heard that Mirna’s dictating a new story for CBC. Plants very lush, you ought to make a trip to get some basil. Love you! xoMum.

The days that she doesn’t contact Cecilia, Vero tries to keep herself occupied. She’s got her own life, you know. When she isn’t playing an instrument (the banjo’s her latest favourite, much to Mirna’s elation), Vero busies herself in the solarium, tending to that overgrown jungle. Since the depletion of Mirna’s sight, Vero hasn’t mustered the confidence to admit to her sister that she is unable to meet the needs of their 'fertility warehouse.' This naming came from one of their favourite sayings, resistance is fertile and has since soured in both of their minds for similar reasons.

For Vero, 'warehouse' connotes the ugly factory work that was once so in vogue, facilitating the wealth of the Western world, at the expense of the quality of life for the people of so-called developing countries. These are old school tendencies of thought that Vero hates to admit that she had and has, even though these issues are ones that spurred her early political

Stewart 18
rallying. Now, the world’s wealth is distributed more evenly, and Vero knows that she ought to concentrate on what humanity currently has to offer instead of its past misgivings.

For Mirna, she can’t help but think of ‘fertility’ in an Atwoodian way, *a la Handmaid’s Tale*; she also finds this *old school* pessimism to be distasteful, despite it being the very thing that launched her early contributions to feminist social justice activism. Further, a fertility factory, for this is what the word ‘warehouse’ connotes to her, reminds Mirna of how artificial insemination used to be popular among rich, erudite types before adoption was made lawful under the UN mandate; it was then that things changed, and the children of the countries of *have-nots*, could have a chance at a future. Mirna had been pleased with this global law, though suspected it might soon be revoked, and adopted two young Thai writers in an attempt to secure permanency of such a benevolent (*unbelievable!*) new act bestowed upon humanity by global government.

If they shared these ideas with one another, it is likely that Mirna and Vero would agree to change the name of the solarium, but habit and pride prevent them from admitting that much of their separate, past, *bleak house* ideologies are still with them. Pessimism, like the once fundamental Christmas fruitcake, is something that has since been deemed unfavourable by popular culture.

On a Tuesday morning, Vero repots a hibiscus, while Mirna sits drinking tea, waiting for Audrey to pick her up for yoga in the park. Mirna used to instruct the class, but sadly had to give it up because someone overseeing asanas has to be able to see the lazy tendencies of her students’ postures in order to ensure that they don’t hurt themselves. This is a grave void for Mirna, although she makes a concerted effort not to complain about anything that is sight related.
Instead, her feeling of vexation, about the loss of her favourite sense, is revealed through her tone,

—Is the old fart coming by to help today with the hedges?

Mirna hears the smile on Vero’s face as she answers,

—He’s still younger than you, my friend. Still younger than you.

—Her-umph.

Again, Mirna notices the lilt of her sister’s smile that enunciates Vero’s voice, as she replies,

—Did you just say her-umph? Isn’t that something Grandpa Corke used to say?

—I was clearing my throat. And the old fart’s only younger in age, by two measly years. Not in spirit!

Audrey walks in the back door, greeting the women with a large bunch of lilacs from her back yard.

—Hello ladies!

Mirna sniffs.

—Lilacs! Audrey, you know me too well.

As Audrey guides Mirna to the door, Mirna mumbles,

—I know, I know. I’m slower than molasses in January, but those young guns’ll be sorry because I can hold a pose for over five minutes!

Stewart 20
When Maurice comes by to help Vero with the solarium, the two wind up in the conservatory, as they often do. It was he that helped Vero build the instrument tepee that now hangs from the high ceiling of the room. One afternoon, when Mirna was at yoga, the two smoked a joint in the backyard and conjured up the idea.

Laying on her back near the garden and exhaling a cloud of smoke, Vero said:

—How cool would it be to have a sort of instrument tree hanging from the roof of the conservatory?

—What do you mean?

—Like, instead of those stupid old trees we used to cut down for that ridiculous tradition for the twenty-fifth of December, instead, make a tepee sort of thing, but comprised entirely of instruments? My mother’s cumbersome accordion, could sit on a shelf secured to the roof, and then the oboes and guitars, the cellos and flutes, the banjo! They could all hang down so that they build a sort of tepee? Then we could stand in it, like we used to stand in those huge hollow trees at Stanley Park, and play music! It’d have to be soundly constructed. The accordion alone weighs a ton.

—Amazing! Absolutely amazing! Your mind is so ... delectable; it’s the first lick of a chocolate ice cream cone!

Mirna had been keen on Vero’s idea and acted as a contractor for the building of the tepee. Besides not actually being able to see it, after the final instrument, a harmonica, had been hung, Mirna marvelled at its feel. She’d suggested that they attach her old ladder, the one that had allowed her to reach the books on the top shelves of her library.
Returning from yoga, Mirna hears the tuning of instruments in the conservatory. Maurice plays the cello and Vero strums the banjo. The two set into an old folk tune that sparks Mirna’s memories of hippie picnics at Cherry Beach in Toronto, when she’d just begun her undergraduate degree.

After yoga, Audrey leaves Mirna in her library, where she types out a new poem on her Braille typewriter, as she listens to the reverberations of Maurice and Vero’s medley. The poem is about hiking and trail mix with forest foreplay sprinkled in every second stanza, for good measure.

Maurice leaves. As to be expected, Mirna asks,

—Well? Did you two get it on?

As though bubbles of champagne are about to gurgle from her throat, Vero replies,

—Jesus Mirna. You’re so predictable. And don’t you know that Barry White went out of style, for good, twenty years ago?

—Never! He will never go out of style in my mind. So? Did you?

—We're just friends. How many times do we have to go over this?

—He does know that you gave up pitching for our team after you dabbled that one time?

—Was that a poorly constructed sports metaphor?

Choking on her bread and cheese, Mirna sprays out, through crumb and curd,
—No! But don’t pretend that you don’t clip the hedges! I overheard you in the bathroom, with the electric razor, before he came over. Just because we don’t get Brazilians’ like we used to, doesn’t mean that you’re not trimming the fat from your pubes! I’ve got an astute ear, don’t you forget.

—It’d be nice if I had been trimming the hedges in preparation for such a thing, but actually, I’ve started shaving my upper lip.

—Hmm. I wondered if it’d come to that.

—Thanks Mirna. Thanks a lot. What about those young guns, as you call them, at yoga? Any worth coaxing into a little Tantra?

—When I manage to cop a feel, which isn’t often, it feels like they’d be good for a tumble in the hay, at least for an afternoon, but as you know from helping me in the bath, well, moss has pretty well covered my va-j-j.

—Sick.

Cecilia’s snuck in, another impromptu visit, like usual she finds these frank and filthy ramblings between the sisters to be distasteful. Knowing this about her niece, Mirna carries on,

—I heard the key in the latch, dear girl, and thought I’d steam up the sex talk. If you’d knocked, maybe we wouldn’t carry on the way we do. I’m sure it’s not pleasant to hear about your mother’s sex life. Or lack thereof.

Vero launches herself from her rocking chair, suffocating her daughter in an embrace. Cecilia eyes her aunt, who is perched on a high stool at the kitchen counter. Mirna’s getting slimmer as the days go by, the waist loosing around the hips of her black cigarette pants. A red

Stewart 23
beret is perched sideways on her bony white head. Cecilia imagines that this is for ironic effect. As a general rule, Mirna only wears subdued shades.

Finally releasing Cecilia, Vero steps back and Cecilia sees that her mother’s floral dress has become tattered.

—The two of you need new clothes. Don’t you know that the fifties have been over for nearly seventy years?

Vero laughs and replies, patting Cecilia’s ample right arm,

—We’re reincarnations of what we could never have been. A postwar housewife and one of Kerouac’s lovers!

—Those damned Beats! They were sexist. No women participating in their shenanigans, oh, pardon me, just the women they were screwing serving them whiskey and Benzedrine, when they weren’t too busy taking care of their illegitimate children!

Mirna emphasizes her point by slamming her palm against the countertop. In the crevices of her mind, she struggles to remember if there had in fact been female Beat poets. It is another instance when she wishes she had done more thorough Google searches before they decided to implement their (partial) technological blackout.

After the sisters go to bed, Cecilia sits in the ‘phone room,’ whining to her lover,

—They squabble over nearly everything, despite sharing the same values. I think that the bickering has turned into some strange simulacrum of love, played out in this gothic arena. It’s musty in here and they hardly turn on the lights. There are candles on the
table! Jesus... Uncle Theo’s death is like a ghostly haze in here. I’m surprised they still use knives.

At breakfast tea, having once again been listening to Cecilia’s phone conversation the night before, Mirna executes the plan she conjured up when she couldn’t sleep out of exasperation, once again, for her niece. She knows how much Cecilia hates her macabre leanings.

—I bet you, Vero, that you will be the first to croak.

—Aunt Mirna!

Alongside the brevity of this rebuke, Cecilia spits her lukewarm tea back into her cup.

—That was hardly called for Cecilia! So uncouth. And you work for CBC! Imagine.

Mirna’s irises flicker back and forth as she says this. Glancing over at her mother, Cecilia notices Vero’s curling lips and imagines this is because of a quiet indignation.

—She doesn’t mean to be a tyrant Cecilia. Don’t worry about your mother. I can stick up for myself. You’ve got four years on me, lady, so why don’t you ante up? For there were never such devoted sisters.

—Ha!

At Vero’s closing singsong, Mirna, again, slaps her hand on the counter. They once won best duet in their town’s Music Festival for their rendition of "Sisters" from Bing Crosby’s White Christmas. They were the only entrants in the contest, although they usually didn’t reveal this when they bragged about their winning.

Stewart 25
—Don’t forget, *I’m here to keep my eye on you!*

As Mirna replies in tune, she sets her blind eyes flickering with exaggeration while pointing her index finger up at the ceiling. Vero giggles, as if on cue, then asks,

—What’ll be the wager *missy*?

A hardened expression sets on Mirna’s face.

—Everything. Everything we have financially.

Cecilia’s mouth is agape, but she says nothing.

—If that’s ok with Cecilia. I know she wants to pay off her sailboat and all, but maybe it could wait till we both *croak*? Only a matter of time, young gun. I just know that I’ll be last to go. All that pot smoking Vero’s still doing. Don’t think I don’t smell it on your clothes.

Turning her face from Cecilia to Mirna and back again several times (if Mirna could see this she would tell Vero not to bob her head back and forth like a metronome), Vero tries to decide what to do. She finally closes the proposal, dejectedly, with,

—We’ll see.

—Great. A done deal then; just do me a favour, on the off chance I go first, will you shave my moustache for me?

Cecilia knows that this speculation over who will initially *croak* is certain to turn into some kind of serious competition. She makes a vow not to reveal how irritating it is that they might wager inordinate sums of their hard-earned wealth, her inheritance. Besides being annoyed

Stewart 26
about the financial repercussions this will have on her life, she thinks that this is not only Mirna’s most foolish idea, but that it is also in exceptionally and uncharacteristically, poor taste. Mirna’s antics are thinly veiled; Cecilia will not participate in such childishness.

Mirna, at ninety-seven, adores this bet and readily participates in shit-talking as though to get Vero to back down from the wager. She figures that her blindness and the possible onset of hereditary dementia that surely lurks around the corner could very well prove to be what makes her the sooner to go. A corner of her aorta is reserved for this bit of doubt that she hides from Vero, though seven decades of yoga has made her small frame remarkably spry. She figures, if she does die first, losing the wager won’t be at the forefront of her mind.

Vero doesn’t enjoy this bet from the outset, partially out of a sneaking fear of death, but mostly because she finds this competition tiring, having entertained Mirna’s fondness for the macabre for nearly the entirety of her life. Figuring that breaking out of this pattern of appeasing her sister might be what finally dries the last juice out of Mirna’s body (which would thereby cause Vero to win the bet), Vero holds true to what she only partially agreed to, even though she senses her daughter’s disapproval.

Mirna wrote successful screenplays, until ten years ago and Vero wrote, played and recorded nearly the entirety of Mirna’s films’ soundtracks, alongside a distinguished solo career in the music industry. Now, as Vero moves her fingers adeptly along the keys of the piano, she feels a pang of guilt, as she hears Mirna’s wool socked feet padding the hardwood in the rocking chair behind her.

Vero shifts her body slightly to take in her sister’s expression during Chopin’s Nocturne, in C Sharp Minor. In their twenties, when they lived across the country from one another, it was

Stewart 27
a tune that moved Mirna to tears. She’d made the mistake of sharing this with Vero one night after too many beers. As Vero turns her body, the bench lets out the faintest of squeaks, pupils’ flickering slightly, the pale blue of Mirna’s glazed eyes point in Vero’s direction.

—Smarten up and concentrate. Just because you’ve known it for eighty years, doesn’t mean it’s perfect.

Listening to Vero’s light fingers on the keys, Mirna laments the ability to check the internet several times in the day. It was after Vero’s vehement insistence, decades ago, that they got rid of the majority of their technological mechanisms. Without argument, Mirna agreed.

Several years ago, their brother Theo, was the part-owner and executive chef at a progressive and popular restaurant in Montreal. He came to visit Mirna and Vero whenever he could. Over the preparation of pulled pork with arugula salad, Theodore articulated his growing unhappiness.

—She’s... Well, she needs some time to think. Her acting career’s just started to blossom and... who am I kidding, Becca just wants to screw around on me when she’s not in town. So we have an open-relationship now. The kids’ seem ok. Karen’s, all mature, fourteen going on fifty, tells me it would be wrong for me to hold Becca back.

Theodore tells them this as he dices cucumber for the salad, to emphasize his points he flips the heavy knife back and forth, throws it into the air, catches it behind his back and finalizes the performance (when he shares this about his marriage), by jamming the instrument into Mirna and Vero’s brand new cutting board countertop.
Rocking along to Vero's piano playing, Mirna shakes her head in disgust and feels a tug of leftover Catholic guilt in the depths of her aorta. This memory now seems to overshadow the freakish end of his life.

She had just sent him a hilarious text message about how Vero was manically cleaning the bathroom. The text read:

The rare times Vero scrubs the porcelain bus, just as she rides it when she’s drank too much gin, it’s like her best violin concerto, she plays with great vigour.

Theo had been crossing the restaurant kitchen, when he tripped over the cord that was attached to the food processor that some pimply faced dishwasher had left out. The other young guy, Jeremy, was busy talking about how many times he’d made his girlfriend come the night before, in a tone and with such enthusiasm, that the echo of Jeremy’s voice quite reminded Theo of his own early swag in the bedroom.

Jeremy was throwing his knife upside down in the air, catching it behind his back and then jabbing it directly in front of him, saying ‘en garde’ to whichever work mate happened to be passing by. Looking down at his Iphone, Theo received Mirna’s text and started to chuckle to himself, just as he tripped over the cord attached to the food processor, causing him to fall directly into Jeremy’s final ‘en garde.’ The blade slid through his forehead, between his prefrontal right and left lobes, and despite this, Theo miraculously lived until the next day, lending time to his entire family to fly in from various Canadian cities, before his death the following evening.

Stewart 29
After finishing what would be the Poirier sisters' final collaborative artistic project, a radio show entitled 'Bluestockings Sing,' the CBC sends a staff member by their home to do an exclusive interview,

—Mirna, did you always want to be a writer?

—Yes.

Mirna sighs. She's been asked this question many times before.

—Let me guess, you want to know my favourite word also?

—Sure. I was saving that just in case we had some extra time.

—Great. It's suiting then. Flibbertigibbet.

The interviewer looks confused.

—Carry on. Ask Vero her questions now. You two go out to the solarium, I'll attempt to put the kettle on.

Vero jumps from her chair.

—You will not. You'll either burn yourself or set the house on fire. Either way, it'd surely be a mess.

—Fine. Why don’t you two wander down and get some ice cream then, and get out of my hair?

As soon as they leave the house, Mirna paws her way up to the conservatory. She climbs the ladder next to the instrument tepee, padding up each wrung, until her wrinkled hands take
their mother’s accordion from the apex, reminding her of when she removed the star from the tree as a teenager. Carrying it firmly, her thin muscles flexed, the thing’s heavier than Cecilia as a child, who would have thought that were possible, she slowly inches her way down the ladder, letting her elbows touch each wrung in an effort to control herself from descending more swiftly.

Mirna has taught herself to play the 120 Bass Cassotto, weighing in at thirty pounds and she does so with dexterity. After only fifteen minutes of practice, she climbs back up the ladder, carefully and puts the accordion in its place. Whirling the ladder around the tepee, so that it gently touches the bugle, just as Mirna found it, she then goes to her library and settles into a nap on her divan.

After finishing up with the reporter, Vero finds Mirna dozing in the library. She closes the door and enters her conservatory, flicking the switch to ensure that the soundproof is on, so that she won’t wake her sister. Taking the bugle from the instrument tree, Vero stands inside the tepee, a calm washing over her just as she raises the bugle to her lips. The accordion falls, hitting the crown of Vero’s head, causing her legs to fold beneath her.

It takes several hours for Mirna to feel her way around the house in search of Vero. Cursing her sister loudly, Mirna imagines that Vero is trying to punish her for being rude to the reporter by playing a cruel game of hide and seek. When she finds her sister’s cold body, she sits on the hardwood floor and gasps loudly, having her final panic attack. When she has stopped sobbing and snotting all over herself, she prays, in gratitude, to whatever thing that might be out there, for her blindness and then feels Vero’s face in an attempt to visualize her sister’s final expression. She believes, but cannot know, that Vero’s life closed in on itself as she happily begun to play the bugle.

Stewart 31
At the wake, Mirna takes Cecilia aside and, perhaps out of guilt for Vero’s death, tells Cecilia that her mother’s money will immediately be released to her.

—Aunt Mirna, why have you hated me for so long?

—You called us crazy. We’ve heard that whispered behind our backs from people who pretended to love us for most of our lives. You’re an ungrateful cunt.

Not missing a beat and recognizing how foolish it would be to argue with this senile woman, Cecilia replies:

—Your language is laden with clichés. That’s one thing that’s never bounced back in fashion. Most people hate your writing.

Mirna reaches for her long dormant acting skills in an attempt to hide the bite of her niece’s comment. Cecilia sees her Aunt flinch before saying,

—Your mother’s always hated your lover and she said that you gutting Dad’s old boat, and transferring the parts into that swank abomination you now use, was unforgiveable.

An usher at the funeral home steps in before things get out of hand. The Poirier sisters were always known for creating scenes.

Later, Cecilia overhears Mirna ask one of her mother’s old lovers, a cardiologist, if it has been proven that people can die of a broken heart. Having quite enough of her Aunt’s theatrics, Cecilia gets out of her seat decisively and leaves the wake.

At twenty-five, when a yogi told her that a person could die from doing a headstand, Mirna didn’t believe the guy, thinking instead that he was trying to manoeuvre her into some sort
of Tantric position. Now she thinks that maybe it’s like the myth of the five point palm
exploding heart technique from a film she saw many years ago, a curiosity because it’s never
been, literally, proven. Regardless, no one that Mirna likes will ever know the truth of how she
died, because no one she likes is alive. The coroner will surely figure that it was carbon
monoxide poisoning, if all goes well.

On her head, in the 'fertility warehouse' Mirna feels the heat of the sun on her feet.
Tiredly, she mimics what she imagines the five point palm exploding heart technique might
consist of, on her vertical torso. A moment before all oxygen has been released from her body, it
is that final crevice of feeling, in the corner of her aorta, that she believes is about to explode.
1957 Taylor Dr.

If you were to stand in the middle of Taylor Dr. with your back turned away from the bank of the Simon Fraser River (perhaps you have grown restless with your post that allowed a panorama of the streaming brown waters below and the detached line of cotton-ball clouds overhead), the leaves that swirl upwards from the dirt road would guide your vision to a pane of glass through which you could see a woman with red hair staring at her scantily clad body in a mirror.

Every afternoon since her arrival, Marleen Carrington partakes in her only required task for the day: outlining the imperfections of her body in indelible ink. Taking the black and white still of Marilyn Monroe down from the corner of the vanity, Marleen's eyes flicker from the photograph to her body in the mirror and back to the photograph, in order to determine the incongruities of her figure in comparison with that of Monroe's. The severity of black ink covering the stretch marks on her thighs and buttocks makes for a significant contrast with her pale, freckled skin reflecting back from the mirror in the dimly lit bedroom. Dario won't be returning from the mine for several evenings yet. By then she'll have scrubbed these demarcations clean. Her knickers and bra are one shade darker than her stomach. In comparison with her skin, underwear and hair, she feels that the black lines she has drawn might suggest some covert indiscretion. Breathing out heavily, she sees, unsatisfied, the balloon of her belly. Twenty lost, ten to go. A glass of orange juice will get her through the day.

From the side window, Paul sees the slight oval of her stomach and hopes that this strange woman, who has taken over his father's home, isn't pregnant. It's irritating enough that Paul has to try to teach her to keep house. There are more important things for him to do. Every
day the dog needs a good run. Plus there's always school work. As he steps away from the window, Marleen notices his presence. He doesn't care. The only benefit of her arrival is that he is permitted to cook, without his father's usual reprimand. Eggs and toast, a roast finely garnished, these are tasks that only ladies are meant to take on. Or at least that's what he'd overheard his father say in that harsh tone to his mother so many years ago. Freed from his father's watchful eyes, Paul likes to dig up the backyard looking for old treasures. Before his mother passed away, he buried matchbooks and scraps of paper in hopes of setting fires when she wasn't suspicious. The few times he managed to unearth these, they were too wet for him to execute his initial plan.

Paul's father's new wife, Marleen, is the opposite of suspicious. She is indifferent and oblivious, although Paul can't quite conceive of her in this way; he does understand that she has plenty of odd habits. Too many times in a day, he catches her tucking and untucking her blouse into her skirt. Most days she's so tired (though Paul can't imagine how because she hardly does anything) that she doesn't even manage to put on make-up. It's a sign she's feeling better if she applies scarlet lipstick, though Paul loathes this shade because he knows that she is reusing an old tube of his mother's. Paul often wonders about his father's initial meeting with this woman.

At dinner that night in Vancouver, Dario experienced extreme unease at having to sit with Dr. Deaver and his family. They were exceptionally polished. Dario's tuxedo had been cut slightly too short in the legs, but he'd been in such a rush to make it to the hotel, that there was nothing he could do once he got the thing on and his ankles were exposed. He must have been sleeping during the fitting; Paul's silent treatment before his departure was an irritation. Staring into the mirrors inside the elevator, Dario realized that he should have wet his mane of dark curls as there were several that sprung straight up from the top of his head. Despite these
misdemeanours in presentation, Dario caught Marleen's attention during dinner. He ate his salad with his dinner fork and his dessert with his salad fork. Mrs. Deaver was anything but impressed by this man's lack of sophistication. She'd encouraged her husband not to leave England because of such peasantry. And she's no fool to her daughter's expressions either. Another reason they fled. As Dario bumbled about with his utensils, Marleen kept a look of amused appraisement. After dinner she asked him to dance and finally led him into the coat check for a proper kiss. Mrs. Deaver peered in and noticed the lavender of her daughter's dress from beneath the coats. With a swift yank of Marleen's wrist, she dragged her daughter back into the hall, leaving Dario looking dishevelled. Afterwards, several of the Deaver's new Canadian acquaintances engaged Dario in a conversation about his work, not without noticing the smudges of mulberry lipstick around his mouth and on the corners of his ear lobes.

Leaning against the bar with a glass of scotch in hand, Marleen reels Dario in from across the room, as he attempts to look captivated by a round of preliminary talks about business. Her green eyes set in an intense, unfaltering stare, beneath a cascade of red curls, when she moves to the terrace, Dario can't help but make excuses to follow her.

Now, only a month later, Dario reminds Marleen that she is 'not well' when she gets hard on herself for barely contributing to the household. Taking her hand, his brown eyes locked with hers, he claims that these domestic duties will require some adjustment just as it will take awhile for her to understand what it means to be his wife. It is only a few weeks before they will host an evening for the community; a place where he can show her off. He begins to prepare her by getting a lavish dress made and encourages her to try it on often, as though to secure a confident persona. As though to remind her of the woman that nabbed him.
During dinner, in Vancouver, Marleen felt certain that it wasn't just Dario's flood pants that were making him uncomfortable. In her fantasies, she imagined (and sometimes treats this musing as a fact), that his excitement at their meeting made the fly of his pants an irritation. Smitten over this odd, burly man in poorly tailored clothing, she had given short, sly responses to his questions at the table. Circling around her with nervous blather, she'd thought of his speech as a formal wall of text that she couldn't wait to dissolve in bed. On the terrace, she let him ramble, making ridiculous jokes about his fathering skills, about his upbringing; self-deprecation was a strong suit of his. She barely listened, though she did catch some of his speech about the tomatoes in his garden, *it's amazing how fast they go off*. The sight sort of reminded her of an ape blithering about in a penguin suit. For some reason this absurd notion was attractive to her. Blinking back at him, mimicking that childish innocence of Monroe's, she cut his speech short by placing a soft palm on his bare forearm, below where he had scrunched up the sleeve of his tuxedo,

— I'd love to hear more about your tomatoes later, somewhere, perhaps more private?

Looking down at her curvy frame, it is his turn to appraise. Her white eyebrows have lifted, as though questioning, as if she is wondering if he might dare to accept her offer. Swallowing a gulp of scotch, he becomes more composed, aloof,

— If you want, you could come and see the view of the ocean from my room, and I'll tell you all about them.

They agree on this simply (by nodding at each other) and then walk inside to partake in social frivolities with the others, so that their separate disappearances won't be noticed. Ignoring her mother's suspicious eyes, Marleen acts out a migraine and then heads upstairs to rest. Shortly

Stewart 37
after, Dario spills a glass of red wine on his shirt and goes to change. They spend this night together and are married the next day.

Returning from work a bit early, Dario is pleased to see her body crouched in the garden (*she is finally busying herself with something*). Quickly, his satisfaction dissolves. That dress he had made for her, green chiffon, hangs from her frame, muddied gloves threaten to spoil the delicate material. She looks up, smiling.

—Oh Marleen!

—Yes darling? What do you think? The tomatoes have nearly gone off! But weeding, I'm certain, it is my new favourite activity.

—Why are you in your party dress?

—I thought it would inspire me to get out of the house and do something, and it did!

Dario steps into the garden, pulls her up from her hunched position in the soil. Cupping her shoulders in his hands, he says,

—You are not well my little woman.

Ripping the gloves from her hands, she shoves them into his chest and then at once, she is startled by her actions and so she shrugs sheepishly, gives him a kiss on the cheek and goes inside, as if to change. Instead she spends the rest of the day with her head buried beneath a pillow. When Paul comes home, he is permitted to fry up some bacon and he and his father sit in the dining room eating sandwiches with the hockey game blaring on the radio.
Beneath the din of the game below she considers her new station. It's not her fault that she wasn't trained for domesticity. Her mother never thought she'd need to be. The other women in town ought to offer courses in the field. They're so goddamned good at it. Their lives revolve around speculation about whose house is cleanliest and whose coffee is strongest. Marleen hopes beyond rationality that she'll never have to see these people again; she doesn't care a bloody bit for these sorts of banalities.

As a family unit, the three struggle to adapt. Agnes, their next door neighbour, has caught Marleen, on several occasions, sleeping into the afternoons. Once he catches wind, Dario attempts (more gently than he'd hoped) to put an end to this.

—It's been a month darling, the meals' really ought to be your responsibility now.

Sleeping this much can't be good for you.

Putting one of his massive hands over top of hers, Dario's facial features tense. Dario wonders, besides the intimacy, if this marriage will be advantageous to him. A pang of guilt convinces him otherwise.

Paul watches her face go blank on the sofa. Always, his mother answered Dario, appeasing him with false promises. It's difficult not to compare Marleen to his mother. Orla complied to Dario's demands in ways that kept the household running. It's hard to pity Marleen. She's a rich lazy lady. Or that's all that he has gathered from her so far. Adjusting to this woman is an inconvenience. Once, Paul and Orla put up a Christmas tree in the middle of the living room; the branches reached out to the couch, brushed your face when you walked down the hall to the kitchen, an idle object in the middle of a thoroughfare. Marleen's stiff posture reminds him of this. Though, of course, she doesn't have nettles that can be trimmed back to make the

Stewart 39
situation more convenient. Envisioning his mother dragging the tree out after the holidays, to let it disintegrate in the woods behind their house, Paul is overwhelmed by the sound of the nettles falling on the wooden floor, his mother smelling of pine afterwards, patting his arm and leaving behind the residue of sap.

Many women had avidly pursued Dario after his first wife died. It took Marleen to pull him out of that melancholy. Her hair flooded his mind, dying his senses red. That night in the coat check, a wave of carmine washed over his face and later rose petals seemed to slip out of her body. Her exaltation, her noise whether wildly raucous or a soft purr, distracted his rational thoughts. The electricity of their desire for each other was insatiable. Being around her made him feel as though he were standing in front of a fire. His touch on her arms, shoulders, neck, sides, brought shivers from her; as though a string were being pulled from the bottom of a doll, her body convulsing accordingly. Their initiation dance began laden with energetic silences. As the rhythm of their bodies moved, she released startling cries. The heel of his hand covered her mouth as they moved onto the terrace. After, they lay naked listening to the sound of the waves behind them. Brushing the sweat from his forehead, he tried to think of incorporating her into his life, tried to rationalize bringing her home. It's possible that Paul's chill demeanour could be placated with another woman in the house. Or at least, the way that her damp cheek rested on his chest, her breath warming his nipples, he imagined that she might somehow better his situation. Since Orla died, Paul had been entirely too sensitive. Hopefully he won't transform into an odd man like his father. That's all that Dario wished for the boy. Resting his palm on her head, Dario considered her often fierce, yet strangely meek personality and wondered how Marleen might get on away from her parents.
Marleen does not miss her mother's disapproval, or her father's negligence and she understands that this is unusual, or would be unusual, for anyone who had never been separated from their family after thirty-two years of living. There is a place inside of her that wishes that she might be more complacent in terms of the domestic. Plucking out a few thoughts on her typewriter, she moves into a blank place, typing *domestic disobedience* three times over. She really ought to strive to make herself into something more palatable. In some ways Paul's company has been a blessing, though she feels utterly incompetent when she watches him perfectly execute a complicated recipe. It's unbearable to consider that the promise of a better life, away from her mother's disparaging glances, is fading beneath the sunset of their shotgun wedding, just the way that her mother had said it would. Here the tow of the social scene is nothing like London. The town's still booming and apparently there are many kinds of clubs one might join, at least that's what the numerous women in the neighbourhood have tried to rope her into. Marleen remembers watching Agnes, next door, waving chicken feed under the calf's nose in an attempt to get the animal back in the barn, but to no avail. It still feels as though there's little to do, despite the possible clubs; driving past the bars at closing time is one of the only activities that gets her excited and she can't do that when Dario's home from the mine. Many might see her as having the luxury of unemployment, a frivolity that has been her lot most of her life, but she is growing bored. The yelling men in the streets, the throwing of punches, the loud, unruly workers that fall into the street well after midnight, these escapades make her find meaning in her day. She can't fathom why. If she were lucid, she might deduct that it is the opposite of the offering made by the women and their clubs, and after the company she kept in London, it's no wonder that she's annoyed by the idea of making friends with the seemingly unintelligent wives of the town. Perhaps that's the appeal of the stupidity of the men out in the

Stewart 41
street, at least they've the courage to reveal their dissatisfaction. That's something to surely admire, or so Marleen thinks, because she does not have the guile to protest against her own dissatisfaction except by oversleeping.

If her mother were still speaking to her she'd tell Marleen sharply, reminiscent of Aunt Muriel’s Victorian disapproval, to pull up her bootstraps and get on with it. Getting on with it to Aunt Muriel would mean polishing up a song on the piano or completing an embroidered landscape. Neither tasks appeal to Marleen.

Once they arrive in Prince George, after ten solid hours in the car, Marleen feigns excitement about their life together; manages to mumble out,

—Looks great.

The night is pitch navy. Across the bridge, she notices how the tips of the trees, perched atop the river banks, cut into the sky in a zigzag pattern. British Columbia is drastically different than anything she's ever encountered.

Paul's disappointed to see his father getting out of the car with a well-to-do woman. Agnes, his long time nanny, notices this because of his brisk exit to his bedroom.

—Tell him I'm sleeping.

Agnes does just this and Dario, surprisingly and rather tiredly, accepts. He towers over his new bride; his chestnut curls matted at the back of his head from a static position in the car all day. Wearing a tight fiery bun at the nape of her neck, Marleen knows that she will come off as more refined than she actually is. This is not something that she wishes, she would prefer to appear warm. Extending a hand, she introduces herself to Agnes.

Stewart 42

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—Hello Agnes. I'm Marleen. Sorry for the delay in us returning, Dario insisted on showing me his favourite spots along the drive.

A smile spreads across her face, creasing the powder on her cheeks. Agnes appears sold on the theatrics of this gentle lady that Dario's brought home, although his demure expression suggests that the travel time hasn't entailed the pleasant detours that Marleen relays.

In actuality, the majority of the trip consists of preliminary get-to-know-each-other sorts of conversations that are generally fundamental to first dates. This is fine for awhile. Dario talks about his Croatian mother and British father, and even jokes about his malaise at the gala where they met.

—Apparently my father didn't pass along the refinement that your parents have. Gee I was nervous in front of your dad. He's done a lot for the province so far, his reputation's a big deal up here. I hope that he would have considered me up to his standards, for you.

A coolness passes over Marleen's face; her desire to emulate that innocent warmth (embodied by Monroe) starts to diminish. This admission of his is too reminiscent of the fools she dated in England who also sought her father's approval, separate and unwarranted from her own appraisal of their value. Unlike them, and much of the society that she kept in London, Marleen is unimpressed by her father's wealth, never mind his supposed expertise in the medical field. Marleen thinks, has always thought, that excessive awe or praise of others, particularly her family, is uncouth and even borders on ridiculous. Besides, her father's wish has finally been fulfilled; she is no longer his financial dependent.

She thinks of the people she knows in London, the women she went to Oxford with. Most are married now, but those people, well, they were the ones to admire (though Marleen could
never quite articulate why). As a small child, Marleen had the honour of meeting Virginia Woolf at one of her parents' parties. That strange looking woman had ducked in to the room, breathed sharply, looked for an exit to the outside and then glanced down at Marleen (who sat most unladylike on the floor with her legs spread).

—Oh. Hello. You must be...

—Marleen.

—Yes of course. Pardon me. My name is Virginia. Rather dull party isn't it?

—I guess. Same as always.

—Agreed. What would you like to do with yourself when you grow older Marleen?

—Father takes me to the library sometimes. I like it there. Perhaps I might work there.

That long nose had crinkled, those hunched shoulders shrugging upwards as she said,

—I do hope that you are able one day Marleen. I truly do.

As the car continues north, Dario feels her withdraw and allows silence to ensue. There's nothing wrong with a bit of marital stillness, he tells himself, trying to block out thoughts of Orla. The hours of quiet unrest before the river ensnared her. How her orange head of hair also turned away so often from his glances and now, there's a crimson head (differing in colour yes, yet similar in the way that it resembles a prim, oversized doll) that cranes away from him in the passenger seat.
Another canyon winds itself below them, a river snaking through the mountains, farmhouses here and there, and this scene transposes itself onto Marleen's memory of London, the gritted streets, the feeling of foreboding whenever her father threatened to be rid of her after her latest social transgression. Now, the world that she inhabits, the one that passes by her window is of the savage unknown, it is a different sense of foreboding, one that surpasses what she once considered as 'constraint.' In comparison with the company she kept back home, there is nothing here to exalt besides the grandeur of the scenery. Looking back at him, her facial features tighten as this shift in reality sets in. Her usual portrayal of aloofness is betrayed by these disturbing thoughts. He tries to read her, but is confounded by this new exterior. Before long she starts breathing sharply, inhaling through her nose, she halts before exhaling and he rightly deducts that something is amiss.

—What's going on?

When she refuses to answer his inquiry (the treacherous landscape below is absorbing her, she sees herself falling), Dario pulls the car over. Getting out unsteadily she kneels beside the car, trying not to peer down the steep slope. As her breath continues to escalate, he crouches and grabs hold of her hand, then rubs her back and tries to make her stand, but to no avail. She will not look at him either. Holding her breath, her state culminating to a panic, he raps her back with some pressure, as though to nudge her back to normalcy.

—Breathe Marleen. Breathe!

This seems to help. In her mind this physical, repeated tapping becomes rhythmic, unlike her panic, it is something solid knocking on her being, reminding her that her body is there, that her body has not flown away through the window, into the valley, that it is her mind that she has

Stewart 45
allowed to be dragged down into that curving river, not unlike the coiling shape of the Thames. With eyes closed, the soil so close to her face, she slows down her breathing (with his guidance) until she manages to reach a state of calmness.

After he helps her compose herself and gets her back into the car, Dario decides that it would be untrue to say that he does not love her even though his most prominent emotions (of both incredulity and confusion) toward the complexity of his beautiful new wife tug at his mind, making him doubt about the future he has chosen. An hour rolls away as he drives and she pretends to sleep. When she decides to appear awake she offers little in the way of explanation for her outburst.

—I guess I'm still not used to life in Canada.

At the breakfast table the morning after they arrive, Marleen exudes the same sort of enthusiasm with Paul as she exhibited towards Agnes when they met the night before.

—You are eleven, is that right Paul?

He nods reluctantly and reaches for his comic book. Dario moves the eggs across his plate, trying to hide that he is observing the two.

—I remember being that age. The world was certainly a bright place...

Marleen casts an exaggerated smile in an attempt to be just like Monroe in *Seven Year Itch* (that innocent lilt of the tongue portrays pure simplicity although there is an obvious suggestiveness in what she says and does); her abnormal tendencies from the car ride the day...
earlier are placated. Dario sighs lightly, smiles back at her and resumes eating the breakfast that Agnes prepared for them.

When the house is left to their devices, Marleen and Dario kiss on the couch, and tell each other unexpected stories. A stillness takes over. She talks about her education, how literature has helped her make sense of the world, especially after the war. It has stayed with both Marleen and Dario, even though they were small children then. Some memories carve themselves too deep to be removed. Especially for Marleen, those etchings of childhood terror stay with her, her father had been away caring for wounded soldiers, leaving her mother and the help to cover the windows during blackouts. She breaks off.

—I have to tell you something. It's not good for our situation.

Having already lost a wife to an unidentified ailment that the town doctors could not explain, Dario's facial features set rigidly. No one in town could help Orla and that disease took her away. Could Marleen's behaviour in the car be a result of a similar malady that will ultimately cause him to lose his second great love?

—I've never cooked. Ever. In my whole thirty-two years.

A sharp, unexpected laugh launches from Dario's throat. His face is crinkled with joy. The warmth of his skin, his eyes and his touch help to quell Marleen's apprehension.

—Really! Never! How will I help Paul?

—We'll sort it out my dear little wife. Don't you worry your pretty head. Paul hasn't had a mother around for four years and Agnes will pop in to help here and there. All will be fine.

Stewart 47
Two days go by and all is not fine. Paul withdraws. Marleen can't seem to do much more than burn toast in the morning and Dario needs to get back to the mine, leaving them without supervision. Her typewriter sits on the kitchen table and a couple of dead ribbons are in the garbage. At least he knows that she's writing.

On day three, Marleen still hasn't changed from her pyjamas when he arrives home from work. That night, he has to peel her from her bed clothes. Her skin sticks to the cotton and he notices that ink has been smudged at the corner of her mouth. When he walked in he found her sitting with perfect posture on the couch, her hands interlocked on her lap, her neck craned towards the window, her face blank.

Her father gives her a typewriter for her twenty-second birthday and he urges Marleen to do something else with her time besides act as a pawn in social affairs. This afternoon, she's certain that this instrument isn't working in the way that her father had intended, though she finds solace in the recognition that she'll never turn into her mother. Finding a trashy book in a closed trunk, Marleen spends most of the day in bed reading the filth. Then she sits down for an hour plucking out several paragraphs (that she is unhappy with) in the same style of the harlequin she'd been reading.

When Paul comes home he is troubled by her presence; she's got ink smeared on her face again and a fine film of sweat glistens on her forehead. It would never occur to him that one might consider him an eleven year old with intricate designs. Although he didn't manage to stop his father's second marriage, Paul will manage to mar the relationship between Marleen and Dario. His mother offered so much more than Marleen, as any live woman might. She let him help in the kitchen and enforced outdoor play. Dario harped on Orla about Paul being too
solitary, but at least Paul had his mother to rely on for company. It is troubling to Paul that Marleen has virtually no reaction to him when Dario isn't around. Does she even hear him opening and closing the front door? There is no indication that entrances or exits are observed. To test this, Paul comes home on a solemn Tuesday and starts to pluck out a vehement letter to Marleen on her typewriter. He is a sentence in before Marleen clubs him upside the head. Paul looks at her, startled and retreats to his room.

What a stupid, rich woman! That's all that he's gotten from her so far. Lord knows how she can be expected to entertain a bunch of his father’s friends soon. Dario wants Agnes to teach Marleen to cook. Paul decides to relieve Agnes of her duties, after all, he has learned a lot about being in the kitchen from her. He will get things going for that dinner, start practicing by preparing possible hors d'oeuvres. Anyone but his father would have been apt to choose a more able wife. Paul looks under the kitchen cabinet to verify that the rat poison is still there.

As she does her usual morning physical in the mirror (inking out her stretch marks once again because Dario has left for the mine that morning) Marleen notices that her breasts are uncharacteristically sensitive. Perhaps their evening foreplay has gone too far. Something isn't sitting right and it's not just Paul either.

When she heads down to the kitchen, this Saturday morning, she notices Paul pouring over *The Joy of Cooking* in the living room. He has not taken too kindly to her since the typewriter incident. For her, it was more about him using one of her prized possessions. For him, he figures, that her anger might have come from what he was expressing there.

Marleen stares at him and wishes to come off as calm and controlled. Paul takes this look as one of disapproval and chooses to guide the situation appropriately.
—Dad's business thing's coming up. I know you've got your dress, but now I've got to teach you to cook. Do you think you can?

Now here's a well maintained boy, Marleen can't help but think despite her overwhelming desire to flee the house. His parted coif is no mistake (she's sure) and his pants are ironed. Because Agnes was dismissed several days earlier, Marleen suddenly becomes cognisant of her stepson's abilities within the home. What a great advantage this might bring her. If only she were in the mood to be manipulative. Truth is, little makes her excited enough to even begin to try to manipulate these days. It used to be the only talent she had.

—Well, while you were sleeping I got started. Made the dough for the quiche. You know quiche, I'm sure? Being such a lady?

It would be difficult for anyone to miss Paul's sarcasm. In many ways, his attitude is far too familiar. Marleen lets a smirk escape her lips and understands that this day together is very much a test.

—Yes. I do know quiche, Paul. I've always wondered how it was made. Will you show me?

Paul nods disapprovingly and takes the dough out of the refrigerator.

—Put an apron on.

He puts one on himself and then helps tie a knot around Marleen's back, as though securing her to the task.
Knowingly, he plops the dough onto the floured table and demonstrates how one ought to use a rolling pin to flatten out the material. Again, Marleen tries to contain her amusement, although this is hardly something to be tickled by; her husband's son is showing her to tend house with a condescension that would do her mother proud.

—You want to be even with how thick the dough is, you see? It's delicate, easily broken.

Marleen feels a strange affinity to him. If he hadn't been playing such a curmudgeon and had she not assumed the role of a depressed captive, she's certain that they would have gotten along famously. It takes much of her not to react to his disapproval. How she knows it and oh how she feels it. Instead she tries for something simpler.

—So do you go to the cinema Paul?

Scrunching his nose at her, Marleen imagines that he must find her accent distasteful in some way. The lilt, she figures, connotes snobbery. She has to be rid of it.

—No. Not too often. But I like it. Most movies Agnes picks. See you don't want it to stick to the table like that.

—Does Agnes like Marilyn Monroe movies? Like Bus Stop? Did you see that one?

—Ya. I saw it. The cowboy was neat. He liked to fight. I'd like to be able to fight like that... but I don't think it really helped him with the lady.

—Her name's almost like mine! Marilyn, I mean, not her character. But, no, you're right, it didn't Paul. Well, maybe it did, because his fighting made him see something about himself. Why do you want to fight like that Paul? I'm sure your father wouldn't like that.

Stewart 51
—Well you don't know much about my father. Now, we have to slice the dough into squares so that they can fit into that muffin tin... See, it isn't difficult.

—You're right Paul. I don't know your father as well as you do. But surely you don't think that you need to fight to get a girl.

—Now we just put each one into a little circle and that will hold the quiche. No, fighting to get a girl is stupid. I guess it would just be good to help me with the boys at school.

Marleen takes a step back and looks at Paul. She sees how his delicate features could make his situation difficult with other boys. Again, something all too familiar. Boys have never been her problem, but rather, fitting in with the girls at school. Yes. Always. Especially at university. Taking a step away from the table, she lights a cigarette at the counter and examines Paul. It's possible that like Marilyn's character in the movie, his real disadvantage is that no one has shown him that he's needed.

While Paul sticks the muffin tin into the oven and reaches into the fridge for the spinach and egg mixture that he's prepared to fit into the quiche, Marleen wonders whether or not Dario might play Don Murray's role, as the overbearing cowboy. Would he fight for her love that way? Would he be as obnoxiously aggressive in his desire to make her his wife? Could she play this as convincingly? Marleen knows better. That film did nothing for women. Not at all like Woolf's work. She begins to feel light headed, the idea that orange juice and two slices of burnt toast might not be something that a woman could, or ought to survive on, for days and days, passes through her mind, and she can't get out of this... state she's in and she hears Paul talking about the quiche and then there's nothing.

Stewart 52
You see the same image as always, she steps off the bridge, her feet and legs hold for a moment in thin air before the currents swallow her up, the stones weigh her down. You spend too much time fuelling the imagination, trying to figure out what she was thinking. The trouble is that this focus too soon becomes reality.

When Marleen awakens from what Dario will surely call 'a spell,' an odour of sterilization overwhelms her. Her body is pinned down by starch sheets; her mouth is parched, her eyes hurt from the artificial lights in the austere room. Paul sits in the chair next to the bed, his legs jittering, rising and falling at the command of his feet; the sound of shoe soles echo in her ears. Lifting an eyebrow at him, she is about to ask what happened when he says:

—You fainted. And I'm pretty sure the quiche is ruined.

—Oh. Sorry Paul. What is this god awful place?

—Hospital. And only say sorry if you mean it M.

M. She likes this. One might even call Marilyn this, but in a softer tone. And though Paul's voice is hard, Marleen can see that he has a spark of kindness in his eyes. He averts them as she holds her gaze for too long and then she picks off a few pieces of fluff from his shirt.

—I had to try to pick you up. There's all kinds of dust floating around the kitchen floor.

He shakes his head in mock dismay, as though she should take her domestic responsibilities more seriously. A guilty feeling settles in her chest, even though Marleen understands that, in his own way, he's trying to lighten the situation by teasing her.

Stewart 53
A man in a long white coat walks into the room. Paul stops fidgeting, then gets up and leaves.

—Good. I'm glad to see that you're awake, Mrs. Carrington. I'm Dr. Ned Andrews. I took care of you straight away when Paul and his nanny got you here. So it looks to me like you've hardly been eating which is rather dangerous in your condition.

—Yes, I know.

Marleen nods and thinks about the doctor in London who had told her the same thing. Nervous disorders are often aggravated by eating too little. Is that what he had said? Fuzz seems to surround her memory.

—Oh?

The doctor looks surprised. Marleen's annoyed by this. Of course, she knows that she should eat more.

—Well, do you know how many weeks you are Mrs. Carrington?

—What?

—How far along are you? In your pregnancy?

A knot seems to have formed in her esophagus and Marleen can't spit it out to speak; it is as though a hollowing feeling moves through her body. She can't help but envision a bulbous head tearing out of her and she knows that she just can't have that. Shaking her head back and forth is all that she can manage as a reaction.
—You don't know? Well, when was your last menstrual period?

Her head tilts to and fro repeatedly. Dr. Andrews leans in.

—Are you alright Mrs. Carrington?

Marleen takes a deep breath in and holds it. Heat seems to be rising up from her feet and she sees her head explode into a rainbow of particles, brain matter spraying from the roots of each hair follicle. Her pale complexion begins to turn a deep ruby colour, nearly matching her hair.

—I can't. I just CAN'T.

These last words come out shrill, almost wild. Dr. Andrews takes a step back.

—But you are a newly married woman. Surely this isn't that unexpected. And you and Paul seem to be managing alright. I'm sure Dario will be thrilled. I've known him for years and he's always wanted a large family...

Marleen's jaw seems to unhinge at this statement. This woman is no longer one of composure. She's breaking out of her British mould. A sharp hiss indicates an inhale and a long, dark gush of air outwards makes her not unlike the many children that the doctor has had to treat for extreme fevers.

—Where is Dario? Not here! What he wants... that's not up to him. It's not manageable. Just not manageable.
There's no question about what she wants and she considers whether or not this dolt of man will get her to the answer. Dr. Andrews steps back and shuts the door to the room. Placing his small hands on his waist, he stares at Marleen with inquisitive eyes.

—I hope you're not suggesting what I think you are, Mrs. Carrington.

—Yes I am, Dr. Ned Andrews. Do I look like someone that is composed and caring enough to have a child? Call me mad if you like, as long as it justifies getting me where I need to go.

Playing hysterical will be advantageous to her situation now, a mask for her anger, her rage, her sadness. If need be, she will speak of coat hangers—a last resort only. In some ways, she wishes she were capable, but it's as though she's seeing herself from above and well, this is not something she can manage.

—Fine. There's one doctor that does them, he lives thirty minutes out of town. His name is Alexander Martin. Once you are well enough to leave, you call him when you get home. Here's his number.

He sighs.

—The only reason I'm helping you is because I've known your husband for so long and I'm certain that he doesn't know what sort of mess he's gotten himself into by marrying you. And poor Paul! I suspect that he's got to put up with more than Dario does.

A mocking, tyrannical smile spreads across Marleen's face. What an annoyance.
—Well thank you for your professional opinion Dr. Ned Andrews. I will be sure to pass that along to my husband.

Moving towards the door, he shakes his head in disgust. Yes, this woman has status, but not enough to make him apologize for his rational approach to her situation. Dario always liked the wild ones.

In the car, Paul asks Agnes if Marleen will be okay, as though she couldn't answer the question herself. Why should she muster the energy? Besides, she ought to let one go. In many ways, Paul takes care of her; she is not oblivious to this. Resting her head on the passenger side window, a shame passes through her. She feels it descend from her head all the way to her toes. Her toes have gone numb. If ever she were meant to have children, now would be the time. No, no, no. A vision of Paul playing nursemaid somehow makes the situation seem bearable (an infant wrapped in a blanket, Paul's delicate face peering down), but then she sees Dario looming, his features set tense in disapproval, why aren't you minding it Marleen? No she won't get away with anyone else caring for it... She could go back to England, have the thing there and then give it to one of her barren, educated friends, but an image of its head crowning and breaking her, quickly subsides any romanticized notion of birthing.

No. She is resigned. This has to happen.

After they arrive home, Paul puts a Sinatra record on the player and dishes out some apple sauce. On the sofa, they sit in silence, spooning the cold substance into their mouths. Paul wonders if Marleen misses England. He has always wanted to get to the other side of the Atlantic and he wants to ask her about it, but pride holds him back. Asking about her past might be considered kind and he's tried to avoid that since her arrival. She kind of looks like a red haired

Stewart 57
version of Marilyn, he thinks, but of course, that'd be something just too generous to voice.

Sinatra's refrain echoes in the living room.

—I wonder if I'll ever have a world on a string Paul?

—Maybe you do... You and Frank, you've got something in common. You're in love!

You could sit on a rainbow!

Paul peels into laughter at his own statement and hides his head in his hands as though the song is just too embarrassing for him to go any further. With curiosity, Marleen watches him. How did earnest Dario breed such a sarcastic little man, she wonders. The corners of her mouth curl up.

If there were hope to be had you feel that it might unfurl from that grey space in your mind, not the place that leads to dark, but the place from which the light begins, just as it starts to become murky, murky but not unmanageable. For her this may have appeared under the guise of normalcy, normalcy hidden within harlequins or in sudden peels of unexpected laughter about the untapped irrelevancy of it all. If only she had maintained, if only you could have taught her how.

The next few weeks that pass cement the strange relationship that Marleen has with Paul, which is great, it keeps her mind off Dr. Martin's unreturned phone calls. It seems as though Dr. Martin has gone out of town, or so his receptionist says. Because Dario's still at the mine, Paul continues to 'teach' Marleen to cook. They quickly learn that she's terrible and awkward too, spilling ingredients and making a mess of Paul's kitchen. Together they try to figure out an adequate scheme so that Marleen will come off as the maker of Paul's meals. Lingering, always, at the back of her mind is how she will get out of her situation. She tries playing patient, waiting...
for the call, busies herself watching the extremes Paul will take to deceive his father. It's unclear to her why Dario would be so opposed to Paul's work in the kitchen.

One night when Dario's in town she tries to broach the subject. Immediately, he's gruff and defensive in his response.

—Never mind that. I've plenty of reasons.

—Name one.

—Well, I'm weird enough as it is. Paul's going to be normal.

—You always say that dear, but I don't really see it... You're perfectly 'normal' to me...

She giggles and pets him below the blankets. A moment of peace. There's no pushing these topics with Dario and she accepts this. Parts of his past marriage have come out, her ailment, her death, but never in detail, though the bridge that Orla stepped off can plainly be seen from their living room. It must be very strange for both Dario and Paul to have that physical reminder just outside of their home. Drawing him closer, she nestles her head into his neck. Occasionally (often when he is so present), Marleen feels guilty about not telling Dario about her condition, but the threat of him urging her to have the thing is far worse than this intermittent nagging. Finally, relations are friendlier between them. It is growing more rare, the times when he averts his eyes away from hers and she is relieved because initially there wasn't anything more lonely. Nearly two months into the marriage and they are gaining momentum in their partnership. Two months. She's well aware of the danger of the third... but what is this that he is paranoid about? Paul being strange? Perhaps he is, though Marleen has no other eleven year old
to compare him to. They are getting along better. Life is almost easier now, mostly because Paul's taken over her responsibilities. Dario interrupts.

—Well, I always had girl friends as a child and my mother got me to help in the kitchen, but then the boys started calling me a poof and well, my father got a hold of that and never let me forget how shameful that was. Even after I married Orla, he didn't let up until she had Paul. I just don't want that to haunt Paul the way it did me. He already has the shame of his mother's death hanging over his head.

Smiling at her, he runs his fingers through her red curls; in part, the nagging returns. Burrowing into his chest, she tries to find comfort in the ebb and flow of his breath. She knows that they're anything but her father's definition of ordinary (which is what made her wet for him in the first place), although she'll try to maintain this semblance, in part, for the sake of Dario's sanity.

Dario returns to the mine, for the final time before the party. Marleen and Paul continue to prepare for it. Paul's appetizers become increasingly elaborate: sautéed scallops wrapped in bacon, moccasin potatoes, lobster stuffed pastry. For once, Marleen indulges by snacking, but gets so overwrought by the fear of appearing with child that she vomits up the contents of her stomach when Paul goes out to play. Catching her breath at the toilet bowl, she grows light headed as she examines the half eaten contents: a messy rainbow of starch, tomato and barely chewed meat.

On Friday, before Dario gets home, Paul does most of the work for the party the next day and Marleen cleans up the artistic aftermath of his intricate designs. While washing bowls and cutlery, she imagines that most of the wives who will attend are likely to stand around not even

Stewart 60
bothering to feign judgement. Already, their reactions to her have been grim. She knows this is because compared to them, some might consider her cold; taking a cloth to the counter, Marleen rids the surface of crumbs and spills. Several women in the neighbourhood have tried to chat her up when she's gone out to get the mail, but they spoke of such ridiculous and trite topics, she'd brushed them off quickly. Through terse lips she'd said,

—Good to know, Suzy. Thanks for the update Claudette.

The others roll their eyes as if to say, who does she think she is? In reality, she is shy and also distrusting of women. Filling her in on the town gossip shows Marleen one thing: they are without a doubt discussing her misgivings. Paul's promised her that he'll mingle around the room with her and even whisper in her ear names that she's forgotten. Plus he'll keep her in plenty of champagne. Marleen finishes tidying up in the kitchen and passes Paul on her way out; she taps his back lightly and gives him a grin. He grins back.

Gingerly, he puts on oven mitts and pulls out the cake, checking its consistency with a toothpick. Before, he'd been planning on doing all these things, but it wasn't going to be for Marleen's benefit. There are many ways that a cook can exact revenge. When she first arrived home, Paul had been determined to get rid of her, but now things are different. She laughs at his expressions and loves to eat his food. Putting the cake back into the oven for a few more minutes, Paul sits, perched on the counter, looking out the window. He knows that Marleen's doing the same, on the other side of the wall, though she likes to sit on the arm of the sofa. Several times he's caught her staring out at the bridge; some of her tendencies are just like his mother's. Because of his friend Freddy, whose sister likes to tell the child all the town gossip, Paul now knows that the women in town had been vicious to his mother too. Touching his palm

Stewart 61
to the cool pane of glass, allows him to cover the view of the birch trees and the bridge. By leaving room between his fingers, he can still see parts of the bank of the river in the ice blue of the midday sky. Paul promises himself to be rid of all malicious thoughts he's had for this woman. The last thing he needs is to lose another one. There's always his father to think about too. He couldn't stand the loss of another wife. These are fleeting notions for Paul. Most importantly, it is the feeling that he gets from Marleen that acts as his foundation (he can't admit it to himself, but his mother never granted him this); Paul knows that Marleen needs him.

As the house fills with people, Marleen and Paul circulate carrying trays, making small talk. Dario notices immediately that Marleen is nervous when she is left alone. As the guests mingle, he sees that same anxious expression that she wore in the car driving up from Vancouver. Instead of hyperventilating, she keeps pressing the waist of her dress with the palms of her hands. Marleen knows that all these well-dressed women are actually weasels. They've heard she's a woman of good breeding, though it's yet to be confirmed as she's in her thirties and without children. So far, Marleen hasn't heard any of that mailbox chatter that is so familiar in the neighbourhood. Their heeled shoes clatter.

The deep green of Marleen's dress brings out the colour of her eyes, but does little to blush her pallid face. Other women hold back around her as if that sound of her British tongue might poison them. Marleen wishes it would.

Set in the basement is the bar where many men hover, downing drinks. Marleen wishes that her post were there; at one point she aims for it and manages to stand for awhile among the men, smiling through pursued lips while drinking scotch. Paul finds her and steers her back to

Stewart 62
the direction of the ladies, as if guiding her back to her proper role as hostess. Her language is clipped, as if she might say too much if she were to let her tongue go. Paul notices that she inhales sharply as Dr. Ned Andrews walks in with a handsome man.

By rubbing the sides of her dress, Marleen irons out, partially, her nervousness; a doctor's patient is in the strictest of confidence. Dario pats both of the men on the backs, as they come in carrying several bottles of Glenfiddich. Muttering a few rusty prayers, under her breath, Marleen walks over to the men. Dario joyfully introduces them.

—Old, OLD friends Marleen! Mrs. Carrington, this is Ned Andrews and Alex Martin. I grew up with them and then we went to university together in Vancouver. Grand chaps!

From Dario's intonations it's clear that the scotch's hitting him and somehow, Marleen is no longer apprehensive about the scene. Dr. Andrews appears amiable, but not too friendly, as though he's never before seen Marleen. Her eyes narrow in on Dr. Martin, plotting how to get him alone.

—How do you do? It's so nice to meet some of Dario's childhood friends... Oh! Dear me! I've forgotten about some pastries in the oven. I'll be back with them and a round of scotch. Rocks?

After delivering these items to Dario, Ned and Alex in the dining room, Marleen wonders how she will broach the subject with Alex. The three of them are talking zealously about hockey. In deep rumination, Marleen rounds the corner to the living room, nearly stumbling into a man who is bent at her bureau examining her typewriter.

—Oh! Excuse me!

Stewart 63
Blue eyes blink back from the magnification of his large spectacles. A smile seems to twitch out of his lips.

—What a splendid looking machine! Do wish we had some of this calibre down at the office. Oh. Pardon me. Leonard Smith. I'm the editor at The Citizen. The local newspaper. Do you know it?

—Yes, yes of course. I'm Marleen Carrington and this is my typewriter so I am very, very pleased that someone else admires it. I do enjoy reading your editorials.

As this comes of Marleen's mouth she feels strange that she has so suddenly become at ease. This man does not seem like the others. She isn't paranoid about her speech, or her mannerisms; unlike the women whose eyes narrow as though misinterpreting every stilted syllable that comes out of her mouth, Leonard Smith seems encouraging when she speaks. Or, perhaps it is that he retreated from the throngs of the party to examine her typewriter, a familiar habit this escapism. Perhaps it is quite simply that he is a man.

They quickly discover that they have much in common, particularly their shared fondness for T.S. Eliot. Marleen is elated to tell someone (who recognizes how special it is) that she met Virginia Woolf as a child. Leonard drools over this.

—What was she like?

—Stern in a way, yet not discouraging. It was a party like this one and she snuck away to be alone, as I had. I told her I wanted to work in a library. It wasn't until much later that I realized the importance of having said this to her, it wasn't until I had read Three Guineas.
—That's just terrific Mrs. Carrington!

—Please call me Marleen.

Smiling at Leonard, she takes a clean sheet of paper from the bureau and feeds it through the body of the machine. Then, Marleen looks around the room, at the women milling about, gathering in small clusters, surely speculating. Then with great speed and amazing accuracy she cracks out some of a poem:

And I have known the arms already, known them all—
Arms that are braceleted and white and bare
[But in the lamplight, downed with light brown hair!]

Raising her eyebrows and smirking at the women, Marleen watches Leonard's face go flush when he realizes what she is pointing to ironically. Marleen shrugs, illustrating perhaps, her resignation and then she resumes typing, her fingers severe on the keys:

I should have been a pair of ragged claws
Scuttling across the floors of silent seas.

Drawing away from the instrument, Marleen gives Leonard another sheepish grin as she looks, once again, at the groups of women crowded around each other like herding cows. All the men, save for Leonard, have retreated downstairs. Ducking a little to see through the spiral staircase that descends into the den, Marleen notices that Dario, Ned and Alex (who have left the open dining room and migrated towards the other men) have started to make a significant dent in a bottle of Glenfiddich. Marleen sighs and turns back to Leonard once again. His look of incredulity (he has read her subtext) is so apparent to her, his flappy mouth agape, she launches into gutty laughter, a sound that seems to reverberate loudly throughout the house. The sows' heads swivel swiftly in her direction, but Marleen will not be distracted from Leonard's reaction.

Stewart 65
—Mrs. Carrington, would you like a job?

She studies his face, as if inspecting his tone and facial expression for sincerity. There's nothing to indicate that he's anything but serious. Later Marleen will learn that Leonard is not practiced in sarcasm, but in this moment she must ask,

—are you certain? Because I would love one.

—it would only be secretarial to start, but I can tell it'd be a breeze for you. Typing, organizing reports and reporters for that matter... Surely you're capable of more, but that's all I've got to offer at the moment.

Having trouble containing her excitement, Marleen gives Leonard a hug, which proves to be difficult because she is clutching a glass of wine.

—Thank you! Thank you! You won't be sorry!

She waves her glass, a sweeping gesture past the circles of despondent women, which causes wine to shoot out and onto the beige rug. Again, her laughter becomes explosive, an outpouring like a volcano. Paul comes by with a cloth and some soda, to clean up her mess. The women continue to stare. Marleen pays little mind, enjoying her giggles, for it has been far too long since she's felt anything that closely resembled this glee. Peering back at her, still disbelieving of this woman's effusiveness, Leonard says,

—Well, we'd be happy to have you there. Just typing up the interviews mainly and that basic administrative stuff, but I can see already that you will bring an element of excitement to my work place.
Abandoning her glass next to the typewriter, Marleen grasps his two hands in hers, again guaranteeing him that he will not regret this decision. She thinks that it is quite likely that it was Marilyn Monroe who first cinematized this sort of idiotic enthusiasm.

Dario is happy to glance over at his wife who has raised a heeled foot in, what looks like, exultation. Usually at home she is sullen. What Leonard Smith might have done to bring out the vivacious woman that he first met in Vancouver, Dario doesn't know. Or care. It must be repeated, if they are to be happy with one another. No, at home, when he's been there, she's been full of sulk and melancholy. Later on in the evening, one of the wives says something ignorant about England. Clearly the wine has hit Marleen, for she knocks the flat of her hand on the coffee table and a hard laugh unapologetically flies from her mouth. Paul sees the women exchange critical eyes towards their hostess. Dario sees his male colleagues pass amused and somewhat satisfied expressions at one another. In his mind, Dario decides that he and his wife are the new social elite. The trajectory of his life is finally on course.

Slipping out from beneath Dario's leg the next morning, Marleen goes to the kitchen to attempt to make coffee. Almost immediately, Paul takes over for her. He says that he's impressed, that she did a good job with the guests. They clear empty glasses and munch on leftover food. While unsuccessfully trying to remove a shoe scuff from the floor, Marleen thinks about heading out to Dr. Martin's as soon as Dario leaves town again. Monday or Tuesday. This is what she and Alex Martin agreed on during their hushed conversation in the vestibule; he didn't extend the conversation further than necessary, but did promise to help her. Marleen is grateful at the ease and confidentiality Dr. Martin exhibited, believing that many that perform such a task might be apt to hold such a thing over her head. Anyway, she has enough being held over her head with the ever watchful wives. It is disturbing to Marleen to see how they wear their
obedience on their sleeves. It comes out in their introductions: "I'm Dr. Sheridan's wife." On and on this tradition goes. None of these women claim their first names, occupancies or interests, unless directly related to their husbands. "We play tennis with the Bigby's," translates to, we might hold, or are at least trying to hold, high standings in municipal affairs. Marleen has trouble relating to these sorts of interactions, but no matter, she'll find solace with Leonard Smith at the newspaper. No use wasting energy on trifles.

Tuesday, Dario's off to the mine again and so Marleen prepares for the procedure. Driving out to Alex Martin's, Marleen doesn't consider what her state will be like after—well, she does realize that she'll be doing much better. The palpitations in her chest are heavy, nearly all encompassing, seems as if they are pulsing right out of her ears. They are not extreme enough to force her to pull over; she doesn't want to be late. Consulting a map, she is first lost (having held it the wrong way, she went in the opposite direction), but makes her way back, the palms of her hands aching because of her grip on the wheel. She considers that this misdirection could be a larger metaphor for her life.

A ray of sun cuts through the miles and miles of trees. Firs, spruce, she's not sure, but it is an intelligible thing; the darkness lifts from the forests on either side of the car, suddenly they're permeated with temporary light. Before, the sun covered with clouds, nothing could be seen inside the hearts of the woods. Now the forest floors present themselves, matted in moss. Layer on layer of green horizon beside her and when she looks upwards, it is a sea of wide waves of emerald, olive, pea and pine (and too many other shades, surely known only by professional painters), those waves of forest landscape, all encompassing; she feels minimal, like the first time she swam in an ocean. Taken away with the tides. It's hard to feel magnified in the presence of such an arduous landscape.
Finally Marleen arrives. Alex opens the door. He wears a wool knit sweater and his wife stands behind him, she wears a look of welcome on her face. How odd. She extends a hand.

—You must be Marleen. I'm Sue. Terribly sorry that I couldn't come to your party. Our little one came down with a cold.

As though veering away from this warmness, Marleen lightly touches Sue's hand and averts her eyes. For some reason such gentile propriety seems inappropriate. Perhaps Marleen expected a guilt enabling encounter for this solemn affair.

—Well come in Marleen.

Moving away from the door, Alex leads her in.

—There's Dottie there. Isn't she precious?

An infant sleeps in a basket on their kitchen table. To Marleen, this seems like some sort of sick trick.

—Well, let's go downstairs to the office and take care of this. Sue'll be helping you. She'll hold your hand if you like.

Sue gives Marleen a reassuring nod; Marleen is grateful for the affection. Laying back on the table, Marleen looks up at the other two wildly. Sue hushes her and begins to count. Marleen's body accepts the drugs.

Waking with a dry mouth, Marleen cranes her neck about until she sees Sue in the far corner of the room. Sue passes her some apple juice.

—Thank you. Oh thank you.

Stewart 69
Marleen squeezes Sue's hand (too tightly) and can't shake the overwhelming relief. Placing a cool cloth on Marleen's head, Sue offers warmth in a closed mouth smile. Solace is found here between the women, in Sue's silence. If only Marleen could silence her own voice, that's the real trouble. Alex enters back into the office.

—So, you'll have to just take it easy for a bit Marleen. Soon, I'm going to get Sue to drive you back, I'll follow her in my car... Paul will be home from school soon, you should be there... Dario doesn't know, hey? Well, it's not my place, but it might be a good idea to tell him. Obviously, no pressure. You are sound with us.

In the car Sue repeatedly looks at Marleen in the passenger seat, and so Marleen keeps looking out the window. Before Marleen gets out, Sue says,

—If you ever need to talk, just drop by. I had one once.

Marleen turns to see that Sue's eyes have welled.

—Really?

—Yes. Actually, it was how Alex and I met. It helps to talk, trust me.

—I'll think about it. Thank you so much.

You see the figure in the living room window, a silhouette in the November sunset. She stares at the barren birch trees as they sway in the wind. Frost has gathered on the ground, she knows that if she gathered the will to go for a walk, her footsteps would sound the same as that time when she walked on his starched shirt. So close, the river passes, the air wafts up cool. You
cannot comfort her; she cannot comfort herself. Something will lift, a decision, a decision to move on or give up, for stasis has been too long drawn out.

Waiting for Paul to return home, Marleen plucks distractedly at the typewriter, though sexy sentences refuse to spill themselves from her fingertips. Nothing but unsatisfactory fluff, she may as well showcase what the wives wore at the party; it might be an improvement to the drivel she's laid forth. Outside it is dark——so early, it's only four. Paul meanders up from the river bank, what was he doing? It's too steep to play there. The door opens and closes.

—Hi Paul. Come here please.

The boy walks into the living room, smelling of fresh, autumn air; Marleen grabs his wrist and draws him in for a hug.

—What's going on?

His voice is high with concern, his body stiff in her arms, she lets him go.

—Don't worry. I just had to go to the doctor's again today, everything's fine. I'm just happy to see you that's all. Would you like to go see a film tonight?

A look of suspicion flashes over his face, but then a smile spreads across his mouth. He nods his head excitedly.

At the theatre, The Prince and The Showgirl unfolds, Marilyn dressed in extravagance, but something has shifted for Marleen. She remains untouched. Nothing about the story appeals to her attention. It seems as though Marilyn is an empty body floating across the screen. Usually Marleen curbs her analytical skills and dives into the cinematic experience, noticing little

Stewart 71
nuances of speech, but not looking too closely at what the trajectory of the tale enforces. This
time is different. It's empty. There's no partaking in this; the narrative unfurls, but she barely
notices. Reel after reel passes before her eyes and she retains nothing.

Afterwards, walking to the car, Paul says,

—Marilyn's really not that great.

Marleen leans towards Paul, pats his back and asks,

—What do you mean?

—I don't think you're really like her at all. You're too smart.

Laughing, Marleen unlocks the door for him,

—Well thanks, that's a nice compliment, but remember she is just playing a role.

Although she's been instructed to take a few days to rest, Marleen decides to get in
contact with Leonard Smith, figures out that she'll begin work next week. Against better
judgement she chooses to write to her mother, tries to regain contact. It might be nice for them to
speak on the phone some time. All these tasks are done from the couch or the bureau, but it's not
the same as before. She is sensitive still and tries to be gentle with herself, but in many ways
knows that that woman who first moved into 1957 Taylor Dr. is gone.

Three days later, Dario returns from the mine. Marleen is paranoid that Paul, or perhaps
Agnes (who dropped by to give Marleen an apron, how subtle) might have told Dario that she
has gone back to her initial habit of sitting on the couch all day. This cautiousness is confused for
despondency.

Stewart 72

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—What's going on love? I've been so excited to get home. After that wonderful party, I thought you'd been fixed. You hadn't acted so lively and happy since that night I met you... Where did that lovely woman go?

His eyes are bright; he means no harm. Flinging his coat across the couch, he steps towards her. His large frame blocks the kitchen where Paul is pulling out a casserole from the oven. Dario draws Marleen to him, puts a hand gently on the back of her neck and peers down at her.

What she wants most is to move away, to shove him aside and run (though of course he wouldn't move, her weak arm pushing him) because that lovely woman is gone. It's not her anymore. Not in the same way. Will these drastic ups and downs be her life? More rock bottom than sky high? What happens to a woman who is lacking the maternal gene? There's no place for her. Not with the women in the neighbourhood, not with her family, not with Dario, not with Paul. This can't be true. She knows it, but instead she indulges in the idea that she's got nothing to offer anyone. None of this is the romantic scene she'd intended; Marleen turns to the window, stretches her neck so that she can see the bridge. Putting hand on her back, Dario says,

—Let's go upstairs for a minute. Let's talk this through.

She refuses to turn her body. Her face is stern. Dario picks her up, cradles her body, acting out the threshold of marriage walk, up the stairs and with a less sweet intent.

—Marleen? Tell me what's going on.

He's put her down on the bed and sits on the floor at her feet, imploring her to feel better, to talk at least. There's no explaining this in her mind, why the sadness has returned. It is

Stewart 73
confounding. She feels her jaw set. If she didn't want the thing, then how could she need to mourn the loss of it?

—Listen. You go down. Paul will feed you. Let me write here and I'll feel better.

—Paul? He can barely make toast!

—Hardly. You two need to talk about that. Both of you fear being abnormal. I think it's a family characteristic that we ought to embrace. Go. Talk it out and leave me with my thoughts.

She said it. This is her family. Nonetheless it takes her the majority of the evening to sort out how she will begin to lift this sadness. Not to suggest that it will leave forever: she is not that naive. Often, it's an unexplainable state and sometimes she can figure out a means through which to escape its stranglehold. These uncertain sometimes will have to provide solace. In part, Marleen knows what's built this all consuming cloud. Like the movies, she's just accepted the premise, as though nothing ought to come into question. In a way, she's treated this idea of her role in the world with the same ignorance. Never before now has she stopped to ask herself why. There are certain things you ought to do. That's the way it is. Or was. There is a knowing that her capacity goes so far, that her limit is to see through a life in Canada, to pretend even (a macabre premise, surely) that she hasn't much time to live. A job offer has already elevated her confidence, her capacity, her knowledge; at least in her own mind. Somehow, someway she will shuffle towards creating real meaning in her life and it will not include idealizing anyone. Not anymore.
Dario and Paul talk. It seems as though they are both afraid of each other. Afraid that
they won't be needed. So far Marleen knows that her understanding of their relationship is finite,
though, she is beginning to feel as though she might contribute in some way.

Coming clean with Dario, partially, that's all she can muster for now. In bed that night, he
waits for her to explain, hands her a cup of warm tea, is patient, sitting and sipping until she is
able to unlatch the lock on her tongue.
The Box-Shaped Man

What limits people is a lack of character. What limits people is that they don’t have the fucking nerve or imagination to star in their own movie, let alone direct it. Yuk.

― Tom Robbins’ *Still Life of a Woodpecker*

Act I: The Hook

Knees up, Emily sits on a plastic patio chair outside the bookstore café clipping her toenails. The half moons fly through the air, one landing in the coffee cup of a nearby diner. Head bent behind *The Globe and Mail,* he doesn’t notice its presence until it pricks his tongue and slides uncomfortably down his throat. By this time Emily is finished the task, appearing innocent unfurling bits of cinnamon bun, and holding them between the same thumb and forefinger that held her pungent feet. She licks the syrup from her lip and struggles to think of a six letter word for amalgamation.

Emily is aware of Adrian’s shifting weight at the corkboard, but has been ignoring his presence. Earlier in the day, he eyed her while reciting poetry at the creative writing class that she was sitting in on; she ducked out during the question and answer portion of the presentation. As Emily was running errands around the university she noticed several of her peers fawning over him, under the guise of getting their copies of his book signed. Adrian had raised his eyebrows eagerly when she’d hurried past, though she pretended not to notice by appearing absorbed in the comments on an essay she’d just gotten back. Emily noted that the swarm of women that surrounded him were of the same caliber detailed in his writing: poking pelvic...
bones, perky breasts, and (surely) manicured pubic hairs. This was not an industry to which
Emily wished to subscribe.

Perhaps that is the appeal for him now, she thinks and flicks a gob of cinnamon bun
residue off the end of her middle finger; it lands on the windshield of the vehicle parked below
her table. She’s seen his kind many times before. The attention garnered from her innocent
facade can be tiring, for older men are often comparable to teenage boys. It’s the possible
consequences of lulling these types that makes her dubious about acknowledging them. If Emily
chooses to speak to Adrian then she might have to muster going out with him.

Saturday she curled her hair for work and since hasn’t run a comb through. It now being
Monday, she understands that ‘dishevelled’ might be the adjective to best describe her. Emily
thinks about the connotations associated with ‘dishevelled;’ she might be considered untidy,
uncouth, not appropriately preened to societal standards of feminine beauty. The unfortunate
thing about men who thrive on hunting Barbies is that women who are less concerned with their
appearance come off as wild game.

Now, the vestibule is empty. Emily sighs. He could be perfect fodder for her latest
project: The Project. It’s bringing her to complete exhaustion; another one shelved, she supposes.
Another stymied.

Adrian enters the patio. His coffee mug overflows in his right hand, his left carries a plate
of quiche and a magazine is tucked between his elbow and torso. He looks left, right, careful not
to make eye contact with Emily and then notices that all the tables are occupied. Emily pushes
the chair adjacent to her with a grubby foot.

—You sure?

Stewart 77
She nods yes and offers a closed mouth smile.

He struggles with his items, places the mug down first. The table is uneven; coffee overflows, running dangerously close to her papers. She lifts them and darts into the café for a cloth. As she wipes down the table, his face goes flush, his arms awkward extensions still holding his lunchtime materials.

—There, sit.

Emily hangs the dishtowel off the side of the railing that frames the deck and returns to her crossword. The side of her palm and length of her pinky are covered in newsprint.

Mouth full of quiche, Adrian attempts to communicate. His opening “you” is accompanied with a spray of crust. Two crumbs land on her puzzle. She laughs.

—Yes? What were you trying to say?

He lifts a finger in front of his face, hurried chews ensue.

—Pardon me. You were in that class today.

—I was just sitting in.

Adrian leans back in his seat. She stares at him in defiance.

—Oh. I see.

She nods then picks up her book and places it in front of her nose. It’s his most recent. He squirms. Her wide fingers, with severely cut nails, grip the spine; he finds this sexy for reasons inexplicable.
—What do you think?

Her eyebrows rise above the book. She shrugs.

—Not bad. If you’re into that kind of thing.

She closes the text and sets it in front of her.

—I find it interesting, that you felt the need to include a disclaimer, before your poems.

Her voice is stiff. He knows he’s under scrutiny.

—Seriously though, your introduction?

She leafs through and finds the passage she is seeking.

—‘As a scholar with feminist sympathies, I choose to write in celebration of those who triumph a healthy, sexual relationship between body and mind. It is with this in consideration that one ought to read my poems. I wish to exalt and privilege the female form in order to rectify the tired tradition of objectifying women that has been so prevalent among male writers.’ That’s quite the task you’re taking on. Especially when you describe the gritty details of Aunt Flow coming to town.

Her eyes pierce him; her lips stretch into a scowl. He feels himself getting hard.

—Aunt Flow? You’ve got to be kidding me.
He says this rushed, anxious to see her tangerine bob shake again in disgust. Instead a smile slips from her lips,

—You are seamless in your evasion.

She notices the chestnut scruff above his lips, how it’s spotty below his sideburns. He is older which makes this patchwork all the more endearing. This note of attraction doesn’t appear on her heart shaped face, a furrow is set resolute.

—Well, how would you like me to reply, miss?

—Miss? Emily. Emily Boxe. Both Emily and Boxe, with an ‘E.’

—It’s good to get the names of my harsher critics. So... you think I’m full of shit.

Her shoulders lift. She turns her head in a faulty attempt to hide her smirk. She whips her head back at him, puts her hands on the table, fingers spread, elbows up. She leans in, eyes squinting, jaws set:

—Prove to me that you aren’t.

The whiskers around Adrian’s lips push out two dimples at the corners of his mouth.

—If you read my academic work, most of my arguments take a feminist stance...

Or...

—Or what?
With other women it’s never this difficult. There aren’t many questions; in fact, the inquiries he usually deals with are redundant. Why did you decide to become a writer? Did you always feel alienated, even as a child? Let me be here for you. After they screw: let me in goddamn it! He brushes this aside, deciding to proceed. She did invite him to sit here. He scratches the scruff on his chin.

—Or, you could let me take you out for drinks. I’ll prepare a presentation on why I have the right to write women’s bodies.

Although this is well articulated, confident even, he finds himself staring at her bare feet. Like her fingers, the nails are clipped too close to her skin. Her toes are chafed and a distinct odour’s wafting up. He looks at her face. She doesn’t seem surprised. He can’t read her. She glares at him. They hold this fix until he looks to see if she’s wearing any jewelry. Emily watches him do this.

—When? I mainly work nights.

—That’d be up to you. I’m here, indefinitely right now, staying at a friend’s. Beautiful place, although there are many dead trees that surround it, from the pine beetle fiasco, it adds a macabre... Burnt orange.

He pauses and looks at her hair.

—That’s the best way to describe it. I mean them. Burnt orange.

The smirk reappears on her face. His nervousness is her amusement. Adrian can’t remember the last time he went off like this.

—How ‘bout tomorrow night? The piano bar on Sixth Avenue?

Stewart 81
Her eyes pierce him again, unfafltering. She isn’t afraid or in awe of him.

—Should I pick you up? I’ve managed to borrow a car. Luke, he’s outta town, I’m staying at his place. Oh, right, I said that. Good guy, doesn’t buy my position either, you’d like him I’m sure, he’s a classic Renaissance man.

—I’ll meet you there at eight. I’ve gotta run now.

She jams her papers into a bag with amazing speed. Her flip flops are on her feet and she’s nearing her car in the parking lot below as he gathers his thoughts, finally spitting out hoarsely, after she’s seated, with her window rolled down:

—Great! I’ll see you then, then!

Emily waves offhandedly as she drives past.

Adrian remains drinking cold coffee before he leaves; in his mind, the dialogue they shared plays on repeat. He can’t settle on how to piece together the fragments of emotions that hovered during this encounter. Filled with shame over her biting criticisms, he tries, instead, to focus on seeing her extreme gestures and speech again; excitement overrides that nagging embarrassment over what he’s written, and another chance to observe her face nearly obliterates the harsh words that flew from her mouth. Hopefully she’ll drop the subject of his writing. There’s a chance she’s expecting something quite literal, a real presentation of why he’s written what he has, for it’s possible that she might not have agreed to have drinks with him, if he hadn’t said he would. Maybe he ought to have something prepared in his defense. He knows this probably won’t materialize because there’s an unopened bottle at Luke’s, and surround sound in

Stewart 82

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the bedroom. Before Luke left for Vancouver, Adrian hinted that he might like another go at a relationship. Laughing, Luke slapped him on the shoulder, and said:

—Good luck with that, man. You go through women faster than you go through socks.

Adrian knows that Luke has a point. It’s been two years since Annie left him, though the divorce is pending; she’d been itching to have kids. Since then, there’s been a revolving door of women that have come in and out of his bedroom. None have shown even the slightest suggestion that they’re value could compete with Annie’s. Not until now.

For a moment, while he doodles on a napkin, Adrian considers letting Emily in, if she brings up his writing. Honesty could score a lot with a woman like that.

How to explain to her why he really portrays women the way that he does... he could overact his past hurt. A role of a lifetime, surely. Anticipating an evening of football and some soft-core porn on Showcase to coax him to sleep, he figures that these activities will help him find a way to lay down the (partially honest) gauntlet of his emotional baggage to a woman that actually intrigues him. Realizing he’s long due to take Luke’s dog for a walk, Adrian gets up and leaves the café.

As the barista is clearing the table he notices a stained napkin that says “Emily Boxe, the Object of my Desire.” Big surprise, thinks Oscar, before jamming it into his pocket.

Act II: The Line

Emily finds her attention drifting in and out of the task at hand, though less so than before; before she’d just been an extra in her boyfriend’s narratives. Picking up a Cinderella Stewart 83
figurine (she had painted purple nipples and a huge blonde bush overtop of her gown), she remembers how she’d conjured up the idea for their gallery show, *Happy Endings: Her Story*.

—A call back to Disney and all that romantic shit that they impress on the minds’ of kids. A set of nudes where Cinderella’s a dominatrix with a broom and Snow White’s dwarves are her sex slaves! Women’s *real* happily-ever-afters, but more in the style of, of, say... a masseuse including a happy ending, for free!

Incredulous, Patrick’s eyes grew wide; he loved the idea, but vetoed the Snow White orgy because that was inappropriate. Alternatively, he came up with the idea of her dressing up as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*. All she’d have to do is hike up that country skirt and give a stuffed bear fellatio. She remembers how they’d planned out the details over wine in their basement apartment. This same apartment that now looks as though a monk has moved in. Patrick took most of their furniture.

No. No more of that stupidity. Now she will handle her endeavours alone. Magda, the curator of *Happy Endings*, quickly became infamous in their small city for exhibiting their show, though of course, Patrick had nearly claimed full credit. Emily realized later that this was stolen artistic and intellectual property.

This echoes, just as her voice, quietly singing, echoes in the home that they had cohabited. Most of their shared objects (except for the bed, she drew the line at that, having paid for it herself), have been moved to his new house, with his current leading lady. After all the jealous rants and the hindered intimacy (because of his trust issues that had nothing to do with her, but with the woman that he’d soon be marrying *on paper*), the bed seems like small retribution, even though in her mind it is the one item that’s marked her life’s turning point.

Stewart 84
Finding them on the bed (*talk about trust issues!*), made her gather an unknown courage to launch Patrick out of her life. Now Emily imagines him being shot out of the roof of her car, from the passenger seat that he’d kept warm for too long.

The afternoon wilts away as she leafs through some of her negatives. She has to hold them up to the window to be able to decipher the differences between men. Sticking the nudes she took of Patrick in a pile she’ll deal with later, she goes through the more recent ones. These were primarily procured by Oscar. Emily dials his number and then hits the speakerphone button so that she can continue working while chatting. There are two rigid dining room chairs left. The floor, with her yoga mat, is the more obvious choice.

—Hiya Lady! Just going through the checkout here, what’s going on?

Emily hears the expected noise from the supermarket; someone’s getting hoarse because he was overcharged by a dollar for a bag of chips that were meant to be on sale.

—Sounds like there’s some serious stuff going on there...

—Oh, you know, the usual kind of crisis I suppose. Don’t you have anything better to do with your day?

The ruckus in the background grows mute. Someone booms: “ARE YOU TALKING TO ME? ” Oscar replies, obviously placating the irate customer,

—No! No! My friend. Emily, don’t you have anything better to do with your day than braid your cat’s hair?

A hearty laugh expels from Emily’s mouth; it is something Oscar hasn’t heard as much since her and Patrick broke-up. Momentarily, she is silent.

Stewart 85
—Actually, I don’t have a cat anymore. The bastard took her with him. But, I’m calling to thank you because I’ve gotten some great stuff from that ad you posted.

In an attempt to cheer Emily up, Oscar rallied some friends and got them to pose for her project. Most had ad libbed, either lines they’d gotten themselves or lines they’d used on others. She didn’t particularly want to see Oscar naked, but he’d insisted. It’s been a year since his last heartbreak. He was glad to have the chance to paraphrase the asshole and was looking forward to the recording going public; he was planning on inviting his ex to her gallery show, Sweet Nothings: Her Story.

—What did your ad say Oscar? Some of the models had some bizarre references to it, and I was confused at the time.

—Oh Honey! It’s great! Photographer seeks nude male models. Those who are existentially sound need not apply.

That laugh he loves again hurls itself from Emily’s throat.

—You gonna give that poet a run for his money, or what? Couldn’t believe that stupid napkin. Does the guy forget where he is?

Emily giggles softly.

—You mean, why wasn’t he expecting my spy to pick it up and bring it to me?

Come on Oscar!

—Well, he could have played it a bit cooler, don’t you think?

—Yes. Of course he could have. I guess...

Stewart 86
—What lady? Speak!

—I guess it’ll make it easier, to go through with it, you know?

—You’re not thinking about backing out are you? This guy’s perfect for your show and you know that Magda’s falling all over herself to see this thing through. Ran into her last night at a dance, someone told her what you’re working on...
And well, she was already a fan of yours because of Happy Endings, she’d never garnered so much publicity for the gallery before that show, well, you just can’t back out on her...

—Oscar!

—What!

—Someone told her what I’m planning on doing? Was that someone, by chance, drinking double whisky sours last night, dressed as a much more attractive version of Johnny Depp in Edward Scissorhands?

—You bet he was! Man I love that movie. Plus that makes you what, a short haired version of Winona Ryder?

—Yes, it does. And don’t change the subject by flattering me. Why did you tell her?

—Liquid courage, like usual, and I wanted to anchor you into this thing. It’s going to be fantastic. Don’t you worry! Plus, think about how disappointed Magda will be if you back out.

Stewart 87
Emily sighs. She knows that he’s right. It would have been possible to drop the project if Magda hadn’t known that she was working on something new.

—Ok fine. Thank you. I’ll get a hold of Magda soon.

Early autumn sun filters into the basement apartment, a triangle resting on Emily’s hairy left leg as she continues to ramble on to Oscar. She is oddly nervous about her evening with Adrian, but refuses to voice this to her friend.

After their talk, Emily eats a salad on the lawn behind the house. The landlady’s cats circle around her smelling of piss. That’s something that she doesn’t miss about Harry. Patrick and his newly monogamous lady (as if she won’t screw around on him again!) are free to enjoy Harry’s lack of personal hygiene. A crow circles overhead. Something is lifting within Emily and she is reassured. One coat is being shed, another appears, a fine invisible film over her skin.

Against her better judgement, Emily shaves her armpits, legs, bikini line. She brushes her orange bob. Coats her eyelids with liquid charcoal. Applies muted cherry lipstick. Her palm flattens her bangs against her forehead. She smirks. Rarely does she wear makeup. This is the ultimate thrill. Emily believes that this look originated from a film, not an Egyptian goddess. She is a tangerine version of Uma Thurman in *Pulp Fiction*: “Mrs. Mia Wallace” purrs in her head.

Emily does the twist before turning away from the mirror. The photograph tucked into the corner of her reflection catches her eye, a smiling couple and a child (in a stroller) beside a bridge overlooking a canyon. The image was taken during the last trip that she and Patrick took. What an argument there had been, coaxing him into driving south. *She’s not our responsibility anymore, let it go!* Usually when she is reminded of this tangible amalgam of her and Patrick, she sees her body as it flies above the happy family, diving into the rapids below. Today she

Stewart 88
chooses to erase that trope and instead she replaces this image with one of her in a Wonder Woman suit, circling over the child’s activities, within reach to swoop down and rescue her, if need be.

As she walks to the bar, Emily notices the fluff from the trees settling into the curb of the sidewalk. She has a strange yearning for snow. She lives on Sixth Ave., and is aware that she is late. At the corner of the street, Oscar rounds in his rusty VW. He comes to a lurching stop. Emily gets in.

—You know I’m only going a block right?

—Ya, but don’t you think it’ll be more fun this way?

Emily is not certain what he means by this and let’s it slide. She doesn’t feel like admitting that she can’t read his elusiveness.

Oscar pulls up across the street from the building, knowing that her date will be able to see her through the darkened windows. As she steps out, he calls for her to come around and then kisses her quickly on the lips.

—Have fun. Call me if you need a bail out.

Adrian does notice this exchange, despite the fact that the bartender is babbling his ear off. She wears a navy and white sailor style dress and a jean jacket is slung over her arm. A sputter from the VW and the barista from the café is off, leaving the fair maiden waving, her hand above her head, grinning widely, her teeth a blur of white between painted lips. Because he is not paying attention to what the bartender is blathering on about (although he keeps nodding yes), just as Emily walks into the dimly lit room a bottle of wine and a glass appear at the table.

Stewart 89
—Hello Adrian! Hi Richard! How was Ireland?

He realizes that she works here.

Emily is exultant, not fazed in the least by her tardiness. Richard’s reaction is not territorial; he noticeably holds himself back until she is one, two, three, four, high heeled steps over. She gives him one of those distanced hugs, body held back, arms embracing. Adrian is comforted by this. Knows he’s got nothing to compete with.

—Hello Jay!

The piano player gives her a knowing nod and halts abruptly from the song he’s playing, quickly starting into another.

—Oh Cohen! You know me too well.

Emily clasps her hands together, holds them to her heart. Adrian recognizes the disadvantage of being on her turf. She plops herself down in the seat next to him.

—Burrowing Owl! Impressive.

Emily is not impressed about this wine, but she does know its price. She’s more interested with Adrian’s choice in footwear. Flip flops, despite linen pants and a dress shirt. He notices her observation and crosses his legs uncomfortably.

—Richard, may I have a wine glass please?

Richard darts to the bar behind them. There are no other patrons.

She leans forward in her low chair, small breasts swelling into the pointed V of her dress.

Stewart 90
—His name’s actually Ricky. I mean that’s what he goes by. But when he works here, he insists on being called Richard. It’s ridiculous. I’d like to say fun to watch, but a whole shift tends to drag on...

It annoys him that she hasn’t apologized for being late and he thinks that standoffish might be a good card to play. Looking at the delicate frame of her torso, seeing the small curves that are pinched inwards where her panties meet her skin, he chooses to be warm. She shifts back in the chair and appreciates that he didn’t tuck in his shirt, that the buttoned material shows a line of dark hair that sprouts up his taut belly, offsetting his slight tan.

—You prepared?

He lifts his eyebrows,

—I couldn’t. Was too busy.... Thinking of tonight.

—I hate! I mean, thank you, but puhleeeease. For one, you’re visiting town, so how busy could you possibly be and secondly, isn’t that the kind of rubbish one of your personas might use to capture an impressionable woman?

Her eyes are dark, they are so dark, Adrian can’t begin to describe them. Oh and they dance, dance me, to the end of love: the tune on the piano has infiltrated. He finds himself laughing. At first nervously, but then on and on he goes, and he sees that snow in Toronto when he first fell in love. He can’t help being reminded of his initial meetings with Annie; he wishes he could control what his perverted nostalgia conjures up.

She shifts in her seat a little. Giggles a bit. Understands that this is going to be tougher than she thought.
They get into the bottle of wine. There is little hesitancy. The tension is thick, their dual discomfort blatant. Already, the usual exchanges have been generally abandoned. Neither wishes to elaborate on trivial pasts.

Thinking at first this a comfortable silence, Adrian second guesses himself. Seems like she’s tired. Of what, he can’t tell. This could be the worst date she’s ever been on.

—What were you doing in that class?

—I’m an Arts’ major, an English minor. Each creative writing class I’ve taken, you’ve been on the syllabus. Maybe that’s the token thing a university does for its Alma Mater. Sat in because I wanted to see the womanizer, in the flesh.

It’s a simple cut, clean even. Feminist criticism of how poorly he writes women is usually saved for print.

—My personas are womanizers... Oh. Never mind. What’s your medium then?

Art? Fine Art I suppose?

His emphasis on ‘fine’ makes them both grin. Emily doesn’t usually entertain bad jokes.

—Photography mainly, painting here and there.

—Really? I’d love to see your work.

Her look is a glare, a size-up. She tries to be even, deliberate, but finds herself drawn to that tiny triangle of lower abdomen skin, the coarse hairs that button down from his navel. She thinks to call Oscar, to bail out, but can’t bring herself to do it just now. Why waste such a good bottle of wine?

Stewart 92
—There’s one here, hidden. I insisted he let me put it up, but clearly the boss didn’t deem it worth... prime real estate. You’ll have to check it out before we leave. Before we go.

She tries to catch herself, sees how quickly things could slip. His attractiveness is not unworthy of attention, but she will not come off as the others.

Stilted conversation hangs in the air then slides away. She’s withdrawn. Adrian tries not to look at her by shifting his legs.

The bottle of wine dissipates and although Emily has hinted she ought to get going, Adrian is convinced by the bartender, when he gets up for the tab, to try the chardonnay before going on their way.

Adrian looks back to their table. Emily appears quite bored; she must be thinking about the poor quality of her date, Adrian’s sure. A fresh bottle certainly won’t hurt.

The wine’s too much. Unable to reciprocate small talk, she knows she’s too far gone. This is further proven when she walks to the bathroom; the furniture seems to leer up from the hardwood floor. She should call Oscar. In the bathroom mirror she stares at her face for quite some time, considering how to proceed.

When she exits the facilities, she finds Adrian at her photograph in a dark corner of the bar. His face is reflected in the grainy image. The sparse hairs on the porous flesh are transposed overttop of his features. Emily watches as he peers into it, trying to sort out what it is. When he figures it out, his mouth spreads into a smile. A long hair sprouts from between his teeth in the reflecting photograph.

Stewart 93
—How the hell did some poor bastard let you take a close-up of his balls? One can only imagine...

Emily has turned away from him. Richard watches Adrian stare at her ass.

—Well, it’s past my bedtime.

She says this too loudly, turns unevenly and starts walking out the door, leaving Adrian to pay the tab. Standing on the balcony outside of the bar, she grips the brick of the building for balance. As bleary as she is from the wine, she recognizes that she no longer has much bearing on what she ought to do.

The fresh air brings things back, a little. Adrian walks out; he grabs her hand as they descend the steep stairwell, rambles on about how grateful he is for visiting this shit hole of a town, because if he hadn’t he wouldn’t have met her.

—Will you walk me home then?

A glint of anticipation flicks in his eyes. He crosses one foot over the other ankle and then reciprocates with his other foot, over the other ankle, all the while holding her arm.

—Let’s go.

This is the point of no return. She tries to convince herself she’ll get it together before they reach her apartment. It shouldn’t be difficult to withhold more material for him to write about. It’s obvious she can’t trust him; the trouble is she doesn’t trust herself. She negates this by imagining that his bracing her arm gives him the belief of control.

Stewart 94
They stop in the empty avenue. She faces him. Her left foot crosses her right ankle, she stumbles. It’s seldom that she wears heels.

—So. What has made you so very angry with women?

His smile withers slightly, though the lilt of her tone is reminiscent of Hepburn’s drunken scene in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. This poor girl is probably just looking to belong, like the rest of them. It couldn’t have been nice indefinitely, he thinks. They always want to get in.

—For starters, I’m not angry with women.

—Oh, really? There seem to be a lot of bitches and cunts in your poems.

Adrian visibly cringes when she says ‘cunts.’ He knows she has more right to the word, but it is the usual rejection of this word, by the sorts of women he usually goes for, that makes him ill at ease. All promise seems to shatter. The crisp ‘c’ echoes in his mind; he has an urge to run.

They don’t speak. She refuses to procure an answer and he refuses to give one. He grabs her forearm and they continue to walk up the avenue. In front of a small house with tall grass, she says:

—Would you like to come in?

She steps back in her heels unevenly. Mascara has smudged under her right eye. There’s an attempt at a coy grin. His posture is rigid.

—Maybe for a bit. Shouldn’t leave Luke’s dog alone too long...
Emily is not oblivious; she shouldn’t have taken on his poetry this early. Grabbing his hand, she leads him down the stairs to her suite.

The hall is dim. She fumbles in search of a light in the living room. A myriad of coloured glass expels from a Tiffany lamp. There are books strewn, willy-nilly, across the carpet. The mantel above the fireplace is warped from bearing the weight of her literature. Prints and paintings hang on all walls but one. Adrian notices that same dark haired barista in a photograph, holding a broken beer bottle beside his head, a trickle of blood culminating in his ear.

—Have a seat. Beer?

—Sounds good.

Settling on one of two dining room chairs, he notices various scribbles on notes and napkins. He tries to read them, but to no avail. Her handwriting is an intricate scrawl. The toilet flushes; the tub tap goes on.

Holding her hair back from her face, she first gulps water from the tap, then turns it to hot and washes her feet with the end of a towel. Those shoes are treacherous to her rancid feet. She’ll project the slide, but is nervous for what could happen. Besides the poetry (maybe those women deserved it), he really hasn’t proven to be a complete jerk. He did buy all that wine. Still, she knows she must go through with it. But could it be that this act might prove that she is everything she despises, that she is everything she wishes to reject, that she might be everything that he is also... Only time will tell, surely.

—Don’t call me Shirley,
Patrick used to say. It’s hard not to miss him when she’s around someone so similar. So similar because he, too, can’t be trusted. It all starts out fun and carefree with free booze and great sex, but how quickly it will be sure to unravel, like it did with Patrick. Recognizing the danger, she tells herself that she will not let Adrian be with her more than once (maybe not at all, maybe not at all!) She’d held Patrick at arm’s length, suspicious he wasn’t over his ex-finance. When he’d insisted she let him in, well, she’d quickly been sorry that she had. Why can’t more men be like Oscar? She is reminded of a postcard, a woman from the 50s’ poses at the beach, a bubble over her head: Where are all the kind, attentive, gentlemen who are also good listeners? They already have boyfriends. Stupidly, she bought it for Oscar. He’d hated it. She could tell by his closed lipped smile.

When she walks out of the bathroom, Adrian’s staring at a contour drawing of Patrick’s eye and earlobe; Adrian glances at her, blushes slightly, then moves on to the next item, treating her place as though it were a gallery. Finally he sits back down on one of the rigid dining room chairs.

—It’s not like I’m trying to degrade women. My poems are mainly honest, with some imaginary bits. But they can all be passed off as fiction. Those women say things to me, like I could be their future husband or something, how or why they do, one can only imagine... Usually it’s downright pathetic.

Emily praises herself momentarily for having the heart to turn on the tape recorder when she walked into the apartment. It rests just beneath his feet (so obvious, under a milk-crate), and is state-of-the-art in recording such prized confessions.
She settles down on the other rigid dining room chair and pulls it closer to his, perhaps too close. He shifts so that he isn’t looking into her face.

—Has anyone ever called you on it?

He speaks to the blank wall ahead.

—Sort of. But they all came off as irrational and without merit. Hysterical, even. Ridiculous. I get it in some ways. I blow them off pretty quickly. Like you said, I’m seamless in my evasion. Plus, confrontation is difficult when an artist always uses ‘you.’ I never name names, that’s for sure. ‘You’ is safe. There were so many for a go there that ‘you’ could have been half the wait staff in Kitsilano.

His voice is hard, annoyed by these remembrances. Wringing his hands together, he realizes he’s gone too far. She’s beautiful, but like the enemy in a way. Adrian sits, perfect poise, as though he is about to eat Christmas dinner with a family he doesn’t know, but his face reveals something like dejection.

—Why do you do it? I mean, why write them that way? It’s so ugly, seems like there could be more beauty to it all?

Emily has moved in; her body closer to his. Her right knee is resting by his left leg, her whole body turned and he can’t bring himself to do the same. Yearns to, but won’t. The dangerous territory is no question now. His nose is a pointed silhouette that will not look her directly in the face.

He can’t reply. Adrian sits there hoping for an out. Silence. She becomes self-conscious about her position.
—Look. If you don’t want to be here, then don’t be here. I’m not looking for anything. Some decent conversation with someone who will look at me would be alright.

—Is this better?

Adrian shifts his weight so that he’s looking at her directly. It’s as though they’re at a wedding reception, two guests who didn’t know each other (in their straight, high-backed chairs), but destined to sit next to each other because of the bride’s intricate seating scheme; a signal of new familiarity is indicated by the slight pivots of their separate chairs. She gets that lifting feeling, the one that made her pursue this in the first place.

—Is this what you’re looking for?

They’re face to face. She feels herself wanting to recoil immediately. Her neck yo-yos her head up and then down. Yes. Emily feels herself blushing. Longs to escape, but knows that she can’t,

—Look. I’m not after anything here. In fact, I just got out of a huge relationship and the last thing I want is... anything, anything of that sort. And if I gave you the wrong idea, I mean you’re in my apartment and...

—What’s the worst that could happen? I could kiss you. And really that’d be up to you... What do you think?

Emily struggles, shifts. This is not how things are meant to be going. He’s looking at her with those brown eyes and those perfect dimples, smiling because he must be laughing at her discomfort. And does it matter really? Does it really?

Stewart 99
She takes the gum from her mouth and sticks it under her chair. Feels the flutter in her stomach and nods yes. Yes, and yes, and yes, she nods. And before she is done his mouth is on hers and she’s leaning in, and his body is pressing against hers, and she has soon left the property of her seat, climbing onto his (the bride would be proud, surely), and her legs are wrapped around his torso. Emily can’t help but breathe heavily, can’t help but sigh in the moments when their lips take rest from each other. They move to the floor. And his body is on hers and she knows he is still married, officially. Adrian’s face hovers over hers. You are so beautiful, you are so beautiful. His mutterings help, but still she is conscious of what he represents. But he is there, with his beautiful brown hair that floods into his eyes. With his whiskers that scratch her face and the knowing, always the knowing, that this shouldn’t be happening. Against her leg, through thin cotton, she can feel him. She wants to continue to feel that pressing on her inner thigh, that look, that unforgiving look, those unrelenting eyes. Emily pulls back, wondering if he knows. All he can do is grin then fall into the crevice of her collarbone and breathe there on her breast waiting for more.

Pulling his head from her chest by yanking the hair from the back of his skull she says,

—This is it. This is all it can be.

—What do you mean?

He settles his body, to the right of hers, on the floor and stares into the lap of her dress imploringly.

Shimmying up into a sitting position, she allows proximity between him and her crotch; Emily laughs.
—I mean that you won’t be getting in there. I’ve made up a new set of rules for myself and you are not about to break those.

She won’t move him further from her, deciding that it’s best to let him stare at that pocket of her dress. This she allows, for a few minutes, until he mutters under his breath:

—What I could do to that cunt. What I could do.

He lifts her dress with each hand (which turns it into an open peacock-tailed fan in front of her) and stares into the fine folds of her cotton underpants.

The bottom of her sailor’s dress blinds her from his inquiring eyes. Oh, what he could do. She knows. She understands. And it has been so long; she is already wet and waiting.

—No.

Emily pulls the dress down over her legs, stands up, then pulls the chain on the Tiffany lamp; the living room goes dark save for the faint rays of street light.

—I want to show you something. Sit down in your chair and look at that wall.

He does as he’s told not as recompense, but with hope for something better. This is what she, sort of, thinks she will grant him.

The blank wall floods with light and a figure. Without a head, it is a woman’s body: neck to knee naked. Adrian realizes that this is her. A gasp escapes his lips; he is partial to her portions. Ribs apparent above the swell of her sides and belly. The fiery fur that lies beneath. Emily stands next to the rigid chair: his front row seat. Adrian grips her wrist.

—Why are you doing this?
—It’s what you wanted, no?

Adrian tries not to appear uncomfortable even though this is the oddest experience he’s ever had with a woman.

—I’d rather touch you, be touched.

His voice reminds her of a teenager whining.

Through the shadows of the apartment he sees a sense of consternation pass over her face. There’s a reservation that’s set.

—You’ve seen mine, now let me see yours.

—What? This is fucked. I saw a slide of you, and now you’re expecting me to expose myself? You’re screwed lady.

—Yes. Perhaps. And I’m going to take a picture no less.

Inexplicably, her confidence has returned. She is neither ahead nor behind in this game.

—Fine.

He doesn’t understand why, but he is undressing next to the wall with her image. Fingers expertly undo buttons to reveal a malnourished chest. Quick flick of the fly and his pants are around his ankles, boxers too. Crumpling them into a ball and kicking them aside he stands in the nude staring at her defiantly. He does as he’s told not for appeasement, but rather for the possible rewards he might gain from this unusual encounter.
Lens in hand, she stands a little behind and between their two dining room chairs; they act as a blockade between his nudity and the garments that she wears. His figure is the best she’s seen; his face expressionless. Several shots are acquired. She knows they’ll be worked in perfectly. Emily circles their seating arrangements and then props her ass awkwardly on the wood that lines the top of a chair; her weight makes it unbalanced. Finding a way to gain stability, she raises the camera once again—just pixels away from that once flawless face. Each pore is exposed, slight razor burn and several pox scars. Perhaps it reveals too much to her, hesitancy sets back in just as he grabs her wrist, cornering her by standing right in front of the chair. There’s no bashfulness about his erection, as she had expected (past experience has filtered through, Patrick covering his nether regions with a hand as he gets up and heads towards the toilet) and through the lens she sees every blackhead on Adrian’s nose. And then she is crushed by his presence, as he stands on the chair and she remains there propped on its unreliable wooden crown; she is somewhat worried that they’ll topple over, but this concern is overridden by gratitude for his kisses and the camera is soon placed on the carpet, and all of her plans are erased by the vibrations of his body.

_I'd like you to be mine._

____

Lying naked next to each other, Adrian turns,

—You know what I like about you?

He brushes the skin on her shoulder, removing an eyelash.

—What’s that?

Stewart 103

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—It’s like you’re the most honest, the most familiar to me, in a long while. And of course there’s your body.

Adrian shivers slightly,

—Your body!

Emily shakes her head. She sits with her back perfectly aligned with the wall. Her bed, suddenly a confessional booth.

—You only say that because you link bodies and familiarity, I’m sure.

He props himself up on the pillows.

—You’re totally discrediting that I also find you honest. Honesty’s refreshing.

Still sweaty, Emily wipes her brow with the back of her hand.

—You don’t know anything about me. You have no way of knowing I’m honest.

Adrian shrugs, then nestles into her chest.

—It’s just a quality that I feel you want to be.

She shifts her body, forcing him to take his head from that crook in her collarbone.

Curling away from him, into the fetal position, she feels her eyes well. Emily tries not to shake.

—What’s wrong? Don’t you feel this too? There’s something here, this isn’t just animal instincts.

He can’t see her face. It takes her many heartbeats until she’s slowed her breathing to respond.
—Of course I feel it too. But it doesn’t mean I have some great hope or trust in your honesty. I wish you didn’t feel this way about me. I’m bad news. I can be a nightmare of a woman to be with.

Arching an arm over her, Adrian flips her body so that he can look into her eyes.

—You’re right. Of course you are. But I know my intuition. And my intuition is saying... this is it.

Adrian has the good sense to leave after making coffee in her messy kitchen. He sets the mug on the carpet by her bed and she stirs when she smells it. Emily abruptly sits up, yanking the comforter over her bare torso. Her eyebrows rise as she realizes what she’s done.

—Just thought I’d bring you a cup before I go. Had a really nice time last night. Be great to do that again sometime.

If it hadn’t been for the sleep in her eyes, her ears, her mouth, she’d see how great he looks with his hair tousled. A boyish, near bashful grin. Avoiding eye contact, she replies:

—Ya, me too.

Her sense of dread is written on her drowsy face.

—I’ve left my numbers on the counter if you wanna hang out again. Don’t know too many people here anymore. Lots of free time, as you pointed out. It’d be nice to get to know you more.
Emily’s visibly surprised by this. It’s been three years since she’s slept with someone so quickly and that time has weighed on her like something fierce. Besides this, she knows she’s become one of them. As she reaches for the mug, she notices the soggy, deflated condom on the carpet and is grateful for this alone.

—Well, I ought to get going. But really, do. Call. Looking forward to it. Not often do I get to meet intelligent women.

What he means, she knows, is that not often does he sleep with intelligent women. His poetry is drowning in ineptitude, which is even more insulting because his personas condemn these women for lacking sophistication, a specific sort of sophistication that he can supposedly afford, coming from barrels of money, after all, *Romps in the Slums* was his breakthrough book. Emily is cognizant of what she is. Yet another conquest. She aches to think that she’ll be described in the same way: her mouth open, yearning. She manages, while realizing the falsity immediately,

—Sure. I will,

Three days later, he’s surprised to find her phone number in the book. Actually, it’s under Patrick Sheridan’s name, her ex, the photographer. Adrian learnt about her past relationship when Luke returned and Adrian had happily relayed that he might have found someone with whom he could pursue something serious. Luke lifts an eyebrow at her name, having been to *Happy Endings: Her Story*,

—Bad news man. Just another depraved girl. Wish you had seen that show, with her ex, I’m sure she was an unreal lay, from the photos I could tell she’s a vamp. Crazy in bed I’m sure.
Luke does not receive the reaction he's seeking. Adrian shoots him a look, as if to say, don't talk about my woman like that. It is this that shows Luke how serious his friend is. Luke continues nonetheless.

—Listen, I'm sure she's smart and nice and all that, but she's really just a girl, no matter what her age. And it's rumoured that her and Patrick fostered out a girl of their own.

Adrian is unruffled; the same day he leaves a rambling message on her machine. No reply.

Three days pass and again he calls; this time he hangs up.

He waits another three days and then leaves a dozen red roses on her doorstep.

In the afternoon, she finds them, with a note, picks them up, walks across the lawn and throws them in the middle of Sixth Avenue, nearly hitting a passing car.

Three days and again he calls. No answer.

Two days, and she arrives home to find a fruit basket and a poem. She keeps the poem (just in case) and then walks across her lawn and disposes of the thing in the middle of the road.

The next day he phones. Emily's message has changed.

You've reached Emily. If this is A.M. I'm sorry to be the bearer of this shit news, but I've died. Anyone else, leave a message and I'll try to get back to you from the afterlife.

Stewart 107
For weeks, Emily is shamed by the encounter. It takes days before she yields to Oscar’s curiosities; tortoise like time (for Oscar at least) passes before she dishes the details. He’s glib about it, thinking that it will heighten commercial and public value for her future show. She doesn’t think her friend really gets it; she slipped up with the worst of them. Magda keeps calling, knowing from Oscar that Emily has a complete exhibit. Emily postpones *Sweet Nothings: His Story*, indefinitely.

Only six months after their ‘familiarity,’ Adrian McMaster has a new collection of poetry published (how he was able to get a press to pump the thing out at such an alarmingly speed, *one could only imagine*). Besides the obvious poem, the one that the collection has been named after, "th ♥ shaped box(e," Emily finds herself in nearly all the crannies of these pieces; her pride, her person, her body revealed—though thinly veiled by his assiduous use of ‘you.’ She is drawn out of that long, shame ridden depression. It is the fuel she needs. It could have been the collection as a whole. Or maybe it was the poem that not only described the inside of her apartment, but also a thin caesarian scar, that finally threw Emily over the edge, opting for retaliation.

**Act III: The Sinker**

It’s opening night and the gallery is packed. Since the arts program begun at the small university, there’s been no other that’s managed to gather such a strange reputation. People haven’t forgotten her poses in *Happy Endings*. The hype is heightened because of McMaster’s publication, *th ♥ shaped box(e*; the reviews are poor. The faculty’s collective eyebrows are raised because his descriptions of Emily are obvious. Many acquaintances from the feminist community shun her. From the people that praised Emily for her and Patrick’s show, she hears
murmurs, sees smirks. Most days she finds it all tiresome; sometimes Emily finds herself oddly reveling in it.

Last time she was in the library, she overhears a couple of her peers whispering about the weakness she’s shown. Emily leaves the cubicle, stalks the few stacks, circling around their gossip and finally faces them. The two women try not to cower.

—If you’ve something to say to me, say it to my face.

One blathers out,

—What do you mean, Emily?

—What I mean is… When I saw you leaving Professor Dilbert’s house at dawn, I had the decency to stay silent. And last time I saw you…

Emily points at the other.

—You were dry humping one of your students at the bar. Again, I had the decency not to open my trap. Think about that before you go off about me again. I’m sure these are tidbits the faculty would love to hear. Oh and if you’ve the time in your pathetic little lives, my show is on Monday. Here are two invitations.

The pair actually take her up on this, arrive early and are amazed. Thirteen naked bachelors are thrown onto the white walls, expelled from thirteen separate projectors around the gallery; their voices compete with one another. At each individual piece, his voice spills out a slew of lines, coaxing the viewer to go for a round of sexual exchanges in the sack.
At quarter to the hour the exhibit’s officially set to begin, Emily’s stomach starts to rumble. A couple of her professors are drinking wine outside the main gallery; she sees this through the glass doors that partition the spaces. She notices a group of strong headed women enter the main doors, scowls set, expectant.

Magda and a fellow in tweed walk up to Emily. Magda paws the man’s jacket and says:

—Emily, Lucas. He works for the Citizen. Would it be alright if he were to ask you a few questions for tomorrow’s paper?

Emily can feel the blood rushing to her head. She has that same feeling she used to get when she had to cut off a drunk at the pub, a feeling that generally preceded an ugly confrontation.

—Sure. No problem.

—Let’s start off with some preliminaries from Magda, because she’s facilitated both shows that you’ve been part of. That’s alright

The women nod their heads in agreement. Lucas turns on his tape recorder.

—Testing. Testing; (pause). We’re at Emily Boxe’s Sweet Nothings: Her Story. Magda Dietrich is also here. Magda facilitated Emily’s first show, Happy Endings, which was a collaboration with her boyfriend Patrick Sheridan. What do you think about Emily’s first solo exhibit, Magda?

—I prefer it to Happy Endings.

—Really? Why?
—Emily was very much a sex symbol in that one—don’t get me wrong, the idea was fantastic, but I think the meaning was lost, mainly because of the attention it garnered by the people that came to see it. The men ogled her; the women hated her.

Emily laughs nervously and butts in, forgetting that it’s Magda’s turn to speak.

—That’s a great assessment of how I felt that opening night. It didn’t help that Patrick maneuvered me around the room like his very own blow up doll. It was a surreal experience. I guess I didn’t realize the implications at the time.

—What are your impressions tonight Emily?

—So far so good, but then again, the show hasn’t really started. None of the early birds have erupted in disgust, so that’s great for me. Some might say that’s the sign of a tame exhibit, but I prefer it to theatricality. Not that I didn’t appreciate that feminist from the university screaming at me at Happy Endings opening night.

Magda and Emily exchange amused glances. Lucas notices this then carries on:

—Sweet Nothings is incredibly different from Happy Endings. You said the inspiration for your collaborative show, with Patrick, was a “reclaiming of women’s own bodies and thus their own fates.” What is the message is here?

—I wanted to play with the notion of fairy tale again, but in a very different way. Growing up, I watched those Disney movies and the meaning, at the end of each narrative, was always the same. The lead female character is saved by the male
hero. The reactions from the viewers at mine and Patrick’s show, well, I guess they led me to a sort of epiphany. As a result, *Sweet Nothings* comes from a more contemporary place, where women’s troubles, a lot of the time, actually originate from men trying to masquerade as Princes or heroes and I’ve found that this usually happens when men are trying to lure their fair Princesses into bed. The thing that gets me are the lines that guys feed women to get them to go for a tumble in the hay. I think that women need to be their own heroes. This show is about the lies that people tell each other in order to fulfill a basic animal urge, but the message is up to the viewer.

Emily feels that her face is too hot. She clutches one of her wrists and tries to breathe slower, in order to ease her racing pulse. Would he publish everything she just said?

—Why did you call it *Sweet Nothings: Her Story*, when there are many men, from the community, in this show who are openly gay?

—Well I named the first show *Happy Endings*, and Patrick chose to add the tagline, *Her Story*, and I initially liked that because it harkens to feminist criticisms, but afterwards, it dawned on me that that exhibit was actually more concentrated in voyeurism. It wasn’t about celebrating women’s sexuality, but instead appealed to men’s views of women; this didn’t dawn on me at the time, if it had, I wouldn’t have allowed Patrick to take those pictures of me. So adding *Her Story*, here, was more about my own reclaiming. As for the orientation of some of the men showcased tonight, well, just like I played the sex kitten for *Happy Endings*, that was a character, in *Sweet Nothings* these men are also

Stewart 112
playing characters. Straight characters. The gay men were the most fun to work with because they liked to script the monologues themselves, for their own private reasons and for political reasons also, and also, I suspect, it could be a way for them to seek vengeance. I can certainly relate to all three of these motives.

Despite raising an eyebrow at Emily mentioning revenge, Lucas continues with his questions:

—Patrick’s image is up there and it’s the only one without a voice-over. Can you tell me why, Emily?

—For the simple reason that I came up with the idea after we’d broken up. He’s very lucky that I didn’t have any documentation of the things that he said to me.

—And of course, there’s Adrian McMaster, noted local poet, his voice-over is very interesting...

—Yes. That’s one way of putting it.

—Has he talked to you about it? How did you get him to agree to it?

—Well. That’s the one piece in this exhibit that wasn’t staged. And I don’t know that he’s heard about what I’ve done here.

—Emily, I can assure you that he has.

—Oh?

—I’m a close friend of his. Luke.
A look of recognition passes over Emily’s face. Luke looks back at her and smiles, but remains silent, his recorder imposing, next to her mouth. She continues nervously, at first, then sets in on a hardened tone,

—Then you know what he thinks. I’d be interested to hear what kind of pseudo-feminist bullshit he’d feed the public, in an interview, either highly praising, or completing rejecting his appearance in my show. Actually I’m surprised he’s not here with a scripted speech for all of his adoring fans, but I do understand that’d be taking a risk. Remember, he was playing a role. A role that provides him material for his own creative endeavours. I’m sure you can spin the rest of this interview anyway you want. Thanks for your time Lucas.

—My pleasure Emily.

People mill about the gallery, reading the pamphlet that encourages viewers to participate in the exhibit: *imagine how you might feel if this is what your bed fellow told you.* Several acquaintances, creative and academic, come by and shake Emily’s hand. Oscar stands by her, waiting until these people leave. They gossip when no one’s within ear shot. Subtly, Emily points, here and there, drawing Oscar’s attention to people’s reactions of what is being launched out of the still mouths of the ghostly, naked men.

Past and present partners of these apparitions are half stunned, half appreciative, or entirely resentful of how their men are exposed. Several individuals storm out of the gallery, throwing Emily hateful stares. *All the world’s a stage.* The recordings of half-baked pick-up lines can’t be up for argument, not when the image matches the voice. There’s no blaming the artist when you can hear your man’s voice laying on the grease he initially trapped you with. At one
point Oscar exclaims, “It’s performance people!” But this doesn’t have any effect on disgruntled individuals headed for the door.

A sickness overcomes Emily as she wonders if McMaster will show up. A little crowd of women have gathered in front of his naked image; a few of them are quite young, first year students. They giggle.

Adrian enters the gallery; he sees Emily immediately, a flute of champagne in hand, she lowers it so that it is held in front of her midnight blue suit, the pale liquor in the glass quickly changing to a shade of lighter night sky. He’s wearing a grandfatherly golf hat (an attempt at anonymity?) over his chestnut hockey hair. There’s a large dark beer stain on his beige linen shirt. He locks eyes with her. She turns towards Oscar, saying something that makes him launch into laughter. The few women that mill around Adrian’s naked likeness begin to whisper. Despite the echoing male voices, the guests of Sweet Nothings become remarkably hushed.

Turning away from her, Lucas now at his side, Adrian pretends to be exceptionally interested in the first bachelor. It’s Patrick. Getting a side profile of Adrian’s face, Emily notes that he has a distinct look of discomfort when he reads the caption next to Patrick’s image: “I’m impotent and clean. It doesn’t matter baby.”

That swarm of women, around his likeness, parts, allowing Adrian to step toward his portion of the exhibit. He gives his naked projection the elevator eyes. His voice-over continues, midstream, "I’m trying to degrade women." Adrian steps back, unsettled; he mutters,

—Jesus!

Emily is watching, anticipating. He glances over at her. She imagines a set of cartoon daggers flying from his eyes; they fall around her midnight suit, her body unharmed. The speech

Stewart 115

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continues: "they all came off as irrational and without merit. Hysterical, even. Ridiculous. I get it in some ways. I blow them off pretty quickly. Like you said, I’m seamless in my evasion. Plus, confrontation is difficult when an artist always uses 'you.'"

He hears what he said to Emily that night; it registers in a different way for him. Adrian’s face is a shriveled scowl. Talk about reel to reel exposure. Not just the lines, it’s the confessions that bring him grievance. Too many drinks in that night, he’d rambled on to her about why he writes the way that he does: "a defense mechanism for the fucking twats that screwed me over."

Emily walks over, the reflection of his naked body, a mockery in front of him. The two women from the library stand in the middle of the room surveying, whispering behind him. Adrian turns towards them, booming:

— I can HEAR you!

Lifting his arms above his head, Emily is reminded of the swaying of dancers. Her peers react as though he’s a female bear protecting her cubs. They scurry off.

He sees the shadow of her suit before seeing her. Had there been anything material to rip down and shred it’d be gone. Instead his mouth opens enormous. His voice is immediately shrill:

— You little cunt. Such bullshit! This is not me. It is not! I don’t know how she did, but she did!

He looks around the gallery at the observers on the periphery of the room. He’s pointing at Emily and turning towards his audience, concentrating, in that moment, on convincing them of his innocence.
—There’re plenty of recordings of me! She’s manipulated my voice! I did not say these things, I did not!

Emily walks up to him, places a hand on his forearm, her voice, a sexy murmur, lulling,

—I would not eat her box. I would not eat it with a fox. I did not! I will not! My name is Sam I am and I did not eat green eggs and ham!

His brown eyes are further angered, darting back and forth around the room, finally settling once again on her, her midnight suit, her empty champagne flute, her smug, smug face.

—You can’t do this! (He stamps his foot for added effect.) You can’t do this! You don’t have my ... you don’t have my ... fucking permission! This is UNLAWFUL!

Adrian glances over at the onlookers, as if for support. They blink back doleful, either slightly amused, or slightly confused. He turns back to Emily, holds his left arm directly in front of him (an awkward extension), palm flat, fingers pointing directly into her vision, a few inches more and the tips of his fingers will touch her eyes, he closes with,

—I. I will SUE you!

He lets his arm fall to his side, juts his chin out, as though to say that he means serious stuff. Luke appears at his side, hovering annoyingly. Emily gives Luke a sympathetic nod, then says,

—Easy there beer breath... Wouldn’t want to ruin a nice little experience with the arts... These pieces are more about personas, might I remind you of what that means?

Stewart 117
She takes another step towards him; he smells her, tries not to tip over into more intoxication. Procuring a copy of his latest book, she takes the book mark out, creases the spine and asks him:

—Would you like to reiterate this little ditty, or should I? I know it’s not the most revealing about me, but I’m sure it’d do the trick.

He looks dumbfounded; she continues,

—I can read it myself if you like, but I know how much practice you have, reading to the public, serenading them in your private little perversion of what love ought to be. Here, read.

Emily hands him his text. Adrian sees what her hand offers and then looks up into her eyes. There is something there that only she can see. Regret.

His hands hang limply by his sides. Emily’s voice grows more gentle,

—Maybe Luke could read it? Then we wouldn’t have to have any of this (she lowers her voice so that only he and Luke can hear her) ugliness, be documented by the press?

Adrian’s point of focalization is the floor. His head is so severely bent towards his feet that only the hunch of his shoulders can be seen by the audience behind him. It is the quietest, most feeble voice that says,


Hesitantly, Luke takes the folded book from Emily’s hand; he begins to read.
that ♥ shaped box(e

[wish i could eat ur cancer when u turn black]

-nirvana

th surroundings, clipp’d, tailor’d
u expect’d u wood

let it in
b4 u ask’d what i was thinking,
post-coitus,

i was all—

walking th dog after dinner w/u(
th reek of th mill’s no matter
) i’ve got me an old lady

that ♥ shaped

ur face

that ♥ shaped

ur body

that ♥ shaped

box(e
an entry, an exit

that ♥ shaped
(th object of my desire

that ♥ shaped

box(e
th site 4 a final injection

Stewart 119
Luke quickly hands the book back to Emily; the audience, lined against the wall that Adrian refuses to face, as a collective whole, hardly looks satiated. Emily booms, for her audience,

—Thanks Luke, beautiful! With that kind of voice, well I'd like to make you mine.

Emily looks into Adrian’s eyes that peer upwards from his still slouched position; he is imploring, that same eager, whining, terrifying look that he gave her when he let that peacock fan of her skirt fall. A pang of guilt. No.

—It’s not personal.

She says this softly.

Oscar walks over and stands beside her. Adrian gathers himself, his shoulders suddenly upright and prepared. His face hardens again.

—Yes. It... IS!

Adrian’s vocalized spit sprays Oscar and Emily’s faces. Oscar steps forward, his palm on Adrian’s chest:

—You did it to yourself man. I’ve read your stuff. Something’s gotta happen for being such a horrible shit to women.

—I don’t know what you’re talking about! This is ludicrous. You’re all a bunch of ... of washed up rednecks, with nothing to do with your time!
Adrian’s closing sermon isn’t believable; his voice, though still loud, has completely deflated.

The audience, many of McMaster’s fans and colleagues included, glance over, though less interested than before. Adrian waves his arms about, talking almost incoherently from that short distance away. Talk about ape shit, Emily thinks, as his upper limbs gesticulate wildly, but nothing that resembles English comes out. Luke steps in and guides Adrian out of the room, through the hall and out of the gallery.

Oscar gives her a glance, as if to say, "Honey, you dodged a bullet by letting him go." Emily considers this. Did she really? Tonight the daggers have fallen around her, but that was something that she worked hard for. *Honest, familiar, your body.* This took longer to shake out of her head. Out of her heart. For an instant, she pities him.

The rest of the evening unfolds in a fairly unremarkable way. Picking up the last of the paper napkins, Magda urges Emily to stop helping out.

—Seriously. I’ve called you a cab. Go outside, see that full moon, wait for your ride to arrive. Take a few moments of silence after tonight’s gong show.

—Thanks Magda.

Emily steps out. There’s a shuffle in the bushes. Adrian props himself up against the brick building.

—Jesus. You scared the shit out of me.

His eyes are bloodshot.
—Why did you do this to me?

—I can’t believe you’re really asking me that.

—What about our talk that night?

—As you got to see here, there was a lot of talk that night.

—You know what I mean. After we, after we made love.

Emily scoffs.

—Made love, really? Since when do you say that?

—I don’t. But I really thought, I do think, that you could be the one.

Emily looks at him, amazed. She pauses and then lights the wrong end of her cigarette. Exhaling the filter, then dropping the ruined smoke, affords her some time to think.

—The one what? The one to put up with all your bullshit, about what women should be? What women are meant to be? That role’s retired from my repertoire. My new philosophy is that douche bags are like buses, it’s only a matter of time before another one comes along.

He peers up at her, sullen.

—I know you think I’m bullshit, but the fact that you went to such great heights to tarnish me, it shows me something. If I actually thought you were like all the rest, do you think I would have gotten those poems published?
Adrian looks over at her; she does not turn her face to his. Her nose and lips are profiled in a sidelong silhouette. The cab pulls up. He knows he’s out of time.

— I showed tonight and you got what you were seeking, no? Just like I got mine?

Grinning up at her, still shaken, he hopes that she’ll recognize his potential.

— Want to share my cab with me?

Adrian nods. He gets up from his place among the perennials. Emily holds his arm and gets him into the cab. She sits next to him in the middle seat and then tells the driver where she wants to go.

— I’m thinking about going as Wonder Woman for Halloween. What do you think?

Adrian smiles.

— I think you’ll look hot.

— Flying really would be my more preferred means of travel.

THE END

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Works Cited


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Stewart 125


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Stewart 127