FURTHER THAN PLUTO:
A NOVEL AND COMPENDIUM BASED ON A REAL CASE
OF A YOUNG WOMAN’S STRUGGLE WITH AUTISM,
COMMUNICATION, AND THE PARADOX OF SIMULTANEOUSLY
INVITING IN AND SHUTTING OUT THE WORLD

by

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Thesis Abstract

This thesis is divided into three texts. The first is a compendium, which situates the major themes of the second text (a fictitious novel) into a scholarly context and delves into the broader academic questions that arise from it regarding the treatment and care of people with special needs. Those themes are put into a context that enables special education teachers to expand their notions about communicating with and understanding their autistic and special needs students. It not only examines my own autobiographical connection to the novel (by the fact that I have a sister with a combination of Down Syndrome and autism) but also extends the themes into a broader context, and looks at typical expectations in families with mentally handicapped members and the various methods and approaches of communicating with them. The third text elaborates on specifics aspects of these themes in an endnote format.
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Compendium

1. **Introduction**

The proceeding thesis has been divided into three sections with distinct functions. The first is an introduction, or compendium piece, to the next section, which is a novel in the traditional sense of having characters who move through a fictitious story line. The aim of this compendium piece is to situate the major themes of the novel into a scholarly context and in so doing, delve into the broader academic questions that might arise from it regarding the treatment and care of people with special needs. The third section expands on particularities within the novel in an endnote format.

2. **Rationale**

The idea of writing an arts-informed thesis has resonated with me very deeply since I first took a class on the subject at OISE. As someone who has always been artistic (I was an actor for ten years and have always maintained an interest in creative writing) and yet who has also felt a strong pull toward academic endeavors, this coupling of the arts and academia fit me perfectly. That some subjects and ideas lend themselves to an arts-informed approach made immediate sense to me and because the subject of mental disabilities is so close to me on a personal level (my younger sister has Down’s Syndrome with aspects of autism), I felt that approaching it on an emotional, arts-based level was the right choice. I could never imagine writing a traditional and clinical account of my sister’s condition because I feel that
would require me to censor the emotions her condition stirs in me, and that would mean negating a vast quantity of my experience.

In “The Enlightened Eye”, Elliot Eisner talks about how our selection of form influences what we will say and experience about our research subject (1998, pg.8). In other words, the poetic form can express and open up ideas that prose cannot, and in turn, prose can express and illuminate ideas that a scientific account cannot. Consequently, making the choice of an artistic medium will shed light on fundamentally different aspects of a topic than will a traditional research method and will no doubt, enable the writer to gain a different understanding of the subject through the process of creation.

I first began the process of writing my thesis by writing poetry about my sister Gretchen (which I will discuss further in the next section) and found the experience to be invaluable. The writing of poetry for me is like trying to express what words paradoxically can’t express; for this reason, I was often surprised by what emerged throughout my writing process. This is largely what made poetry such a dynamic form for me. I found it required me to reach into my unconscious mind and not question what came from it if I sensed it was right. It seems to me that research can only become richer and more thorough when we allow all the different levels of the mind to engage in it. Mary Ann O’Connor comments in her essay in “Portraits in Poetry” about what the experience of writing poetry is like for her.

I often find it liberating not to have to articulate feeling—connections in complete, analytical sentences, but just to work on an image in whatever fragments of speech occur to me. Some things are best said, or most effectively said, in poems. Sometimes the silences, the line breaks, the spacing of words on a
Poetic and literary inquiry embraces ambiguity as a natural part of life, and that was one of the reasons that it was such a good place for me to start. It opened my heart and mind to the subject of my sister and liberated me to follow my instincts without making me feel hemmed in by the need to be logical and to provide hard evidence.

Novel writing, although it shares many of these characteristics, is different in many respects from writing poetry. While it also engages the writer’s unconscious mind, thoughts and ideas in novels have to be structured differently and sustained over the telling of a long story. Novels are more tightly bound to complex organization and logic, therefore, and in this sense at least, have different limitations and demands than poetry. They aim to engage the reader for a longer duration of time, and their different characters and scenes can illuminate a wider variety of perspectives on different situations. I feel this larger scope was vital to the story that I wanted to tell especially in how it relates to the theme of family dynamics. I wanted my readers to have a solid and empathetic understanding of the main character of Simone (who suffers from autism), but I also wanted them to know how she affected the people closest to her. From my personal experience, I know that having a family member who is mentally handicapped can be an intensely alienating and lonely experience in many respects, and I wanted my readers to come as close as possible to actually living that experience themselves. I believe reading a novel (and interacting with other kinds of art forms) is one of the most effective
ways of simulating real life in this way. Eisner makes this point when discussing a novel by Elie Wiesel. “Cadence, image and innuendo, even in [a] few paragraphs, grab and hold us and provide the images through which we can enter the scene vicariously.”(pg.20)Because art can inspire a profound sense of understanding and intimate connection, I feel people may be more likely to take action against the injustices they see in the world around them when those injustices are presented to them artistically as opposed to if they read about them in a research text. Art has a way of getting under a person’s skin and becoming a part of that person in a way that a research text does not.

3. **Significance**

The original ideas that I had for a possible thesis topic, and which I first expressed in an arts-informed research class at OISE in 2005, were sprawling to say the least. I initially wanted to focus my attention on different aspects of language; my background in the theatre arts, my interest in creative writing, the fact that I lived in France for three and a half years and struggled to learn a second language, and that I now teach English as a foreign language to immigrants in Canada, were all factors which contributed to my curiosity about the different and varied modes of communication that we use to exchange and express feelings and ideas. However, in the face of all these potential avenues of exploration, I kept returning in my mind to my younger sister’s lack of language and how sharply that fact made her reality differ from my own. It was only after doing an oral presentation in that class that I finally began to consider making her my sole focus
for a thesis topic. In that presentation, I was surprised to see how my classmates’ interests fixated predominantly on what I had presented about my sister. Yet more than simply gathering facts about her, I sensed that they were genuinely moved by her solitude and difference, and curious about the effect she has had on me and my family. They wanted to know what she has taught us, and how she functions in this modern, ever-more impatient world. It suddenly began to seem more conceivable that, especially when seen through the lens of arts-informed research, Gretchen was a natural choice for a thesis topic—there was so much that people could learn from her and about themselves in comparison to her, and because she is so much a part of me, the topic could be approached with all the heart that makes arts-informed research such an effective form of inquiry. Consequently, and as I have already explained, I began the process with writing poetry about Gretchen until I felt that that was no longer an exact fit with my purposes. However, this was not before I enjoyed some marginal success in this area. To my surprise, five of these poems were published in small magazines in the United States. This accomplishment helped spur me forward, for the reasons that I have already gone into, to switch to a novel format with endnotes and an accompanying compendium to meet the academic standards required for a thesis. Finally, it was only after I reread “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” by Mark Haddon (which tells the fictitious story of a boy with autism living in England), that I heard Simone’s voice for the first time in my head, and wrote it down in the form of a monologue. I was satisfied with it (a slightly reworked version of it now begins the novel), and solidified my decision to make autism the focal condition in the novel, as opposed to
Gretchen’s principle condition of Down’s. I felt the main character needed to be more active than my sister and have a higher brain function in order to carry the story and sustain the readers’ interest throughout. Also, I was fascinated by the savant quality that is prevalent in some people with autism. I wanted Simone to be a sympathetic character but also one who could excite the reader’s intelligence and imagination through her unique ideas, fixations, and obsessions.

In the end, I was also comfortable with not having this be a strictly autobiographical account of my own life experience. I felt that in order to tell a more compelling story, I needed the distance and objectivity that I thought fiction could provide me.

The two major themes, or significations, the novel explores are the family dynamics that can take place when a family includes a member with special needs such as autism or Down’s, and the theme of communication that can challenge these people and their family members. In terms of the first theme, the plot of the book has been designed to help illustrate how having a member of a family with autism can contribute to relationship strain between other members of the family. In the book, Simone’s father left the family when she was still very young, largely because he couldn’t handle his second daughter’s significant behavioral problems. Simone’s mother, Linda, is left on her own consequently, to bring up two daughters, and the burden of this responsibility causes her to abuse alcohol as a self-medicating, flimsy coping strategy. As compensation for her two parents’ dysfunctional behaviors, Simone’s older sister, Rebecca, has to shoulder more than her fair share of responsibility for her younger sister. As a result, she becomes
ultra-efficient and reliable, but this also takes its toll on her quality of life; she dreams of traveling, but her duties tie her to her home, she yearns to socialize to a greater degree than she is able, but time doesn’t allow for it, and she wants to maintain a romantic relationship, but again is challenged to find the space for it in her life.

The second major theme that I want to explore in my thesis takes me back to my original idea of communication, except this time, I focus on the communication that occurs in autism and in my sister’s condition of Down’s. Here, I am seeking to broaden people’s notions of what communication can mean by attempting to validate its various forms. Because people with autism are frequently viewed as being isolated from the outside world, evidence of their unique methods of communication is for me a very exciting idea. There have been several incidences of autistics successfully reaching other people, and one very moving example was shown in the documentary film, “Autism—the Musical.” Here, the filmmaker’s, Elaine Hall’s, autistic son was shown using a keyboard and computer to communicate. With help from the specifically designed instrument, the normally reclusive boy who couldn’t sit still or sustain any prolonged eye contact managed to type out, “Mom, I’m going to put you on the spot. You need to listen better,” in an extraordinarily surprising and dramatic moment. In fact, as he awaited her reaction, he seemed to lose many of his autistic features as he looked straight at his mother in focused anticipation.

Even more extreme examples of communication include the book “Nobody Nowhere,” in which Donna Williams was able to bridge the gap between
her world and the outside, and explain in extraordinarily cohesive terms her experience of being autistic. In fact, I was so struck with her ‘Author’s Note’ at the beginning of her autobiography, that I modified part of its main idea to come up with the title for my thesis. Part of it reads, “This is a story of two battles, a battle to keep out “the world” and a battle to join it. It tells of the battles within my own world and the battle lines, tactics used, and casualties of my private war against others.”(1992, pg.xix) Temple Grandin is another autistic able to write comprehensively about her condition in her book “Animals in Translation” (2005) and offer valuable advice and insight to those dealing with somebody with the disorder.

When looking at communication, I find it fascinating that autism is so frequently accompanied by savantism (in nearly 10% of cases according to Oliver Sacks in “An Anthropologist on Mars” (1995, pg.194)) and for this reason, I chose to endow my main character, Simone, with an element of mystical talent. It seems as though, exemplified through this savantism, people with autism are often able to tap into other levels of the mind of which normal functioning people are not aware. Similar to Temple Grandin, the obsession I have given to Simone is a love and talent for animals. She spouts facts about them throughout the book and makes some episodic sense of her world through living with and studying them. However, the biggest way I explore her savantism is through the device of magical realism shown through the character of Paul, the family cat. The omnipotent narrator can get inside his head, along with the other characters, and hence the reader is able to know his often subtle and intricate thoughts. I wanted him to be a source of humour
and perspective, but most importantly, I wanted him to be the sole character with whom Simone can communicate in an easy fashion. I feel this fits with my novel’s theme of communication very well; animals use their own unique systems to function and communicate in this world in often highly sophisticated ways that are beyond our scope of vision. In certain respects, this uniqueness and mystery is similar to autistics. This is the central theme of Temple Grandin’s book “Animals in Translation” and one that I will plunge into further when I discuss some of the research that I did to write this thesis.

The crisis point and resolution in the novel likewise involve Simone’s obsession. In fact, the novel concludes when, through an incident that shows her love and talent with animals, Simone finally accesses some inner confidence to believe that someday she can live independently from her mother and sister.

4. **Methodology**

The reading, research, and background work that I have dedicated to this thesis has been extensive and far-reaching. To make it more comprehensive, I have classified my research into the following sections.

a) **Arts-Informed Research Methodology**

I have read numerous books on this subject including “The Enlightened Eye” (Eisner 1998), “Provoked By Art” (Cole et al 2004) and an OISE thesis in a novel format, by Doug Gosse. I have also been influenced by Rishma Dunlop, whose novel “Boundary Bay: A Novel as Educational Research” was the first to be accepted
as a PhD thesis and Liz deFreitas, who wrote her thesis as novel in 2002. I have also taken three classes on this subject at OISE: “Arts-Informed Perspectives in Educational Research” (with Ardra Cole), “Play, Drama, and Arts Education” (with Linda Cameron), and an individual reading and research course entitled “Qualitative Research and Application of an Arts-Informed Thesis” (also with Ardra Cole).

b) Novel and Poetry Writing

The research I have done on this subject has included reading “Building Better Plots” (Kernan 1999), “On Becoming a Novelist” (Gardner 1983), and “The Ode Less Travelled” (Fry 2005). I took a class on novel writing at George Brown College entitled “A Novel Idea” (with Rosemary Auber) and met regularly with a friend and mentor to discuss the writing I had accomplished so far.

c) Autism, Down Syndrome, and Disabilities

To give me a solid foundation for understanding autism and other special needs conditions, I have also read widely in this area. Some of the titles include: “Nobody, Nowhere” (Williams 1992), “An Anthropologist on Mars” (Sacks 1995), and the “Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time” (Haddon 2003). In addition, I have followed the on-line depiction of Ian Brown of the Globe and Mail’s story of his son, Walker, who suffers from CFC, a rare and complex genetic disorder. I have also watched several documentary films on the subject of autism, including “Her Name is Sabine” by Sandrine Bonnaire, which was made in 2007, and “Autism: The Musical” by Elaine Hall. I also watched the fictional dramatization of Temple
Grandin’s actual life entitled “Temple Grandin” (2010) by Mick Jackson, which presents the life history and eventual success of the title character. All of these were extremely helpful in enabling me to witness up close how people with autism function in the world and interact with those around them.

d) *Animals*

Because the character of Simone is obsessed with and has become somewhat of an expert on animals, I have also had to read up in this area. Books here include “The Education of KoKo” (Patterson and Linden 1981), “When Elephants Weep: The Emotional Lives of Animals” (Masson and McCarthy 1995), “The Book of Mammals” (National Geographic Society 1981), and “Animals in Translation” by Temple Grandin. I have also studied “Wild” magazine (Canadian Wildlife Federation from Jan/Feb 2007 to current), and read the article entitled “Inside Animal Minds” (National Geographic Magazine, March 2008). When I did a performance art piece for “Nuit Blanche” in September 2007, I included an animal fact section and invited the audience to record their knowledge of animals in a book. I have also taken several trips to the zoo, interviewed a farm veterinarian, and watched several documentaries on animals including “The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill” (2003), and “Dogs that Changed the World” (2007). Finally, I researched the story from the Calgary zoo on which I based the ending of the book about the mother gorilla whose baby was stolen by another female gorilla in her band.
e) **Language**

To aid in my understanding of communication, I have also read several books on language and various forms of communication. Titles among these are “Language and Species” (Bickerton 1990), “The Language Instinct: How the Mind Creates Language” (Pinker 1995) and “Origins of the Modern Mind” (Donald 1991). As well, my regular job as an ESL teacher gives me constant insights into the nature of language and communication, and I have taken note of any comments or insights that might eventually relate to this project.

Finally, largely based on advice I received from my writing mentor and from the book “Building Better Plots”, I did a significant amount of background work before I began the actual writing of this novel. Firstly, I wrote extensive background histories for each main character which included physical descriptions, character traits, how they might be viewed by other characters, personal histories and memories, major life experiences, hopes, desires, financial statuses, relationships to the material world, strengths, and weaknesses. In short, I included everything I could possibly conceive of about the characters in order to know them as much as possible before I situated them into the confines of my plot.

Next, I did two detailed time lines for the two separate families of the major characters that began at the birth of the grandparents for each family. I included dates and general life histories to ensure that all the facts I claimed were logical and did not contradict each other. Then I finalized the overall plot outline.
with a plot beat time line for each major character in the book and numbered them so that the major plot point that affected two different characters would share a number on two separate charts. Then, I transferred all these plot beats onto a master list and was left with a detailed and colour coded (to differentiate between the individual characters) general breakdown of the plot. I originally planned to break the plot down even further into the actual scenes I would write, but after doing that for just five chapters, I felt compelled to begin the writing and only break down the scenes into smaller chunks as I went along.

Also included in my research journal are any conversations, comments, films, art exhibitions, or performances that I have engaged in or heard about that influenced what I wrote or the direction that my novel took. For example, my mother recently shared a memory of hers that I found powerful and significant. She confessed to me that after she had given birth to Gretchen and was still in the hospital, she felt that her life was over. It was Mother’s Day soon after her delivery date, and as it happened, I arrived carrying a plant to give as a gift for her. Apparently, I was beaming from ear to ear and the image was so strong that it created an indelible mark in her mind. Without knowing it, I was able to remind her in this moment that she still had hope, that there were still good things left in the world for her and that her life was far from finished. Compelling conversations such as this, I consider as part of my research process.
5. **Scholarly Context**

I have situated my thesis into an educational academic context largely through the characters of the teachers in this novel. The main character of Patrick (and to a lesser extent, the more minor character of Anna) serves the function of bridging the gap between Simone’s educational environment at her special needs school and the home environment that she returns to every evening with her family. By reading the novel, compendium, and endnotes, I hope that a channel of communication could be forged between these two camps of people who interact regularly and fundamentally with people with special needs. In other words, I hope that special needs educators will be able to learn something of value about the dynamics that might occur in their students’ families lives, and at the same time, I hope that the close relatives of people living with autism will take away a fuller understanding of current trends in special need education and the philosophies that underlie it. This novel explores a tension between these two groups, for example, when Patrick supports the idea of sending Simone to a group home, and Rebecca reacts with horror to the suggestion. My hope is that upon reading this thesis, this type of conflict will be less likely to occur. Up to this point, I feel there have been many academic works written exclusively for special needs professionals and likewise many novels that have delved into the day to day experience of families living with a person with special needs, but rarely have these two groups joined together in a single body of work.

Having this broader scope to my thesis, I hope will also broaden the audiences that will want to engage with it. Because it is about people with special
needs, I hope it will attract professionals who work in this area, but because it is also a novel, I hope its appeal will naturally extend into the general public as well and be more accessible to a greater number of people.

6. **What Autism Is**

Again, because I have chosen to make autism my focal condition in this novel, I have included this section that explores exactly what this elusive condition commonly consists of. Anyone who has done any extensive research or reading on the subject of autism or who has become acquainted with another person afflicted with the disorder can attest to the fact that autism is not a simple condition to pin down. It was first described medically in the 1940s by both Leo Kanner in Baltimore and Hans Asperger in Vienna, who each named it “autism” (meaning “aloneness”) independently of each other because of that predominate feature of the disorder. (pg. 190 Sacks) Other symptoms that are prevalent include rocking, spinning, repetitive movements, and language disorders (ranging from mute—as in 50% of all autistics to outright verbosity, meaningless chatter, or robotic parroting speech). (pg. 242 Sacks) Although no theory exists as of yet that can encompass the entire range of symptoms and phenomena commonly found in autism, it was arguably most comprehensively reduced to three core features by Beate Hermelin and Neil O’Connor in the 1970s. Focusing on the mental structure of autism in a more systematic way, they concluded that all autistics shared:

1. an impairment of social interaction
2. an impairment of verbal and nonverbal communication
3. an impairment of play and imaginative activities. (pg. 245-6 Sacks)

Most scientists and laypeople familiar with the condition would agree with these three broad categories that underlay autism. However, even within these confines, the differences between autistic people can differ radically. This variation is perhaps most sharply seen when comparing the different ways in which Kanner and Asperger viewed the condition. To Kanner, the disorder was severe and debilitating; he equated autism with “retardation” and felt children that fell under this category would inevitably suffer from seizures and repetitive movements beyond their control. As well, their sensory responses would function abnormally—with some responses (such as hearing or smell) being heightened and sometimes even unbearable, while others (such as sensitivity to pain or cold) being lessened or even absent. (pg. 245 Sacks).

Asperger, on the other hand, saw more positive effects to the condition. His studies focused on the savant qualities found in roughly 10% of autistic people; in fact, now people who suffer from a form of autism called Asperger’s, experience fewer neurological disorders than Kanner-type children and generally function on a much higher level. These people all share a natural inherent intelligence and many of them also develop extraordinary talents at a young age. Most of these savants have astonishing powers of memory and many have multiple other talents (often musical, mnemonic, visual-graphic, or computational) (pg.194 Sacks) that seem almost inhuman in development. For example, in “An Anthropologist on Mars”, Oliver Sacks talks about meeting a boy with autism named Stephen who had an extraordinary artistic ability. In one incidence that Sacks describes, Stephen drew a
house from memory after merely glancing at it once. (pg.205) However, unlike “normal” talents, Stephen’s didn’t change or develop over time, it didn’t take on a personal flair but instead remained what it had started off as at the beginning. Stephen also didn’t exhibit the pride or vanity that most artists would about their work, but rather, the talent seemed removed from him and not something he viewed as exceptional.

Although there are many theories about what causes autism, none have been proven. From the very beginning of autism, in fact, its origin has been a matter of dispute. Asperger believed it was a biological defect whereas Kanner thought it was a reflection of poor parenting—especially the result of a cold and distant mother, a blaming diagnosis that was commonly accepted far into the 60s. This was dramatized well in the film “Temple Grandin” about the title character’s life and showed the hurtful consequences that such a belief could have. Nowadays it is generally accepted to be biological, and up until recently, one of the leading hypotheses was that the MMR (Measles, Mumps, and Rubella) vaccine was to blame. However, it has recently been revealed that Andrew Wakefield, the doctor who led this research, had unsubstantial evidence to support his claims and has subsequently been charged with professional misconduct. (The Sunday Times, 2009) It is also possible that the disorder may be acquired. For example, in the 1960s, many babies who were exposed to an epidemic of rubella went on to develop autism. In other cases, such as with Stephen from “An Anthropologist on Mars”, the condition seemed to first come on or at least worsen considerably following an early trauma (in this case, his father’s dying in a motorcycle accident just before his third
birthday). In Temple Grandin’s book, “Animals in Translation”, she discusses how autistic brains are different from “normal” ones. She explains how both sides of the brain are affected in autism and specifically that the frontal lobes are smaller or less developed than they should be, and that the communication between the frontal lobes and the rest of the brain doesn’t function as well as it would in a normal brain.(pg. 56-7)

Finally, a curious point about autism that I wanted to examine briefly here is the fact that we so often hear about autistic children but less often about autistic adults. The reason Oliver Sacks suggests for this is that people who suffer from autism usually develop fair language and social skills and function much better as adults. It’s not that they ever completely outgrow their autism, but in cases that aren’t too severe and don’t require institutionalization, they can often end up living fairly normal lives.(pg. 246)

7. **Autism and Animals**

Finally, because my novel focuses centrally on the autistic character of Simone and the connection that she has to animals, I thought it was essential to spend time looking specifically at the book “Animals in Translation” (2005) by Temple Grandin, which explores this very theme. Temple Grandin has made what would be extraordinary strides in her career and personal life, not just for an autistic, but for anyone. She holds a PhD in animal science, teaches at Colorado State University, has written several books, and runs her own highly successful business. Like other autistics, she has a difficult time understanding other people and
interpreting their sometimes indirect behaviour and facial cues, yet her deep connection and compatibility with animals is nothing short of extraordinary. In her book, she explains how it took her a long time to realize that not everybody instinctively understood animals in the way she did, and she concludes that autistic people are in fact closer to animals in the way they think. For example, autistic people think in pictures, and animals, because they lack language altogether, also rely heavily on their sense of vision.

As I explained earlier, the frontal lobes are smaller or less developed in an autistic brain than they are in a normal person’s. Similarly, the frontal lobes in animals are also smaller than in a normal human adult.(pg. 53) The frontal lobes are used to help us make generalizations, or see the “big picture.” However, because autistic people’s frontal lobes don’t function to their full capacities, these people see only the details of the world around them and sometimes have trouble bringing those images together to make coherent sense. Animals are similar in this regard. They can become distracted or frightened by the smallest details that most of us would overlook. That is why Grandin’s slaughterhouse designs were so effective; she was literally able to see the world the way the animals saw it—in the small details (like a puddle that would reflect sunlight, or a yellow jacket hanging over a fence) that the animals might focus on that could cause them to balk or panic.

Grandin believes that normal human beings are blind to anything they are not paying attention to, but with animals and autistic people, tiny details jump out. This is why she argues that autistic savants can make perspective drawings—because they are drawing exactly what they see. There are other more common
talents that autistics share because of this ability. For example, almost without exception, autistic people score much higher than normal people on something called the "Hidden Figure Task". (pg. 296) If a person is shown a shape and is then asked to find that shape hidden inside of another drawing, an autistic person’s ability to see details makes this task simple. An experiment was done in 1999 at the Centre for the Mind at The Australian National University by doctor Allan Snyder, in which he lowered the frontal lobe function in his non-autistic subjects. He found their drawings became more detailed and they also got better at proofreading, which is ostensibly another form of the Hidden Figure Task. Some subjects commented later that they felt more alert and aware of details. (pg. 301)

Grandin also explains how autistic people and animals are likewise similar in that they have simple and straightforward emotions. Non-autistic people may feel one way and act in another or play games that complicate their emotions. Autistics don’t hide their feelings, and they don’t know how to be ambivalent. Further, she writes about how many autistic people can’t stand being touched although many of them crave it. Again, this is similar to taming a wild or frightened animal.

Fear and anxiety can be a horrible and debilitating problem for many autistics. Their sensory systems are often so scrambled that they cannot make sense of things around them. As well, their fear system is heightened in a way a normal person’s is not, which is again tied to the frontal lobes. The frontal lobes combat fear in two ways. First, they activate the amygdala (which is a structure in the middle of the brain that produces fear). The amygdala then tells the pituitary
gland to produce stress hormones which causes the prefrontal cortex to tell the pituitary to slow down. (pg. 193) The second way is through language. Mental images are more closely connected to fear than words, so thinking in words as opposed to pictures can make people feel less fear. She explains how when a person with post traumatic stress disorder remembers their traumas, the visual areas of their brains light up. In contrast, the verbal areas light up when people’s brains are examined who don’t suffer from PTSD. (pg.194) Again, this is similar to animals. An animal who has suffered a bad fear especially at an impressionable age, will never unlearn it, presumably because the fear is always remembered visually.

8. Conclusion

This concludes the compendium section of my thesis. I would like to request that the next section (ie. the novel) be read all the way through—in other words, without stopping at the references and skipping ahead to the end notes. I put the endnotes specifically at the end as opposed to making them foot notes because I wanted the novel to be read as a whole piece without interrupting its flow and inherent rhythm. Once it is finished, the endnotes can be read and the reader can skip back to the novel to see what is being referred to.
Novel

PART ONE

1.

Sometimes when I go into my room in the day my cat Paul is sleeping with his head and his whole body and everything right under the covers.1 And the thing is that it's hard to see him there and so somebody could sit down on him or even jump onto the bed really hard and really hurt him or even kill him, maybe. I told him that but he just grumbled and told me to mind my own business. He's really cranky lately.

I'm writing this in the furnace room in the basement of our house. I'm doing that because my mom says I'm quirky. When she first said that I screamed and I threw my dinner plate onto the floor because I didn't want to eat the broccoli anyway and my sister had to hold my arms down because I flung them all around. But then she made me chamomile tea later and when she put me to bed she explained that it's good to be quirky and my mom didn't mean to be mean and even though I didn't believe her at first, now I do and so I think it's okay.

I like the furnace room anyway. The furnace makes a hum sound and there's all stuff in boxes around from the past and a mannequin to make dresses that I sometimes like to hug when I feel sick or like when things are in the wrong place and Paul's litter box is in here, too. I don't like that though because his b. movements smell really bad sometimes.

Simone is my first name and that's what everybody calls me. My second name is Emily and I don't know why I have it because nobody ever calls me that and
my third name is Malmquist, which is also known as my last name. And it’s also called my surname or family name or even maiden name if I was married except I’m not. It’s Swedish because that’s what my mom is. Rebecca and I used to be Rebecca and Simone Broadside but when my dad left when I was a kid, our mom made us change our names. I’m twenty-one years old and my cat Paul is my best friend. I like to draw and learn about animals and eat cakes and cookies and other brown things and sometimes I like dogs, too, but I never tell that to Paul because he’d get mad at me and that’s for sure. Usually I’m good but sometimes I’m quirky, too, like once my mom and my sister took me to our cottage which is on an island in Lake Simcoe and you have to take a boat across but one day there was a storm and Doug the ferry guy who drinks beer in a paper cup said we couldn’t go. But that never happened before and they started to take all the stuff out of the boat and that just made me feel weird and sick and so I didn’t budge. And Doug and my sister and Doug’s cousin had to all try to get me out and then I was screaming and crying and hitting with my arms and after my mom was mad and my sister cried in the car on the way home so that’s how I know one time I was really quirky. And my mom says there’s other things that make me quirky, too. For example not talking to people is something I sometimes do, not because I can’t, but also I don’t like to anyway and sometimes it gets so long that I think I even forget how. But I don’t know why people talk anyway. Like my sister and my mom just always scream at each other and not talk so I don’t know what good it is. And when you don’t talk people leave you alone, and I like that. But it’s not true anyway because I talk to Paul all the time and I like talking to him because he’s funny and it’s
easy. And one day when I’m older I’m going to work in a zoo and live on my own and then I won’t need to talk to anyone if I don’t want to. And I like that idea.

2.

Linda had her head buried in her left hand, while her right clutched the red cordless telephone to her ear. She kept one yellow pant leg tucked up onto the thinning leopard skin velvet cushion that covered the stool she was sitting on at her kitchen counter, as her other foot tapped a nervous rhythm onto the metal bar that braced the chair’s lower half. This was the pose she assumed when she was trying to muster patience for the incompetencies of those around her. In this case, and in many others in the past, she reflected bitterly, the staff at her daughter’s school.

“Look,” she sighed as she tried to control the flash of anger that her caller’s last comment had provoked in her. “I don’t care who was supposed to be having their break at what time, okay? I just want to know why my daughter wasn’t being supervised when we all know-” and here her voice cracked with emotion, “that she obviously needs it pretty well constantly, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes, Linda, I-”

“And I’d also like to know why Rebecca is always being told about these sorts of problems before I am! I’m Simone’s mother! Or did you people forget that?”

Linda’s fury caused her to stand up now and begin to pace the grey and white tiles of her kitchen floor, past the two full plastic grocery bags that had been steadily warming to room temperature on the counter since Linda arrived home with her daughter, Simone, and seconds later, dashed for the phone. The china teacups
rattled in their forest green wall cabinet each time her heavy footsteps clumped past them, and the black and white photographs of Bermuda, which marked the only trip that the family had taken together as a group ten years earlier, threatened to bounce off the wall.

Having heard the commotion, Paul, the family cat, sauntered into the room, and sat himself down at the doorway to the kitchen. He fixed his green eyes onto his owner and tried to decipher what in God’s name had brought her to this level of hysteria. Another family drama of some kind, it seemed. And more than likely, he surmised, one that involved Simone.

“No, of course we haven’t forgotten that, Linda. We just-”

“You just what?” Linda snapped. “You just think she’s a better caregiver to Simone than I am?”

Anna forced a laugh on the other end of the phone. As Simone’s principle teacher of the past six years, she tried extra hard to steady her nerves. It was in moments like these that she cursed the diplomatic good nature she’d inherited from her Quaker parents. As far as she could tell, it only saddled her with dealing with difficult personalities like Linda’s. “Of course not, Linda! Nobody’s saying anything of the sort. We’re just trying our best to prepare Simone for living an independent life some day like she really wants. She’s bound to make some mistakes along the way, but in the meantime she has to know that hitting other classmates is unacceptable.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I didn’t get an earful from Mr. Breakerman the last time Simone hit his stupid kid? Well, I can tell you that I most
certainly did. And it’s for that reason that I can heartily assure you that Simone is never going to live independently one day! And she doesn’t need people like you to encourage her to believe that she will! In fact, I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. She’ll live with me until the day I die, and then if she’s still around after that, she’ll live with her sister. And people like you and your staff will continue to do a mediocre job making money off of our shitty misfortune! That’s what’ll happen!”

Paul noticed the slight weave in his own walk as she stomped westward now and toward the back of the house, before he spotted the glass of scotch sitting on the kitchen counter in front of where Linda had been sitting moments before. So that’s it, he thought, and instinctively, he glanced at the clock hanging lopsidedly on the orange wall. Ten after four. It’s a bit early in the day, even for her. She must be having a particularly bad day. Humans, he shook his head inwardly in disbelief. I’ll never be able to figure that one out.

Linda seemed to sense the thought vibrations dancing through the kitchen air, because in an instant, she remembered her drink and sipped at it greedily. As the sting of the scotch hit the back of her throat, and its clean, expansive after taste tingled inside her mouth, she began to feel instantly calmer. She leaned against the fridge and inadvertently shuffled around several photographs that were tacked up on its door. Some of Simone’s letter magnets fell to the floor, and if you tilted your head at the right angle, Paul noted, spelled out “bonz”.

Anna attempted a halfhearted, vague defense of herself and her organization, but Linda cut her off before she got past two indistinct syllables. Then gesticulating widely with her drink hand, Linda felt as though the situation now called on her to
take some control. “Anna—I’m tired of this conversation now, all right? I always find it’s the same old thing with you and your staff. And I just don’t have the energy for it at the moment.”

Anna held her breath a moment before answering, trying to remember the bigger, humour-filled picture and then glanced up at her glass office window, through which one of her volunteers had suddenly appeared and was signaling Anna to join her in the lobby. Instantly, that struck her as a brilliant idea. She’d been doing the “keep good parental relations” bit long enough (or in this case “keep any parental relations”), and now she was needed to do her job for real. She jumped at Linda’s opening and tried her best to be exemplary. “Yes, all right Linda. Will do. You take care and we’ll be in touch soon.”

The two women hung up their respective receivers, each feeling relieved to be free of the conversation. Anna was left to join her staff members, most of who were huddled around little purple-faced Megan who was having a tantrum in a corner of the school’s front lobby, while Linda took in the temporary silence of her kitchen. Paul watched as she wandered over to the French doors that overlooked her postage stamp of a backyard. Twenty-two years she’d lived in this house, and still she had never gotten around to getting these doors properly insulated. She could feel the chill of the wind as it seeped through the cracks. She could hear it, too. Howling and whistling and whisking the rain along its back like some sort of invisible frenzied animal. Thank God she wasn’t out in this, she thought. Thank God this treacherous day was finally coming to a close. Work had been an absolute nightmare, and now it was Simone.
She sighed and, spying the grocery bags on the counter, remembered that Rebecca wouldn’t be home to make dinner tonight. Goddamn, I have to do everything myself, she grumbled to herself. She walked up to the bags and peered inside them. A limp-looking celery stalk stared back at her and left her feeling wholly uninspired by any dinner prospects. Sighing, she dragged her tired frame of bones to the bottom of the stairs and stood still a moment before filling her lungs with air.

“Simone!” she bellowed. “Whaddaya want for dinner?”

3.

All everybody kept asking me for so long was why I’m always so bad at school. And after I hit Flora Breakerman for the second time, it was like they even forgot about everything else in their own lives and just started asking me about that one thing. And I don’t even know why that time was so special anyway. Then it got so’s that when I closed my eyes, I could hear their voices saying it and sometimes I could see their lips moving, too, even in close up or in slow motion like a horror movie. And sometimes when the movie got really scary there would be snakes and toads coming out of their mouths and I’d have to bang my head against the wall to get those pictures out. Then they’d say things like “Why Simone? Why did you do to her like that? What did she did to you? Why’d you do it on that day? Why’d you do it at that time?” And what’s funny for me but not to anyone else so my sister says is that I don’t know why. I don’t even know why I did that and now I don’t even like to think of it.
I’m Simone. I’m twenty-one years old and what I do like to think about is animals when they’re happy and strong and things about them that maybe people don’t know already. Like did you know that tigers don’t just have striped fur but also striped skin? Or that a chameleon can make its eyes separate so it can look at a leaf and a bug at the same time? My aunt Gwennyth bought me a book about mammals with photographs and writing and stuff because she wanted to make me feel better after my dad left when I was a kid, and ever since I made it into a hobby to collect facts about all different animals. And now I know so much stuffs about animals that I want to work in a zoo someday and live by myself because that’s my dream for my future. And animals are important because it’s not just people in the world, which is something I think sometimes regular people forget. And anyway people are just other types of animals. And that’s a funny thing to forget, too.

4.

It was a dreary Wednesday afternoon at 1:45 the day that Simone hit Flora, and at the same time on the Thursday directly following, Rebecca had her kid sister clad in her yellow rain gear, strawberry ice cream cone in hand, and walking out of the car toward the zoo that was tucked off in the east end of town. Rebecca thought it was best to keep Simone home from school that day, and as long as she didn’t have to have anything else to do with the outing, her mother concurred. Sometimes just taking a break and getting out, indulging her sister in the things she loved to do (the zoo was Simone’s favourite place to be) helped open her up, Rebecca thought. Besides, it was a lovely fall day; despite Simone’s insistence on wearing her rain
jacket, the sun was glowing a golden light onto the shining coloured leaves and soaking up the last bit of moisture still left behind from the rainfall they'd had earlier that morning.

It was in fact the perfect setting for an honest to goodness heart to heart, which was exactly what Rebecca hoped to extract from her sister that day. A heart to heart would revitalize her, she felt; hell—it would revitalize both of them. Rebecca certainly had her own reasons for wanting to clear her head. Yes—a pair of zoo tickets, a walk between sisters, a real talk (which at times like these, Rebecca liked to delude herself into thinking was an easy feat to accomplish with Simone) was in order for the both of them. Rebecca flattered herself into believing that Simone only really felt comfortable sharing the secrets of her soul with her older sister. That only a person with Rebecca’s sensitivity and keen intelligence could know how to handle all of Simone’s quirkiness and particularities.

Thinking these thoughts, Rebecca glanced tenderly over at Simone, who was walking silently along the sidewalk beside her, looking considerably younger than her years in her yellow jacket, clutching her strawberry ice cream cone, and wearing her somber, even scowling expression. Rebecca thought of how to begin the heart to heart, and paying for their tickets, they went inside.

“So tell me, chickadee,” Rebecca tried with a warm smile that lit up the large brown eyes now mischievously animating her pale face, “what's up with you and this Flora girl, anyway? Is she mean to you, or what? Why don’t you like her?”
Simone stared straight ahead and only a slight flinch of her face betrayed anything that could be called emotion. “Mmm,” was her only response. Rebecca would obviously have to try harder.

“So?” She waited. “Simone, I asked you a question.”

But Simone was too busy eyeballing the two American eagles that lorded over the entrance to the zoo like bouncers at a nightclub to take in her sister’s question. “American eagles mate for life, you know.”

“Oh yeah?” Rebecca indulged her sister for a moment.

“And not many people know that they are strong swimmers, too.”

Rebecca looked at the majestic birds with momentarily interest. But quickly, she brought herself back to the issue at hand. “Simone. So why don’t you like Flora?”

This time Simone took the bait. “Who said I didn’t like her?”

“Well nobody, I guess. But I assumed you didn’t because, well Simone,” Rebecca could think of no way to cushion the harsh facts, “because you’ve hit her twice now.”

“I like her okay. I mean, I don’t really like her, but I don’t not like her also.”

“Hmm…” Rebecca pondered this bit of nonsensical wisdom, one of her sister’s typically obtuse answers as she squinted back at the birds. The larger of the two eagles seemed to search out her eyes just then and fixed her with what Rebecca could have sworn was an accusatory look. She turned back to Simone and noticed that her sister’s ice cream had begun to melt down onto her hands in a pink sugary rush. “Oh honey—careful with that!” She snatched the ice cream away, and Simone
barked out angrily in protest—not especially because she wanted to eat the gushing
dessert but rather because she’d become accustomed to holding it. And there was
also the fact that she didn’t like to be touched. A pale family with bright red haired
twins looked over at them suspiciously.

“Sorry,” said Rebecca, glancing around like a criminal first at the family and
then at the bird as she realized yet again that she had crossed this barrier without
thinking. She handed over a napkin for Simone to wipe herself off. Somehow these
heart to heart talks always took on an entirely different flavour in Rebecca’s
imagination. When she described the special relationship she shared with Simone
to some of her friends, it frequently brought tears to her eyes to explain how
differently they operated together as sisters, how unique and profound was their
connection. But if the truth be told, when it came to relating to her sister in practice,
Rebecca found herself at her wit’s end in no time. She wanted a good relationship
with Simone, it was true, but the journey toward getting there was downright
treacherous. And still she found herself sacrificing so much for her. She’d turn
down social invitations in order to stay home and baby sit. She’d make meals all the
time, pick up her sister at school, shop for her, break up her fights, defend her, and
fret about her. When people came over, there was always the song and dance of
introducing them to Simone, and occasionally, there were those prospective friends
and boyfriends who got scared off when they realized just how much time Rebecca
had to spend with her.6 That was particularly painful. Most of her classmates at
school now lived on their own, but even though she was twenty-three, that
possibility still seemed remote for Rebecca. It was true that her mother drove her
crazy, but she usually felt that looking after her sister was a kind of sacred duty. And that knowledge, that connection with something higher than herself, kept her focused on the important stuff. And as an actress and future winner of the Pulitzer poetry prize, she had no choice but to focus all of her attention all of the time on the important stuff.

They were on their way to the African Pavilion when they passed several large cow-like animals pacing around at the back of their outdoor pens with their backs facing the spectators. Rebecca felt almost paralyzed with boredom suddenly but tried not to show it. They stopped in front of two large bison asses and stood watching them for a moment in silence. “Everyone’s eating bison meat now,” Rebecca offered rather lamely, mostly to break the silence, but also, as she often did, to invite her sister to share some of her infinite knowledge about animals.

“That’s because bison meat is healthier than beef. It’s low in cholesterol and fat, it has omega-3s and can even fight cancer, some people think. The Indians ate so many around 1900 that bisons nearly became extinct. At one point, there were only thirteen left.”

“Really? And how many are there now?”

“300,000.”

“Hmm…” Rebecca mulled this fact over in her mind but was mostly preoccupied by the fact that Simone was able to fit all these extraordinarily mundane details into her strange little mind. They moved on into the African Pavilion, which was where the gorillas were, Simone’s favourite. She made a beeline for them as soon as they entered. Inside the pen were six large gorillas lazily
preening each other in two groups, and two smaller gorillas that were climbing up the jungle gym, swinging on a rope, and then sliding down a long firefighter’s pole over and over again. Simone got an excited look in her eye and found an empty spot on the bench that didn’t touch anyone else. Settling herself into it, she dug her hands deeply into her pockets and leaned forward expectantly.

5.

The next afternoon, Simone and her mother sat together in the family car, and Linda used the closed-in space as an opportunity to berate her daughter.

“And I don’t want to see you ever doing anything like that again, do you hear me?”

“Mm.”

“She’s younger than you, Simone. And smaller. How would you like it if some bigger person than you came around and just walloped you out of the blue like that? All unprovoked like that? Hmm? It’s like your goddamned frog incident all over again!”

“Mm.”

“And I’ve damn well never seen Mr. Breakerman mad as all that, Simone. And he should be mad, frankly. I would be if I was him. Maybe more mad, even. Last time he kind of forgave you in the end, but this time he seems a lot less willing to. And that poor wimpy Flora girl didn’t even come downstairs the whole time we
were there. Did you even notice that, Simone? You’re gonna hafta play extra sweet
to her when you go back to school, you realize.

“Mm.”

“Don’t you just ‘Mm’ me. Mm, Simone? Dja hear what I’m saying to you?”

“Mm.”

“What did I just say?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? I said yeah? Did I say yeah?”

“No.”

“I said you have to be nice.” Linda frowned and shook her head as she made
a left turn onto a one-way street going in the opposite direction. A young
Portuguese man stuck his head out of the window of his yellow car and yelled at her.

“Hey—wrong way, lady!”

“Goddamn it!” Linda backed up until she got to a cross street, and then made
an extra wide right turn that clipped the curb as she passed it and sped down the
street. The Portuguese man had evidently also backed up to the side street and was
still yelling at her. Linda adjusted her mirror so she couldn’t see him anymore.

“Okay, then. Now once we get home you’re sending them an email and
apologizing again for the shitty goddamned behaviour you displayed to that
spineless kid of his.”

“Bu—”

“This isn’t a discussion, Simone. Now your sister can help you with it if you
need. I’ve got too much shit to do. Plus I’m feeling like hell.”
6.

Linda went to work that following Monday morning late and hung over and feeling wholly preoccupied by her disaster of a second daughter. In fact, her distress had gotten to the point that she was muttering to herself under her breath without entirely being aware of it. “What am I going to do with you? Totally Jesus out of control. Total damn nuisance. Why do I always get saddled with all the hardship? Fuck-up of a husband, fuck-up of a daughter.”

Her friend Georgia noticed the sad state she had worked herself into and watched Linda from a distance for a while as Linda struggled with the usually straightforward task of putting on her uniform in the nurse’s station. At first, Georgia found it rather funny that Linda was too absorbed in her own head to notice her standing there, but after it went on too long, it grew awkward and eventually worrisome.

“Honey?” she queried finally in her thick Brazilian accent. “You okay?”

“Hmm? What? Oh hey. You standing there long? Having fun standing there judging me?”

“No, Linda, I—”

“You what? Oh never mind, sure yeah, I’m fine. It’s my goddamn daughter again. Little twit takes it out of me every time.”

“What Rebecca? But she such a good kid! She having school problems?”

“No, not Rebecca! Simone, you know, the crazy one.”

“Oh Simone, yeah. She crazy!”
Linda dragged herself through the rest of the morning but once she promised herself a lunchtime drink or two to help make it through the afternoon, she managed to perk herself up somewhat. It wasn’t like she did that very often, she reasoned, but today was shaping up into one of those exceptional days. As bad luck would have it, though, she ran straight into her boss in the hallway just after returning from “Cool John Fridays”, and she was still feeling a slight buzz from the three cranberry coolers that she had sucked back so enthusiastically.

“Oh Linda!” his voice boomed down the hallway with its unmistakable ring of fatigued authority.

Linda felt herself shrink inside her blush-pink uniform. Oh God—not this now, she thought to herself. But instead of buckling under the pressure, she steeled herself and put on her best boss-appropriate frozen smile. “Mr. Winters,” she nodded professionally.

Unfortunately again for Linda, Mr. Winters didn’t like to yell down hallways. Instead, he shuffled his hunched person down the hallway toward her in his bored and languid fashion. Linda waited with her hand fixed on the doorknob to Mrs. Jeffrey’s and Mrs. Bernstein’s room, when it suddenly occurred to her that her breath must still reek of cranberry cooler and the meager bites of onion-y enchilada that had accompanied it. Balancing the two lunch trays in one hand, she frantically reached for the hard mint candy that she kept in her right hand pant pocket for just such an occasion and tried desperately to open up the wrapping with one hand. Finding she couldn’t, she plopped the lunch trays artlessly down to the floor almost without thinking, unwrapped the candy, and popped it eagerly into her mouth. Mr.
Winters happened to look up just as Linda appeared most guilty, and he narrowed his yellow wolf-like eyes at her suspiciously. Then without taking his glassy beads off of her, he seemed to hold his breath until he arrived face to face with her. There, he continued to stare at her for a moment and let his full breath out before he finally spoke.

“You put in a request for a day off the Friday after this one.”

“That’s right.” Linda was afraid to speak too much now that her boss was within smelling range of her breath and even attempted to breathe in as the words tumbled out of her mouth.

“I can’t grant it to you. Both Michelle and Gregor from your department have already requested that day, and as you know, two absentees is our maximum for a Friday late shift.”

“I see. All right, then.”

Mr. Winters paused as if he was considering whether to follow through on a hard line of questioning about the unmistakable odour of alcohol hovering in the air around Linda’s mouth, but evidently he thought better of it. Instead, he slowly and purposefully breathed in the syrupy air another time before he turned and shuffled away without saying goodbye.

7.

Today I had to go back to school again because it was Monday, and I wasn’t allowed to have more time off than Monday, and the teacher also had to talk to me because I was the one who hit Flora. And if I knew that people would never stop
bothering me about it, then I probably never would have even done that anyway. But I did and so I had to talk to three teachers about it today and Gabriella the volunteer also had to follow me around everywhere I went. And I didn’t like that because most of the time I just like to be alone so that no one will bother me. And Gabriella always asked me questions like, “Are you okay?” and “Do you feel angry today?” and “What else can you do when you feel angry?” that I didn’t want to answer. And she even asked me one time about when I killed that frog when I was six after my dad left because the psychiatrix said that I was upset but I don’t even remember that and anyway I don’t like to think of a time when I was mean to animals because that’s like another me that I don’t even understand or know about. But she kept on asking about that until I felt I even wanted to give Gabriella a good wallop but then I thought that it just wasn’t worth it because probably people would never stop talking about it if I did. When I told that to Anna, she said that’s called progress, but I don’t really get what she means by that anyway. But on Monday and Tuesday and even on Wednesday I hated going to school so much that I was planning that maybe if I hit someone again, maybe if I did that again, then I wouldn’t have to go back forever again for as long as I live. But everything changed on Thursday anyway, when Patrick came to the school and I just forgot about school in a bad way at least for a while.

8. Rebecca arrived at her school early on that Monday morning and also couldn’t get Simone out of her mind. In fact, to her it seemed as though her sister
had transformed herself into a tiny insect that had lodged herself into Rebecca’s inner ear. So whenever Rebecca tried to have other thoughts, say about her own life, they would be interrupted by this miniature insect version of Simone, who would whisper to her, “Don’t forget about me, Rebecca” “You have to look after me, you know.” “How are you ever going to get a boyfriend one day, how are you ever going to be a poet or actress with me around?” In the really bad moments, Rebecca swore she could feel it laughing and clapping its pleased little insect hands together.

The timing of this distracting and nightmarish fantasy was particularly irksome to Rebecca. She had arrived at school early on that Monday morning in order to get better prepared for the audition that she was scheduled to have after school that day. But during her line run, she found she couldn’t concentrate. In fact, she spent most of the time griping to her friend Jill about how hard it had been to get Simone on the bus that morning and how she felt like her mother wasn’t doing any of the work. Jill listened and occasionally offered some unhelpful comments like, “Wow—is your mom always such a bitch in the morning?” and “Oh my God, I’m so glad my sister isn’t special needs!” Finally, it was five to nine and Rebecca had to hustle off to class without having gotten much done.

But it wasn’t until she was sitting outside the auditorium at 3:00, waiting for the audition to begin that her poorly spent time really hit home. It was for the part of Juliet in Romeo and Juliet, which was, as luck would have it on this worst of occasions, one of her favourite plays. She normally felt that she would be one of the obvious choices for the lead, but this year to top off the day she was having, a problem by the name of Brenda Callaghan had arrived at her theatre school and had
thrown everything into doubt for Rebecca. Brenda Callaghan, who was sitting across from Rebecca outside the audition hall as she waited, was pretty and confident and unshakably blonde. She’d shown up with a whole list of theatrical credentials behind her, and her haughty and superior attitude didn’t let you forget that for one minute. And to make matters worse, not only had she caught the attention of Steve McCowan at the school dance last week (Rebecca had been trying to win his affections for months), but now it was obvious that the rumours about her were true: she also had her heart set on the part of Juliet.

Rebecca couldn’t help but feel more and more like a failure as she sat there on the cold hallway floor, avoiding the shining light of competition in Brenda’s eyes and pretending to read over the balcony scene monologue that it was now painfully obvious she had memorized poorly. There was no way she was getting this role, she told herself. There was no way she would ever find herself in a relationship with Steve McCowan. She was washed up, a failure at twenty-three. And that special needs sister of hers was largely to blame.

9.

On Thursday I first saw Patrick at my school, and when I saw him that first time, I felt really scared of him. He was tall and he was a boy and even though he tried to talk all gentle to me, my heart went really fast when he got too close, so Anna said I was like a rabbit. And that’s funny because I am like a rabbit sometimes when I’m scared because rabbits run away as fast as they can go if they think someone is after them and sometimes I do that, too, like when Walter drove the bus
the first day and nobody even explained why Antonio wasn’t there anymore. And when he came out to say hello, I just ran and ran as hard as I could for two whole blocks until Rebecca caught me and told me that Walter was a nice man and everything was okay. But still she rode in the bus with me because sometimes it takes me a while to be sure. But then I’m also not like a rabbit because rabbits only live for an average of one year in the wild and I’m already twenty-one years and girl rabbits sometimes have thirty babies in one year and I don’t even have any. So I’m not like a rabbit at all like that.

And Patrick wore green and brown sandals on that first day and I saw his toes looked big and they had black hairs on them. And then on the second day he had a brown shirt with snaps on it and on his pockets there was a cowboy riding a horse and the horse didn’t want the cowboy on his back because he was trying to buck him off like they do at a rodeo and so I decided I didn’t like his shirt and I decided I didn’t like him, either, because he was wearing it and not even thinking about how those horses felt. Then the third day he had on a green shirt with a moth hole in the back of it which made me laugh secretly, except that was also the day when he tried to sit near me when I was looking at my animal books and so I stopped laughing and instead I started to scream and cry and throw my books around until he left. Then Anna came and read my books with me and called me a rabbit and made me feel better. And on the red shirt day and the black shirt day, he didn’t try to come close to me at all which made me feel happy, but I still felt his eyes were looking at me from across the playroom, so I made my angry face at him two times and he stopped.
That entire week proved to be one of those that seemed like it would never end for Linda. After her encounter with Mr. Winters on Monday, she was even more on edge for the rest of the day than she had been before her lunchtime indulgence. Which was exactly contrary to the point. A headache crept into her temples on Tuesday and was joined by heart palpitations on Wednesday. She was familiar with all these signs and knew that just a little shot of something hard would ease the building tension in an instant. She had done that at work before when it seemed, as it did now, that home and work pressures were building in tandem and were simply becoming too much for her. But now she was fairly certain that Mr. Winters was suspicious of her and that made sneaking a little something a considerable risk.

So she resisted. Or rather, she tried to. She managed to get through her rounds of changing bed pans without too much heartache, then it was a couple of sponge baths, but sometime before she had to administer her daily medications on Wednesday afternoon, she felt she was really losing steam. That’s when her floor manager stopped her in the hallway.

“Linda! Just the person I’m looking for!”

“Oh yeah?” Linda’s heart sank as she turned around to meet the perky rodent face of her floor manager, Megan.

“Glenn had to leave early today because he’s feeling fluish. Could you cover for him until eight?”

“Eight? Well, actually—I...”
“It would be a big help, Linda. And he mentioned that you owed him from last week?”

Of all people, Mr. Winters appeared from around the corner like a lion emerging from tall grass to pounce on an unsuspecting zebra. He seemed to have been hovering around a lot of corners since his encounter with Linda in the hall earlier that week.

“Working late today, Linda?” he asked—the cocky challenge behind the question was unmistakable to Linda.

“That’s right.” Linda turned and tried to look him squarely in the eye. “I owe Glenn from last week, apparently.”

And that was enough to do her in. Linda was now in such an unshakably rotten mood it was like she gave off the stink of it to anyone who came close to her. Her desire for a drink was becoming all-consuming now that she actually felt like her body needed it in order to function at its optimum. She’d gotten away with it (albeit just barely) on Monday, and Mr. Winters was probably going home with everyone else at five. Coming out of one of the rooms, she scanned the hallway for some signs of activity. There wasn’t any. The floor usually got considerably quiet after five, and she made the decision in an instant. Sneaking off to her locker in the change room, she grabbed her purse and hauled it into the washroom stall, where her lips pressed eagerly against the mouth of her flask. She drank the scotch with a relief she could feel penetrating through to her very bones.

Her mood improved considerably after that. Her headache dissolved, and her brain felt cushioned in warmth and serenity. Her muscles relaxed, and she felt
as though she could now get through to eight o’clock. But as she worked preparing
the medications for Glenn’s patients, an image of her second daughter flashed in her
mind’s eye and despite this change in mood, wouldn’t dislodge itself from her mind.
She was looking away, of course, and her eyes looked fearful under that weak and
elusive smile. In almost all the images she had of Simone, even in the ones she
conjured up in her imagination apparently, her daughter was looking away. And yet
she never seemed to be looking at anything, either.8 Somewhat ironically as she
thought of this, Linda’s own eyes glazed over and became stuck resting on the metal
handle to one of the kitchen cupboards where she stood. She unwrapped a mint
candy and popped it into her mouth, still unable or unwilling to unlock her gaze
from that hypnotizing hinge. This was her third day back at school after hitting
Flora, and she was making it obvious to everyone around her that she hated every
second of being back. Why did she always do things like this? Why was she always
upsetting things when they seemed to return to even a shaky semblance of status
quo? But what else could Linda have done for her? Leonard scampered away like a
scared weasel when Simone was just six years old, and Linda had been left alone to
bring up two kids on her own. And not just any two kids. Simone was at least
double the work of a regular kid all by herself. Maybe even triple.

The door handle suddenly squeaked behind her and Caroline from the
maternity ward marched in, head held high and humming a show tune to herself
and startled Linda back into the present. She nodded at her, remembering the
scowling face she was supposed to be showing the world, and picked up her tray to
go.
11.

When Patrick brought in Mila everything seemed different to me, and I’m not really sure why. Maybe it was because I never saw a bird in real life before that I could touch if I wanted to and listen to her sing up close like that. And also I like budgies, too, because they are special. They can see a hundred and fifty images in one second and people can only see sixteen, which means that there are lots of things that they probably know about that people don’t know. Sometimes before my last day at school I used to like to sit in the corner and pretend to be her, even, and I pretended to see things that other people can’t see, like little dots in front of my eyes that I see if I cross my eyes a little and squint. Also she had beautiful green feathers and she sat on his finger, which I liked and pecked at his mouth like she was giving him kisses, which I didn’t like because I don’t like it when a human or even an animal or bird tries to kiss me. And that’s when Patrick and I talked a little for the first time, but kind of to the bird and not to each other, so I didn’t feel too scared which was good. But anyways, I don’t like to think about Mila and school and all that now.

12.

Patrick started his new job on a Monday in late October but was too overwhelmed by it at first to be able to distinguish any of his students as individuals. In fact, he was too overwhelmed to be able to distinguish much of anything at all—including the playroom from the reading area or the washroom from the cafeteria.
This could have been disastrous for the new hire, but he managed to cloak his unease under a veil of professionalism he’d learned from his parents. This had worked for him in the past and was proving to be mostly effective this time around. And despite how Patrick felt, both the staff and the students were convinced that he had it together. And it’s true that he was getting the hang of things slowly. There was a lot to learn about how this place ran and how to work with his new boss, Anna, who he’d heard so much about at the last place he worked. But it still took him a good week and a half to be able to let his guard down. That was when he first noticed Simone.

Anna had taken some of the other employees off the school premises to attend a board meeting, leaving Patrick alone with the students for the first time. It wasn’t that Anna’s presence was a particularly stressful one for Patrick; on the contrary, as far as bosses went, she was quite reasonably laid back and understanding of the blunders that especially her new employees might make. But nevertheless, this was when some of Patrick’s real personality began to emerge—the joking, jovial, light-heartedness so many people were drawn to him for.

It all happened quite spontaneously. He was taking a plastic bottle of apple juice out of the refrigerator and felt several sets of serious eyes settling on him and watching his every move. In the past whenever he found himself in situations like these, his knee-jerk reaction was to break the tension with a joke. And this moment was no different. That same mischievous urge that had compelled him to pretend he was blind for three whole days when he had a supply teacher in grade four began to rise up in him, and suddenly he found himself making a big show of losing his grip
on the bottle and dropping it clumsily to the floor. It’s not like it was one of his better clownish moments, but it was the one that took hold of him in the moment, and once he started the routine, he had no choice but to follow through on it. In spite of its predictability and lack of finesse, it seemed to do the trick of shocking the more “with it” students into a reaction. For a second, most of them were astonished and clearly seemed to expect a loud smash of glass against the hard wooden floor. But judging from Patrick’s playful and exaggerated reaction, some of the more quick-witted ones understood that he knew all along the bottle was plastic and that he was just having fun. Several of these students broke into smiles. Some even laughed. But it was Simone’s reaction that really stayed with Patrick and set her apart from the others in his mind.

She gaped down at the floor without a shred of self-consciousness and for a second, it looked as though she was going to burst into tears. Her eyes welled up in a misty lens and pinkish blotches appeared in patches on her cheeks and around her eyes. She looked down at the bottle and then in nothing short of bewilderment, turned her flabbergasted eyes up at Patrick. For a second, it occurred to him that he’d made an irreparable mistake, and he stared back at her, temporarily at a loss as to what to do. Then he gave her a goofy smile hoping it would act as a buffer to soften the insensitive blow, and to his delight and relief, Simone’s stony stare melted away, and suddenly, she let out a hearty laugh that was so uninhibited and joyful that Patrick felt as though he momentarily connected with the young woman who lurked beneath her autism. It was one of those rare moments of communication that, purely by accident, Patrick had somehow been able to facilitate. Her eyes
looked clear and bright, and she met his with such confidence and ease that for a moment, she looked like an entirely different person. And in that moment, something changed for Patrick. He felt his old self-confidence return, he felt excited about this new journey he was embarking in with this job, and he felt curious about this young woman who seemed to have such intelligence and life under the mask she showed to the world.

13.

Today Mila sat on my finger all the way through our reading circle time and when the story about the princess and the pencils got really boring she sang a song and that made me laugh because sometimes I hate princesses and pencils and reading circle time. And then she flew over everybody’s heads and I could watch her yellow and green feathers when they fanned out like that and then even when Alex wanted her to land on his finger she wouldn’t, and that was funny and made me laugh, too.

And Patrick always arrives before everyone else in the morning and drinks his coffee black and tries to teach Mila how to talk because some budgies have a vocabulary of up to 1,728 words, even though he says it isn’t really working. And I told him he has to be careful never to cook his breakfast around her because sometimes budgies can die from the toxic fumes that come from non-stick frying pans. And that’s why miners took them and canary birds down into mines before. But I don’t think Patrick will do that because I said that to him and he’s different
than Gabriella and Melanie and sometimes even Anna because he listens to me so I even talk a little more with him and then it doesn’t even feel too hard.

14.

On the day Rebecca found out that she’d been usurped by Brenda Callaghan for the part of Juliet, she had to go and pick up Simone from school. And as one might expect, she was feeling less than good about life and herself and everything that went along with either of them. While it was true that she’d gotten the part of Lady Capulet as some kind of consolation prize and the director told her she should feel good about that (he knew she really wanted Juliet, and Rebecca suspected he felt guilty about it), she felt lousy nevertheless. She was thankful for the excuse of needing to leave school early to be on time for Simone; that meant she wouldn’t have to immediately face her friends and all their feigned shock and dismay and outrage.

In her distracted state, she’d forgotten that Simone told her that the school had hired a new staff member a few weeks before, so she was surprised to encounter Patrick in the playroom when she arrived. He and Simone were piecing together some puzzles from the playroom when she walked in, and they both didn’t notice her standing over and watching them at first. Patrick was trying unsuccessfully to find which hole fit a chunk of the Middle East in a multi-coloured world map puzzle with oversized pieces probably aimed at children between the ages of six and twelve. At the same time, Simone was fitting together a much larger puzzle with comparatively tiny pieces that was turned upside down so that its image
faced the floor. In spite of this fact, Simone was doing the entirely cardboard and pictureless puzzle quickly and effortlessly, just by matching the shapes of the pieces together. When Rebecca saw the picture the two of them made side by side like that, she was surprised enough by it to momentarily forget her worries and laughed aloud. But then, afraid she was being rude, she quickly put a hand over her mouth.

“Sorry,” she said, trying to stifle the laugh even though her eyes were still unabashedly bright with humour, “but it looks like my little sister is putting you to shame!” She made an attempt to look at Patrick seriously, but the confused look on his face only made the situation seem even funnier to her, and she laughed out loud again.

Patrick continued to stare up at her from his crouched position on the floor as if he couldn’t register who she was or what she had just said. Finally, he pieced it loosely together (which was still more than he was doing with his puzzle), and chuckled in embarrassment. “Are you Rebecca?” he said, a note of irritation colouring his voice because in truth, he didn’t appreciate being laughed at by a total stranger. Trying to regain some semblance of dignity, he got himself up from the floor, wiped off his knees, and looked over at Simone. And as he realized the miraculous job his student was doing, he was suddenly able to see why Rebecca was laughing, and he chuckled again, but this time for real. “Jesus, Simone! Who knew you were such a show-off?!”

Simone didn’t understand what he meant, of course, but Patrick was mainly making the joke for himself and Rebecca. Rebecca seized on the opening hungrily, letting out the even bigger croak of glee that she felt she was still concealing, and
releasing that flood of emotions that had been churning through her since the ego-crushing news about Brenda Callaghan and her audition, and which had nothing at all to do with Patrick or Simone or puzzles. Laughing with some hysteria when she really wanted to cry was a nervous habit of hers since childhood. Simone looked up shyly at her sister as Rebecca now doubled over, but covered up the physical response to make it seem as though she was only bending down to give her sister a high-five, their agreed-on alternative to a hug. “Hey you! Pretty good at puzzles, I guess, aren’t you?” she said through the tears that were now streaming down her cheeks. Simone looked down blankly at her brown cardboard shapes and frowned. Humour wasn’t her thing at the best of times. Patrick also wasn’t sure what to make of Rebecca’s over the top reaction to his joke or to the situation, both of which he knew didn’t warrant this level of mirth. He sensed that it likely had nothing to do with him, but felt uncomfortable and provoked by the mysterious outburst nonetheless and started to steer their encounter to a close. Half unconsciously, he closed off the space between he and Rebecca with his shoulder.

“So I guess I’ll see you tomorrow, Simone.”

“Mm.”

Rebecca stood up and breathed deeply, sensing she had gone too far. She worked hard at trying to recover herself as best she could as Simone went to get her coat and bag. There was a moment of silence.

“Is that the new budgie I’ve heard so much about?”

“Oh- Mila, yeah.”

“Beautiful.”
She smiled at him again, almost apologetically and suddenly felt at a loss as to what to say. Then, as if to focus her mind away from the awkwardness she felt, her mind returned to her audition. She had an abrupt sinking feeling and hurriedly started to hustle Simone out the door. “Okay Simone. Get your coat, get your boots. It’s time to hit the road!”

Patrick shook his head after they left but then turned back to look out the window at them as they got into the car and drove off.

15.

When I went to the zoo that day with my school, that was when I started to feel that kind of a funny feeling. And it wasn’t my usual kind of a funny feeling, which I feel all the time, and which my mom says is part of how I’m quirky. This was a feeling of like a tickle under my skin and an excited feeling like I have sometimes before I have to go to the bathroom. But then when I went to the bathroom, I still had it so I didn’t know how come I felt it like that so strong. Then I thought maybe it was because I was so happy to be at the zoo because one day I want to get a job there and live by myself if my mother and sister will let me. Or maybe it was because some people on that day said some things about animals that I didn’t already know before, and I thought how that’s funny because usually when I talk, I’m the one who tells about animals to people, and usually people can’t say things that I don’t already know. But Soheila told me how come she knows elephants are really smart, and it’s because when people in a village in India didn’t want them to eat a special plant they had, they put on bells on their necks so they
jingled and the people woked up when the elephants tried to eat it. And the first
night the elephants got fooled because the people stopped them and woked up, but
the second night, the people got fooled because the elephants used their noses and
put mud in the bells and so they never even jingled and the people never even
woked up. And that shows you that the elephants understood about the bells and
so they’re really smart. And Isaac said that vampire bats sometimes drink so much
blood and then they feel too full to fly. And he said that that means that they’re
probably not smart like elephants, and that made Patrick and Soheila laugh. And I
laughed, too, but really because that funny feeling kind of tickled me like when I
have to go to the bathroom and so it made me want to laugh anyway.

And then Patrick and I sat down at the gorilla cage for a while just us two and
we saw a gorilla named Zoila and she is going to have a baby soon and she’s old and
it’s going to be her first baby, so the zookeeper said that was how come she was
holding a stuffed doll, so she could practice how to be a mother.13 And that’s what
they have to do with pregnant girl gorillas sometimes and the zookeeper said it was
working because one time she picked up a mouse and kissed it on the head. I have
some stuffed animals at home, too, but they never make me do like that, and I’m
glad, too, because I don’t want to kiss even a mouse or anything on the head or
anywhere. Even when I have that funny tickle feeling.

And then Patrick’s cell phone rang and he talked on it for a few minutes, but I
was happy because then I could talked together with the gorillas, which I did for
five or so whole minutes.
The part of Lady Capulet sucked as far as Rebecca could tell. She was trying to rise to the occasion, she was trying to be the bigger person and put on a brave face, but the littler person inside her wouldn’t stop whining and throwing around her clothes and acting like a brat. She wasn’t sure why, but this blow, this having to accept Brenda Callaghan in the starring role she had always dreamed of playing seemed to be enough to throw her whole dream of being an actress into question. And Rebecca had always believed that shaking that dream was no small feat.

She had wanted to be an actress for as far back as she could remember, in fact. That and writing poetry were the only things outside of her sister that really mattered to her. When she watched movies as a child, she would be consumed by them for days afterwards and felt as though nothing in her mundane day to day life came anywhere near their importance and profundity. In fact, when life-changing events actually did take place on her street or at her school, she often felt the need to infuse them with more drama than they sometimes warranted to raise them from banality to the scale of what she experienced at the cinema. When her neighbour’s cat died, for example, she led the neighbourhood children in a candlelight vigil service and cried bitter tears for crusty and ill-tempered old Cotton Socks that in truth she barely noticed when he was alive. When she hadn’t seen Mr. Wilks who lived across the street for several days in a row, and then spied a handsome and unfamiliar man getting out of a white car that was parked in his driveway, she concocted a story of how Mrs. Wilks must have murdered her husband in his sleep, so she could be with the man she truly loved. (This particular drama got carried
way too far and finally came to a screeching halt when the police showed up at the Malmquist door and demanded to know who had slid a photograph through the mail slot showing Mr. and Mrs. Wilks laughing together at a neighbourhood party, and which had a giant arrow pointing to the image of Mr. Wilks with a note underneath it demanding “Where is he now?” pieced together with letters from a newspaper.)

But now Rebecca’s life seemed to have been reduced to nothing short of a grind. She was dragging herself through her classes, pushing herself to stay awake through her rehearsals, and now her mother seemed to be making even more demands on her time when it came to looking after Simone. She was suddenly expected to pick her up every day after school and entertain her straight through to dinnertime. At first, Rebecca resented the extra responsibility, but she finally gave into it through sheer exhaustion. She found herself just going through the motions at first—doing what she was told and trying to survive it. But eventually, she found herself actually starting to look forward to that extra time she had with her sister. Her sister kept things simple, and sometimes, it felt as though time spent with her existed outside of the world somehow. Every day she went to the school and saw Patrick again and eventually felt as though she had redeemed herself in his eyes. One day, she offered him a ride into the west end, and unexpectedly, she opened up to him over ice cream.

“The most upsetting thing for me has been my own reaction to this Brenda chick, frankly. I mean, you’ve got to have a pretty thick skin to make it out there, and I seem to be doubting everything I’ve ever worked toward at this first sign of real competition!”
“But maybe it takes experiences like this one to develop a thick skin.”

“Maybe. But it’s just such a drag that I can’t just enjoy being Lady Capulet. I mean, I love the play, and it isn’t really a bad part.”

“But if you really wanted Juliet, then your reaction is understandable.”

“I guess so,” she stirred her double chocolate fudge cake into a soup.

“Anyway, I’m sorry to be talking so much about this. I’m probably boring you.”

“Not at all.”

“Well, I’m boring Simone, that much I’m sure of.” Simone hadn’t said a word since they’d sat themselves in the back booth at Gelatini’s Ice Cream Parlour. “Right, Simone?”

“Mm.”

Patrick and Rebecca looked at each other with humour, but resisted laughing for Simone’s sake.

17.

Once when I was five years old I had a kind of a boyfriend. He never liked to talk and I liked that because that’s like me and also he liked music and he played the piano and his name was Fernando. And what’s funny was that even because he was a boy and he was seven years old, I never even felt afraid of him. Even not on the first day.14

And it was a new school my parents put me in and I was so scared for a whole week that I didn’t move out of the lobby all on the first day and all on the second day until my dad came because that’s when he lived with us still. And I
threw up my sandwich on two days at lunchtime and then I screamed and cried and peed on the floor. That’s when my dad wanted me to stay longer at the school so he didn’t have to pick me up when I smelled like pee and take me back home for dinner. I knew because sometimes he didn’t talk in the car on the way home and my sister says that sometimes when people are angry or upset, that sometimes they don’t like to talk in the car or anywhere. But I don’t like talking anyway, especially to my dad, so I just stared out the window and crossed my eyes and made the lights go all in a streak. Sometimes I imagined that the other cars were cheetahs because cheetahs can run one hundred and fifteen kilometers an hour which is as fast as a car on the highway except that cheetahs get tired after only three hundred yards, which isn’t so long if you measure it, so if you’re an antelope you could always do zigzags and maybe run away from a cheetah if you wanted to not get eated.

But when Fernando came to my school I could saw he was scared like me even if he was all quiet and not screaming about it like I do. And that’s funny because usually I never can know what people feel but with him I just knowed and I don’t know why. And sometimes we sat together and listened to music like he liked do and sometimes I listened to him play the piano and that was kind of like when I used to hide in the closet or in the furnace room at home and listen to my dad play the trumpet because he was a musician. And Fernando and I never kissed or did other gross things like some girls do with boys but sometimes now when maybe I want a boyfriend like other people, I remember Fernando and if I feel upset, sometimes that makes my head feel less dizzy.
And I never felt that way about any boy until Patrick came to my school and then I felt excited all the time and like I had to pee sometimes and then I thought that maybe someday I would be not so quirky and maybe I could even have some of those things that other people have like phone bills and apartments and boyfriends. And then I thought that maybe someday I’d work in a zoo and have those things and I thought that would be nice.

18.

Rebecca’s best friend Jill had dragged her out to a shopping mall to buy mascara with the express purpose of cheering her up. Why Jill thought mascara was the secret ingredient to her friend’s happiness at that particular moment was frankly beyond Rebecca, but she appreciated the goodwill gesture nonetheless. It was true that she was still feeling down, but she tried to make an effort to put on a brave face and not hurt Jill’s feelings.

“This is the one I was wearing when Tim and I went out dancing last week. Remember you commented on how long my eyelashes looked?”

“Uh—” Rebecca had no idea what Jill was referring to. “Yeah, yeah, sure.”

“And I swear it seems like a small thing, but this little baby (she was referring to the mascara here) has pulled together some pretty risky wardrobe attempts in my time.”

“Risky attempts?”

“Yeah—you know what I mean. When you really think you can’t pull off shirt A with pants X or something. You know.”
Rebecca didn’t know, but she was trying not to be a total drag, so she tried to understand. “Like when you wore those pink pants with that striped mustard and green t-shirt that day?”

“Exactly!”

They both laughed at the memory, and with relief, Rebecca felt some of her stress drain out of her. Jill was renowned for dressing outrageously, and while she loved this whole world of style and clothes and make-up, there were times that her fashion instincts missed the mark entirely. Mostly Rebecca loved her friend’s high energy and creativity, but occasionally Jill’s habit of solving existential crises by shopping for make-up struck Rebecca as vapid and shallow. But luckily today, vapid and shallow seemed to be doing some sort of trick.

“Here. Try this on.” Jill shoved a frosty pink tester lipstick into Rebecca’s hand. “So you’re picking up Simone again later today?”

“That’s right. I’m back on full-time duty.”

“Lucky you.”

“Oh I don’t mind it, actually. Sometimes I feel like she’s the only thing keeping me sane.”

“Yeah?”

“How does this look?”

Rebecca looked like a sixteen-year-old mail order bride from Kazakhstan.

“Mmnn, nah. Here—try this.” Jill shoved another tester into Rebecca’s hand. “But there are so many other things out there that could be doing the same thing, Becca.
You’ve got to get out and socialize more, you know. Take your mind off Brenda and Steve and them. Meet some men. Oh hey—that one looks great!”

Rebecca had tried on a brownish shade and had to admit it suited her skin and hair. “Sold!” she exclaimed decidedly and walked up to the cashier.

They hung out at the mall for a couple of more hours and chatted over lunch, and eventually Rebecca felt quite a bit better than she had that morning. They were getting up to go when Jill, constantly on the alert for attractive men for her single friend, made one of her typical comments.

“Ooh! Check out the live one over there at three o’clock!”

Rebecca’s eye searched out who it was Jill was referring to, and for some strange reason, she wasn’t particularly surprised to see Patrick standing there over a glassed booth in the centre of the shopping mall’s central corridor. He was examining jewelry.

Rebecca walked up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. “Well fancy meeting you here!”

“Oh—hey, Rebecca!”

Jill looked from her friend to the handsome stranger with a sly smirk.

“Shopping for necklaces?” Rebecca asked, ignoring her friend’s look.

“Yeah. It’s my mother’s sixtieth this weekend. And I had the day off, so I thought I’d do some shopping.”

“Right. Well, I figured you weren’t bringing the students on a field trip to the Dufferin Mall.”
He laughed. “Beautiful as it is, no I’m not. Don’t think it’s quite the place for a field trip.”

“Well, evidently all roads lead here at some point!”

“Evidently they do!”

Once Rebecca and Jill were back in the confines of Jill’s car, her friend wouldn’t let the subject of Patrick go.

“Shame on you, Rebecca!”

“What?!”

“What?!” Jill imitated her in fun. “Patrick, that’s what! Where were you hiding him?”

“Oh God. I wasn’t hiding him, Jill. He’s Simone’s new teacher.”

“Ah so that’s why you’ve been enjoying picking up Simone so much these days!”

“Oh come on, that’s not why!”

“That’s not why? Rebecca! Come on, he is super hot and he obviously likes you.”

Rebecca squinted at the road ahead of them and smiled a little at the thought of it. “You think so?”

Jill guffawed and shot her friend a look. “Hello? Earth to Rebecca! Come in, Rebecca!”

“Okay, okay,” Rebecca laughed. “That’s enough out of you already!”

“I mean sheesh, girl. You gotta read the signs. Or are you so out of practice?”

“Yeah, I am, actually. I haven’t been with anyone since Shawn.”
“Mm yeah, I remember Shawn!”

“And that was almost a year and a half ago.”

“Well, that’s long enough.”

“But I think Simone might like him. And that could be weird.”

Jill used the stop sign as an opportunity to turn her bright blue eyes onto Rebecca and hold them there in exaggerated disbelief. “Simone? Are you for real, Rebecca? Like he’s going to go for Simone! No offense to Simone, Rebecca, but you can’t be serious!”

Rebecca had to admit that this was true, but nonetheless, the idea of any romance between her and Patrick made her uneasy.

19.

Patrick and Simone were looking at Simone’s animal books together in the reading area, when the conversation shifted into talking about the pets they’d once owned.

“Okay. Well, first I had a Border Collie whose name was Biscuit. And my brother and I used to pretend we were sheep and we’d make ‘bahhing’ sounds and walk on our hands and knees and she’d herd us around the living room.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. She was a lot of fun until she chomped down really hard onto my brother’s leg.”

“Eww!”
“Yeah. Today you’d have to put a dog down for something like that, but back then, we just said ‘bad dog!’ and hoped she wouldn’t do it again.”

“Mm.”

“And then we had a Lab for a while who was as sweet as anything but not very bright. One day as she ran full speed to the front door when the newspaper boy rang the doorbell, she put her head through the glass pane that was beside the door.”

“Like she couldn’t stop?”

“Exactly like she couldn’t stop.”

“Maybe she really liked the newspaper boy.”

“Mm—I think she didn’t like him because she was barking and growling, too.”

“Oh.” Simone smiled. “And did you ever had a bird?”

“No. Mila’s the first bird I ever bought.”

“Me too.”

“You too? What are you saying? You didn’t buy Mila; I did!”

Simone laughed at Patrick’s exaggerated teasing voice. “I know! I didn’t meant that!”

“Hmm. Well, okay. If you say so. Should we get back to this book, now? What do you think? What can you tell me about this animal here?”

20.

Linda didn’t work on Thursdays, and as soon as she arrived on Friday morning, all everybody kept talking about was the seizure that Jim McDowell in
room 421 had had the evening before. He was a crusty old guy who apparently had been a sergeant in the army in the second world war and now had a whole list of medications that he needed at intermittent points throughout the day in order to keep his heart pumping and his fierce some tongue lashing.

When Linda first heard the news, she took it like any disinterested party might who didn’t really give a hoot about her job anymore, and who didn’t have an immediate connection to Mr. McDowell. The fact that the cause of his seizure was likely linked to staff negligence made the news somewhat more intriguing in a gossipy sort of way, but the idea that Linda herself had anything to do with it was still the farthest thing from her mind. After all, she didn’t even know Jim McDowell; he wasn’t on her floor and she hadn’t even been working on the day the seizure had taken place.

But many others on staff felt quite a bit differently on this point. Many of them already knew or were quickly filled in that Mr. McDowell was one of Glenn’s patients and that Glenn had had to leave early the night before the seizure occurred. Many of them knew that another nurse had to have been called in to cover for his patients and word was spreading rapidly that the nurse in question was Linda.

She received some gratuitous stares in the nurse’s station when she arrived but would have been at a loss as to how to interpret them if she’d cared enough to try. In fact, it wasn’t until she ran into her colleague Ronalda that she was finally given some inkling as to what was going on.

The freckled face woman saddled up beside her as though she’d been seeking her out all morning as Linda was pouring herself a cup of coffee in the kitchen. She
was one of those people who loved to be right up front as something juicy and scandalous was unfolding.

She held onto Linda’s elbow as if confiding in her. “And all I’m saying is that your name is being thrown around in connection to it. That’s as much as I know.” Her serious expression didn’t betray her excitement.

Linda sighed impatiently. “What’s this guy’s name again?”

“McDowell. He’s in room 420 or 421 or something. Army sergeant, bad temper. Everyone on the floor knows him, apparently.”

“Well, I don’t remember anyone like that from that night.”

“Maybe he was sleeping when you came in. Do you remember waking anyone to give them medication?”

Linda thought back. That evening was such a fog. She tried to bring back the faces of the people on her medication round. There must have been around ten of them or so, maybe twelve. Maybe she did remember waking up an older guy. A guy with white hair and a red face. But she couldn’t be sure.

“So what happened exactly? Some nurse forgot to give him what?”

“The issue was with the heart medication apparently. He should get two every four hours but whoever it was didn’t give him any at all.”

“Well,” Linda held her hot coffee in her hands and allowed her eyes to stare vacantly ahead of her as she tried to bring back that night. She’d been tired and cranky, she remembered that. She’d been desperate for a drink. And then she’d had a drink. Oh God, she thought to herself. Could the scotch she drank have made her screw up on a patient’s medication? She entertained the idea for a second or two
but then quickly dismissed it as nonsense. She’d had so little, after all. And believed she could function perfectly even if she was a bit tipsy. In fact, the booze had probably made her perform better.

“I really don’t think it was me,” she concluded firmly.

“I hope you’re right, Linda,” said Ronalda with solemnity. And she watched as Linda excused herself and left the room.

Linda spent the next little while going through the motions of her daily chores, but couldn’t ignore the feeling of doubt that was creeping into her mind more and more frequently. Now she noticed the looks she was getting and the whispering that was around her. She wasn’t sure if she was getting paranoid, but she began to sense Mr. Winters’ presence lurking behind every corner; she could feel he was out combing the hallways for her, and as it turned out, she was right. As usual, it didn’t take him very long to track her down. She was coming out of one of the rooms on the sixth floor, an armful of dirty bed linen clutched against her chest like a flimsy shield. He stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of her and his face pinched into a frown. “Linda.” He slid his hands into his pockets. “I want to see you in my office in 15 minutes.”

Linda nodded at him, surprised that she momentarily couldn’t find her voice under the bed linen. And then, “righto,” she mumbled under her breath after he had disappeared down the hallway.
21.

Today is the day that I knewed for sure that I love Patrick. That’s what I decided after we came back from the zoo that time and he cooked me a hot dog because I was hungry and told me about when a ermine visited him when he stayed overnight at his uncle’s cabin when he was fifteen. But I never really loved a boy like that since Fernando was my boyfriend when I was five but now I know that I love him and so I have to think of what to do or how to get him to love me, too because that’s what the princes and princesses do all the time in those picture books where everyone is normal and has a normal life and lives happy everly after. And I thought that maybe if I tried, maybe I could try to put a kiss on him, even, and maybe it wouldn’t even be so bad. My sister and her friends talk about kissing and even though it’s gross, they always say that boys like it, and so I think that’s what people do when they love each other.

And last night I watched some of my mom’s DVDs after she went to sleep and I watched people kissing so I could maybe try to understand it more. And even though I still think it’s gross, I love Patrick so maybe I could try.15

22.

After Patrick met Rebecca for the first time, he was frankly a little confused by her. She struck him as nervous and overwrought, but at the same time, she carried herself with some real grace and confidence. Still, there were early signs that indicated he’d come a little undone by her. He was surprised at how often he thought about her that night, for example, and then continued to do so with even
greater frequency and curiosity right up until he saw her for the second time. And then it was like he was struck by a boulder, like something heavy and enormous had slammed against the backs of his knees and knocked him to the ground. Suddenly, he was surprised by the enormity of his attraction for her. From one moment to the next, he wasn’t able to think of anything or anyone else for hours. He found he’d become completely intoxicated by her; that something had clicked in the past couple of weeks that confirmed it. She seemed to fit his idea of the perfect woman to a degree he’d never thought possible before. She was beautiful and he sensed, fiery, and something about her laugh had infected him so much that he felt he could still hear its light tinkle reverberating in his ears for hours after he first met her. When he closed his eyes, he’d see images of her translucent white skin contrasted against the straight squarish cut of her dark hair, and he imagined kissing her large red mouth that curled itself into a laugh so freely, it seemed, again and again and again.

If he had given it any thought at all, he supposed he had been accused of being a romantic before, but he had certainly never experienced love at first sight to the extent to which he seemed to be falling victim to it now. Their limited exchanges totaled less than two hours and (apart from when they had ice cream and talked about her play) consisted mainly of small talk, but he already felt certain that he knew her somehow, that he could guess at the things that would make her tick and what would make her upset. And although it didn’t stand to reason, he just knew he was right about her.

When he had gotten home from the Dufferin Mall that day, he stepped through the door and put his single plastic grocery bag down onto the worn blue
carpet in his hallway when his phone rang, which was sitting on his small wooden table in the kitchen. After he picked it up, he discovered his mother’s familiar singsong voice on the other end, who was calling him from her home in Nova Scotia. His mother, who was a powerhouse in her own right, always seemed to call when her son was experiencing something big and emotional. Patrick was close to his mother, but immediately after he answered the phone he wished he hadn’t. His mother’s powers of perception were superhuman, or so Patrick had always believed. He knew it would take her no time at all to guess that something significant had happened to her son. And as it happened, she clocked in at less than thirty seconds.

“You met someone,” she announced with certainty.

Patrick laughed and shook his head in disbelief. “You’re unbelievable, Mom!”

“Yes, but you already knew that about me,” she shrugged her shoulders and sought out the eyes of her husband, Stewart, who raised a pair of bushy surprised eyebrows in response from where he stood over the soapy dishes in their blue and white checkered kitchen in Halifax. His wife’s Sheila’s warm blue eyes shone at him and a hint of a smile crossed over her face, as she imagined the wedding of her son. “So tell me,” she held the phone tighter and again looked at her husband as if including him into the conversation. “Who is she? How did you meet her? I want all the details.”

Stewart turned his back to the sink and folded his arms across his chest as if ready to hear a good story as his son looked down at his table in Toronto a moment and thought. He didn’t feel ready for this type of interrogation and wondered briefly
how he had gotten himself into this situation. As happened frequently with his mother, she had him amicably cornered, and he felt he had no choice but to respond. And what he found just a little baffling was how she had orchestrated this move so swiftly. “She’s a girl. Her name is Rebecca.” He stopped himself there, in part wanting to tell his mother more about her but trying instead to hold himself back.

His mother nodded up at Stewart and waited for more. When nothing came, Stewart unfolded his arms and opened his palms in front of him as if to say, “Well?” and Sheila prompted her son. “And? How did you meet her?”

“She’s the older sister of one of my students.” Then, in sudden frustration at how premature this conversation seemed to him, Patrick stood up and paced around his kitchen, finally taking his phone out onto his balcony and looking down at the garage doors in the alleyway below him. A fat raccoon that was sniffing at some garbage looked up at him defiantly. “Look Mom—I don’t want to get ahead of myself, here. I only just met her and she seems interesting, but our meetings have been really short. I don’t even know her, and I don’t want to jinx anything.”

“Fine, fine” his mother said and lifted her eyebrows into two perfect inverted ‘Vs’ at her husband. “Can I just ask who she’s the older sister of?”

Patrick thought he detected a note of worry in his mother’s voice suddenly as she posed this question and Stewart knitted his eyebrows together. Up until this point, Patrick hadn’t given a moment’s thought to the fact that Rebecca was related to Simone. But in these seconds before answering his mother’s question, he had an inexplicable feeling of dread at how his mother would respond to this reality. In a flash, he had a vision of the horrible wrath and violence he’d heard Simone was
capable of. Simone was the little girl who’d squished a frog to death when she was six, the little girl who’d recently given Flora Breakerman a punch in the eye. Up to this point, he had never witnessed an outburst from her; in fact, he’d flattered himself into believing he was somehow exempt from one. But yes—it suddenly seemed painfully apparent that Simone could view this as a betrayal of her. That is—if she did indeed think of Patrick as special—which wasn’t actually confirmed yet. In fact, maybe he was getting worked up over nothing. It’s often unsettling for others when two people get together for the first time —there is often jealousy and changes in dynamics. Things would probably just work themselves out in the long run. And who even knew that anything was going to happen with Rebecca, anyway? Maybe she already had a boyfriend, maybe she wasn’t interested, although in his heart Patrick somehow doubted that.

“Simone,” he answered flatly once he had mustered up the courage to do so, but as soon as the name left his lips, he felt a hot flash of doubt pass over his face.

“Simone?! ” Sheila stood up from where she’d been sitting at the kitchen table, and made a face at Stewart. “Simone the little swimsuit girl?”

“Mom!” Patrick instantly regretted telling his mother about the time Simone had found the scissors and snipped her swimsuit into seven pieces when she didn’t want to go swimming at the end of his first week of work. Since then, she’d always been “Simone the swimsuit girl” to Sheila.

“Sorry—I don’t mean to be flip. But Patrick—” she stopped as Stewart walked over to her and touched her on the elbow. “Doesn’t she have feelings for
you, Patrick? Isn’t she going to be distraught beyond measure at hearing this news?"

Anger and exasperation rose up in Patrick’s chest at his mother’s dramatic and haughty choice of words. He was frustrated at her insights and hunches and on a deeper level than that, he was unnerved because he knew she was so often right about them. But here, he’d felt pushed into talking about Rebecca in the first place, and now his mother was already predicting doom. “News? What news? Nothing has even happened yet, Mom! And it’s not like we even know for sure about what Simone feels, anyway!”

“Well it certainly sounded that way to me when you described how she’s been acting with you lately, honey. You’ve got her talking more than any of the other teachers have, and you said she practically followed you around like a lost kitten when you went to the zoo that day. Now Patrick. This is a good job you’ve finally found. I’d hate to see you—”

Patrick cut her off there. “Look, Mom! Take it easy, okay? I have to live my own life here, don’t I? I can’t let my work be everything I live for!”

“Oh Patrick!” his mother gave Stewart that heartfelt compassionate look that would have embarrassed her son if he could see it and make him feel three feet high. “Yes—I suppose you have to live your life and follow your heart where it takes you. I just hope nothing terrible is going to happen to that poor little student of yours. It’s taken so long to get her to where she is now!”

Patrick swallowed and looked up at the purple twilight darkening the sky like a dish of ratatouille as if it could provide him with an escape plan. He both
hated and appreciated his mother’s habit of communicating everything she felt in the moment. And now this new excitement he’d felt after this chance meeting with Rebecca had become soured. Now he just wanted to get off the phone and sulk in private. “Simone will be fine, Mom,” he said, trying to convince himself of the truth of this statement. But, as he said it, he had to admit that there was something about it that he couldn’t quite believe.

23.

Today was the day when I decided to do it. When I woked up in that morning I felt good and happy and strong and I thought about how Patrick was the one who made me feel like that and that made me feel even more happier, and more stronger, and more gooder. And on the bus Walter didn’t talk to me and I liked that because I could count all the animals I saw when we drove to school and they were two dogs and five squirrels and eleven birds and four cats, but that was including Paul, so I thought maybe that’s cheating.

And Patrick wore a white shirt on that day and when I first saw him I felt so scared suddenly that I couldn’t even talk to him and I went off to read my animal books by myself. And when he tried to talk to me, I felt even more scared and I don’t know why but I made my angry face at him until he left me alone. But after that I felt bad because really I wanted him to talk to me and not to leave me alone like that but still I felt so scared and so I couldn’t help it.

And once in the afternoon I got the guts to sit with him at reading circle time but when he asked what was wrong I didn’t have any voice to answer to him. And
then I thought I should just do it and try to put a kiss on him, but when I thought that, my heart started going like a rabbit, and I had to run to the bathroom to make it go normal again. And then Anna and Gabriella had to come in to see if I was okay but then I started breathing funny and I couldn’t catch my breath so I wasn’t okay and so they called Rebecca to come and pick me up early.

And I felt so bad in the car because I was so scared all day, and I didn’t do what I wanted to and I didn’t do what I said and that’s why I couldn’t believe that I could feel more bader than even I already felt but then Rebecca started to talk about herself to make me feel better like she sometimes does but I wasn’t really listening until I heard her say Patrick’s name. And I thought maybe I didn’t hear right at first when she said that Patrick called her and asked her to eat a dinner with him so I asked her to say it again and she smiled like how Anna says people do when they are happy or excited or something and she said again that Patrick called and asked her to go out with him. And then I saw how I could feel more bad than even I ever think I felt before. But I didn’t tell that to Rebecca because I couldn’t say nothing at all.

24.

Linda felt nothing short of sick at the idea of having to meet Peter Winters in his office on that dreary and overcast Friday morning. But there simply seemed to be no way around it. She slunk around the hallways and did her best to try and avoid the nosy glances of her coworkers, but she occasionally flashed them a fiercely challenging look when she did happen to catch their eyes. Once she even made the face of some deranged hissing animal and scared off a couple of the interns.
No matter how she tried to control the situation, the inevitable meeting closed in on her with increasing pressure, and after fifteen short minutes, she found herself standing outside her boss’ door and steeling herself before knocking upon it with feigned resolution.

Here we go, Linda thought as she glimpsed her boss’ tired-looking face. She couldn’t help but note how it fell and showed its deep wrinkles as he laid his dull brown eyes on Linda. He mumbled a greeting at her, and making no sign or gesture of friendliness, showed her inside his cool and woefully under-decorated lair. She stood on a skimpy square of brown welcome mat and found her eyes were drawn to the rust and red abstract painting that was hanging on the wall over his desk. Its jagged squares resembled an extreme close up of a rock face and reminded Linda of her boss’ stern and no nonsense approach to discipline.

It was to this painting that Linda’s eyes were always pulled whenever she came in here. That wasn’t very often, but apart from being hired in this room eight years earlier, those occasions usually seemed to be for some less than desirable reason. Once she’d been reprimanded for her lateness, once her hours (and hence pay) had been cut, and once she’d been called in for the same offense for which she feared she was being called in today—drinking on the job. The first time had passed without too much drama. Linda and her friend Georgia were sharing a half litre of red wine during a Wednesday lunch break at the Italian restaurant down the street from the hospital when Mr. Winters walked in with no other than one of the biggest private financial supporters of the hospital. Linda had never seen Mr. Winters blush before, but in that moment, his cheeks glowed a deep red as he struggled to make
polite conversation with them. They got off with a warning that time and were put on cleaning duty for the rest of that day. Primarily because this was her second offense, and that a man had had a seizure because he was given the wrong medication, Linda was extra worried that her boss was running out of patience with her.

With a gesture of his hand, he invited Linda to sit in one of the two orange chairs in the middle of the room. Then with a deep audible sigh, he lowered himself into the taller brown velvet chair that looked considerably more worn and comfortable than the orange ones across from it, and fixed his eyes on her.

“Linda,” his rich voice boomed while his whole countenance and demeanor conveyed his grave disappointment, “I simply can’t condone this sort of behaviour taking place at my hospital.” He paused and looked at her from under his glasses, allowing the room to settle from the vibrations of his resonating voice. Linda nodded but found herself momentarily crippled by a feeling of shyness that was unlike her and made her unable to respond just yet. “I’m sure you understand my position. Drinking on the job not only looks bad, but it also has the potential to be extremely dangerous for our patients. Mr. McDowell’s seizure was a direct consequence of your negligence and irresponsibility.”

Linda took in a breath, started to contradict the allegation, but Peter Winters was not going to be interrupted just yet. “In your state on the afternoon of Wednesday October 19th,” he opened the file that was sitting on his desk and looked through it, “Are you aware that you neglected to change the bed pan of one Alfred
Jorgensen in room 2013, to accompany a Mrs. Lillian Wallace to the toilet in room 1818,” he took time shuffling around his papers, “and—”

Linda, who was never good at finding herself in the submissive role, looked up at the ceiling and helped her boss with the final point in the list of her offenses. “And I forgot what’s-his-names pills in room 420, which caused him to have a seizure—”

Clearly non-plussed at Linda’s enthusiastic pitching in, Mr. Winters silenced her by raising his voice to a commanding pitch and thereby drowning her out completely. “And to provide the necessary daily medication for one James McDowell in room 421, which led to his grand mal seizure the following day.” He pronounced both the patient’s name and the last number of his room with a particular nasty bite. Then arranging the papers in the file by tapping them resolutely on the desk, he sat back in the chair and looked at her with the round-eyed stare of a night vision animal. Linda felt herself shrink. But to defend herself, she set her face into a hard stare and frowned seriously at her boss, hoping to convey to him that she was taking these allegations to heart.

“Mr. Winters—please, if I could—I don’t see how you have any proof of these accusations. I mean—I was looking after him for only three hours. There was also a night nurse and Glenn who came back in the morning.”

Peter Winters eyeballed Linda with a look of long-suffering. This thing with Linda was another in his list (which included an aging mother and a pregnant teenaged daughter) of why his life didn’t seem to be worth living for him at this particular moment. “Linda—you didn’t sign off on the medication form. You
changed his bedpan and left without giving him any of the eight pills he required. 

There’s no doubt that you were responsible. And as for the drinking, Mabel Fritz complained to the night nurse that she smelled alcohol on your breath. And one of your colleagues, who for obvious reasons wishes to remain anonymous, confirmed it.”

Mr. Winters stared at Linda soberly as she soaked up this information in silence. Finally, he straightened the papers inside Linda’s file and closing it, pushed it off to the side of the large oak coffee table that separated them. He looked serious enough, but nevertheless, Linda was right when she sensed that on some level, he enjoyed the power he wielded over his employees. In fact, if the unpleasant truth be told, it had even been cheering him up somewhat until a moment ago when Linda began to look at her wit’s end. Trying to ignore this, he continued. “Linda, your behaviour is unacceptable. I gave you a second chance after the first time this happened, and not every boss would be so accommodating I can tell you, but now you’re leaving me with no other alternative but to put you on a three month probation period without pay beginning today. You will be expected back at work on Monday January 20th at which time you will be given no more chances. One more transgression from you, one more glass of wine over a Friday lunch, even, so help me God, and there will be no more conversations or negotiations. You will be let go immediately. Do I make myself perfectly clear?”

Linda felt the colour draining from her face, and she swallowed hard. “Yes,” she sputtered. “But no pay, Mr. Winters? I’m a single mother with a handicapped
daughter! How am I expected to survive without any income for three months? I don’t think you understand the position you’re putting me in!"

Mr. Winters braced himself against the twinge of conscience that he felt for Linda on this score. He wasn’t a completely unfeeling man, and this fact had occurred to him before. In fact, it was one of the primary reasons he gave to himself for having offered Linda another chance after the first incident. Now he was ready with his response. “Well, you should have acted with more responsibility in the first place if your daughter is really such a concern of yours. In any case, there are government services that can offer support for people in your position.” And with that, he tossed an information brochure at her, and got to his feet, signaling to her that their conversation had come to a close.

Linda’s head was swimming as she climbed back into the safety and anonymity of her car. The next three months loomed in her imagination like a series of impossible challenges that she felt she would never have the strength to rise to. Look after Simone full time for three months. How could she possibly do that? She could barely stand to be alone with her second daughter for more than twenty minutes as it was, and now there would be no escaping from her. At least she could cart her off to school every day, but how would she survive the afternoons and evenings? And with no pay. Linda hadn’t been feeling like herself lately. Even apart from this incident at the hospital, she’d been feeling weak and rundown, and now the prospect of being with Simone was making her feel worse. Maybe other arrangements could be made. Maybe there was someone else she could talk to. Maybe something else could still be done.
25.

I killed Mila today. I don’t know how it happened, but only I know that I was just so upset about Patrick and Rebecca that it just happened, and it was like I didn’t even have any control. After Rebecca drove me home the afternoon before, I just went up to my room and didn’t talk and only screamed if someone tried to come into my room. And Rebecca didn’t even knowed or didn’t even care why I was upset because I could hear her talking to Patrick on the phone and laughing and stuff and that made me feel worse and angry. And then in the morning I felt so strange I felt I was even like a zombie all in the bus on the way to school.

And when I saw Patrick at school, he was trying to be all nice to me but really I knew he was happy because he just made a date with Rebecca and he really wanted to put a kiss on her and I just felt so angry and like I wanted to hurt something that I knew that he liked. And then he was with Mila and cleaning her cage and humming and smiling at me even when I made my angry face, so when Mila came to sat on my finger, I even felt angry at her even though when I think about it later, I know she didn’t even do anything. So I don’t even know how it happened anyway, it was like I didn’t even think about it, but my hand just did it all by itself and I was crushing her like what I did to the frog when I was six when my dad left and the psychiatrix said I was upset. And then all the teachers and the students started to screaming and running over to me, but it was too late because Mila was dead but still she had her one eye that was looking at me the whole time. And when I saw what I did, I threwed up all over the playroom floor.
PART TWO

1.

Paul, the Malmquist’s family cat, was already fully grown by the time he was taken into their home eleven years before. They’d found him cowering behind the YMCA between the parking lot garbage cans where he was trying to find shelter from the rain. It was Rebecca and her aunt Gwenyth who stumbled upon him, soaked and mewing like a pathetic drowned rag doll with enormous green saucers for eyes. It was lucky for Rebecca that Gwenyth was living with them at the time because she had a way of influencing Linda in the most roundabout but effective ways. Rebecca thought there would be no way that her mother would ever be receptive to the idea of a pet, so she was nothing short of amazed when Linda’s flat out and predictable “no” gradually changed to resigned silence, which was the closest thing to an agreement they could ever hope to get out of her.

The vet had put his age somewhere between 18 months and 2 years at the time, but nobody could really know for sure. His friendly disposition and readiness to approach people led them to conclude that he’d likely been someone else’s pet before and had either gotten lost or been abandoned. Gwenyth helped the kids make “Found Cat” posters and when no one responded after a month, they happily tore them off the lamp posts and laundromat bulletin boards without telling Linda. Three weeks after that, on the day Gwenyth left the country to go on assignment, she reminded Linda in an off-handed manner to take him to the vet and get him his
shots. When Linda responded with a bored, “yeah, yeah,” Gwenyth winked at Rebecca, whose heart leapt with new pet-ownership joy.

While it was true that Paul hadn’t been born on the streets, he hadn’t been lost or abandoned, either. Rather, he had made the clear-headed and mindful decision to leave the household that he had been living in since he was 6 weeks old when it was suddenly and brutally overtaken by a new baby. He hadn’t been particularly attached to the husband and wife team to begin with; while the man showed some sort of interest in him, he was never home, and the woman was polite to him but generally indifferent. But once the shrunken dictator arrived, what had once been a tolerable situation soon became a living nightmare. The baby kept him awake every night, the new parents were irritable at the best of times (but were more often downright mean), and to make matters worse, they increasingly forgot to give him food and let him indoors or out. Paul was young, strong, naïve, and confident: the perfect combination to make finding a better set-up seem like the obvious thing to do. Missy the neighbouring cat had done it, and apart from the bad name she’d gotten saddled with in her second home, she had found herself in a pretty cozy situation.

Paul, however, had no idea what he was getting himself into. He had no way of knowing just how lucky Missy had been—he’d only spent two nights on the street, and both of these in good weather, and her apparent talent for following the smells of pot pourri and quality steak, had led her straight into the heart of a posh neighbourhood. Paul, on the other hand, spent over two weeks on the street as the weather was turning chilly and damp, and he felt as though he was scrounging
constantly for food. He was uncomfortable and lonely in the first few days, and weak and miserable soon after that. He had ended up wandering around the poorer neighbourhoods of town and couldn’t seem to find his way out of them. They were filled with alley cats, a tougher variety than he’d ever known existed, who gave him hard stares from a distance and hissed or clawed at him when he crept too close. They infested the dark back streets, and if there was any food source to be found, you could be sure they had already discovered it. One night, Paul happened to be crouched behind a roti shop when one of the employees opened the back door onto the alley and was about to dump several overdone potatoes drenched in curry sauce into the garbage when he spied Paul sitting there. He clicked his tongue at him, beckoning him to come forward, and generously laid the plate down for him to lap up. He seemed like a kind man despite his hard, poked-marked face and the girly tattoos decorating his muscley arms—he even stroked Paul’s fur a couple of times as he ate, but as Paul could have predicted, as soon as the man closed the door and disappeared inside, he heard a rustle coming from the pile of garbage bags behind him. When he turned his head, he spied another alley cat emerging from out of a tangle of cellophane. That was the first time Paul was forced to fight for his food. The other cat, an older grey with yellow eyes, was more experienced and easily could have taken Paul on if he’d been in better shape, but the taste of the curried potatoes had given Paul new found strength and determination. He was so hungry, and something told him that that moment was going to determine whether he was either going to make it on the streets or he wasn’t. He hissed and arched his back with more ferociousness than he ever thought he was capable of. The grey cat
shifted and paused but then moved in for a fight. Paul wasted no time. He tore a well-placed scratch near the grey cat’s right eye, and screaming, the alley cat backed off to let Paul finish his meal in peace.

Paul was proud of this accomplishment, but the small victory wasn't enough to sell this new lifestyle to him. At that point, he began to glimpse what an existence might be like on the streets, and far from luring him into it, this experience made him ferociously focused to find a roof to live under at any cost.

He became aggressively affectionate to strangers, but his single-minded determination made him forget to be discerning. As a result, he ended up spending a night with a skinny shadow of a young man with hollow cheeks, a slumping walk and a committed Crystal Meth habit. He proved to be so out of it and unpredictable that he not only gave Paul an old flower pot (that had both dirt and a hole at the bottom) for his water, but he also got so irritated with Paul when he tripped over him accidentally in the middle of the night that he kicked him vengefully in the stomach. Paul ducked outside as soon as the door opened the next day.

As a result, it felt like the angels were smiling from the heavens when he was found by Gwenyth and Rebecca. He instantly recognized them as decent people, and thanked God that the kids were old enough to have outgrown pulling his tail or dressing him up like a baby. He was disappointed at first to discover that Gwenyth didn’t live there permanently, but soon he started to grow accustomed to Linda’s gruff but ultimately harmless persona and to the younger girl’s strange idiosyncrasies.
Of all things, Rebecca found herself back at the Dufferin Mall on a Friday afternoon buying the mascara that Jill had recommended she wear for her date with Patrick when Simone’s school called her cell phone with the news about the bird. As she took in the information, she stood frozen at the cosmetics counter, her face blemishing from white to red. Then suddenly, she snapped into action and wasted no time getting into her car and fighting her way through the sixty-three congested city blocks of traffic toward Simone’s school.

Rebecca could be a drama queen at the best of times. If she had a nasty enough hangnail and she was in the right headspace, it was frequently opportunity enough to get her firing from all cylinders. So when a situation actually did call for concern, when even the average person might get a bit shaken up, Rebecca could reach full and unadulterated panic mode in staggering time.

And now was no different. In a blind single-minded craze, she paid for the mascara and raced through the mall toward the underground parking lot. By the time she reached her mother’s car, she’d broken out into a sweat, her palms clammy on the steering wheel, and she was muttering to herself under her breath. “I can’t believe this is happening. Killed a goddamn bird! Simone—what were you thinking?” She threw the car artlessly into reverse and then slammed on the brakes as she narrowly escaped hitting a navy blue Datsun. A harried-looking mother framed by two screaming babies in the back seat shot her a surprised look, which quickly dissolved into general bad temper. Rebecca waved feebly, flashing a toothy smile in the rearview mirror. Okay just breathe, she told herself as the woman
screeched scowlingly around a corner and disappeared from sight. But no sooner had her lungs received the instruction than the panic welled up in the pit of her stomach again. I can’t believe she did this, she panted to herself. It’s the frog incident all over again. God, Simone. What were you thinking?

The thought of calling her mother and tipping her off as to what was going on with her youngest daughter wasn’t an idea that entered Rebecca’s head for a second. And, much to Linda’s profound irritation, that reaction was not just unique to Rebecca alone. No—if the truth be told, when it came to real emergencies involving Simone, informing Linda was the unpleasant afterthought in everyone’s mind, a task people implicitly understood would suck up the valuable time needed to solve the emergency when it was underway, and which promised to drain every ounce of everyone’s emotional energy once the danger had passed. Simone’s teacher, Anna, found it simpler and more practical to deal with Rebecca, so that’s who she called first when something urgent happened. This time, it took her a full thirty-five minutes to remember to call Linda as well.

And Rebecca hadn’t called her mother at all. That’s why she was distinctly not happy to see her mother’s name illuminated on the screen of her cell phone as it sang out “Vino de Amor” on the passenger’s seat beside her. She knew from experience that not picking it up was worse than the alternative. Even at the risk of a police ticket. She scanned the street to make sure the coast was clear.

“What’s happening? How long have you known about this?” Linda demanded in place of a greeting.

“Only about ten minutes,” Rebecca lied.
“Oh really?” Linda sensed the untruth lingering in the hesitations on either side of her daughter’s statement. “And why does Anna constantly tell you about what’s happening with my daughter before she tells me, eh? Can you answer me that?”

Rebecca rolled her pretty dark eyes exaggeratedly at her own image in the rear view mirror before fixing them on the taillights of the car ahead of her. She breathed in again. Her mother had a way of making these situations all about herself somehow. “I have no idea, Mom. How can I answer that? But maybe we should talk about Simone now.”

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say. And Rebecca knew it as soon as it came out of her mouth. “Don’t you answer back to me like that, Rebecca. I’m the one who raised you, remember? And I raised Simone as well in case you forgot that. I swear, a woman spends all this time slaving over her ungrateful kids and what does she get? A couple of smart mouths talking back to her at the first opportunity, that’s what.”

“Sorry, Mom.” Rebecca opted to not engage her mother at the moment. And this time it seemed to do the trick.

“So where are you? Are you there yet,” Linda asked.

“Ah, no, not exactly, Mom.” The sarcasm in Rebecca’s tone would have been unmistakable to most, but Linda was too preoccupied with her own cross-bearing to hear it. But luckily, Rebecca was used to exactly this brand of inattention.

“The traffic’s really treacherous out here, Mom. I think it’ll still be a while.”
“Well, better that you’re out there than me. I’ve had a shit day, and I can’t take anymore.”

This insensitive response only helped to further frazzle Rebecca’s already frazzled nerves and made her want to get off the phone as soon as she could. “Look Mom, I don’t want to stay on the phone here—” she scrambled for an excuse, “I keep losing reception. I’ll let you know when I get there.”

“Fine. But whatever you do,” started Linda, who started pacing again, this time marching past Paul, who was sitting in the doorway watching her, and down the creaking hard wood panels of the hallway toward the front door, “don’t let those bozos give Simone the heavy sedatives they gave her last spring. You remember? She fell asleep on the streetcar on the way home – I had a hell of a time getting her off, let me tell you—and then she wouldn’t wake up for eighteen hours once she got home!”

Bozos? The word immediately lodged in Rebecca’s brain from where it entered her ear canal, and the confusion it provoked distracted her from hearing the rest of her mother’s rant. Why that woman insisted on using such bizarre and antiquated language Rebecca would never know. Still, the memory of the incident sent a cool chill through Rebecca’s heart. That was the only time in which she honestly believed her sister might never wake up again. When she got home from work that day, she discovered Simone in a dead sleep and curled up on her bed in a position that would have impressed a yoga master. But when Rebecca insisted on moving her heavy and seemingly lifeless limbs, Linda just accused her of being dramatic. And that made Rebecca mad. Her mother was supposed to be a nurse,
and her reactions seemed not only strange for someone in that profession but at times, downright heartless. But then, Rebecca supposed, there was a hopelessly long list of things that made Linda atypical. And worrying about a patient’s sleeping position wasn’t one of those luxuries to make it onto her narrow radar screen.

Just then, it occurred to Rebecca that it sounded oddly hollow and quiet where her mother was. During a usual phone conversation, Linda was frequently interrupted by a doctor or orderly and was asked to do something, or at least Rebecca could hear the dings and whistles of bells and hospital machines in the background. “Hey hang on, Mom. Where are you? Aren’t you at the hospital?”

Linda’s eyes met Paul’s as she gripped her hand around her scotch glass and threw back another gulp. “No, I’m home. Look—I had a hard day. We’ll talk when you get here. Now just go and get your sister.”

“Fine,” Rebecca answered shortly and felt that vaguely hurt yet all too familiar sensation when it came to her mother that there was something she wasn’t being told.

3.

Simone was curled up in the corner of the school’s front lobby when Rebecca finally arrived to get her. The staff had mainly dispersed by this point because, as Rebecca was relieved to see, her sister had already passed through the worst of her meltdown. All her kicking and screaming had brought her to one of her comatose states that usually followed an episode like this. Now the only problem would be carrying her almost dead weight out to the car.
Rebecca beelined over to the back corner and crouched down in front of her sister’s eerily still form. “Hey there chickadee,” Rebecca cooed at Simone as she tried to smooth a wayward lock of hair from her pale forehead.

Simone scowled and made a low grunting noise, opening her eyes a sliver at her sister’s image and then trying laboriously to turn her head away.

Melanie, Simone’s shadower, stood over Simone with her arms folded. Her pale blue eyes looked worn and unsettled, as if now that all the activity was over, she wasn’t sure what to do with herself. She usually held herself quite erect, but now Rebecca noticed how her shoulders slumped forward uncharacteristically.

Rebecca looked up at her questioningly. “Does anyone have any idea what provoked this?”

Melanie sighed and shrugged her shoulders. “No, no one does. She loved that bird more than any other student. It’s true that she was acting a little strangely in the last couple of days, but it’s still a total mystery as to why.”

Rebecca looked down at her sister’s face, and for a second, she was struck by how thin and bony it looked, as if her skull was ready to protrude out from under its thin shroud of skin.

“Strange, “ Rebecca whispered almost to herself, and in that moment, Anna appeared from out of her office, followed closely by Patrick.

At seeing Patrick, Rebecca was temporarily shocked out of her trance, like in all the excitement she’d forgotten that he existed. He looked like he’d been through an ordeal—his hair was messed up, and his thick dark eyebrows pinched together with fatigue and worry. For a split second, she almost didn’t recognize him, and in
that same moment, he also looked at her as a stranger. But then just as suddenly, he seemed to come out of himself and gave Rebecca a shy smile. “Hi,” he said, raising his hand in a half wave.

“Hi.” She smiled back at him and suddenly felt overwhelmed with hope and energy again—as if it dawned on her that this ordeal with Simone were really happening independently of her, that she wasn’t irrevocably tied to her sister to the point where she would drag her down and bury her forever.

Anna’s rubber-heeled shoes squeaked on the blue tiled floor and brought Rebecca back to the situation unfolding in front of her. “Thanks for coming so quickly, Rebecca.” She touched her lightly on the upper arm, and then turned to Melanie, leaving Rebecca and Patrick to make brief and exhilarating eye contact. “How has she been in the past while, Melanie? Have there been any changes?”

“Nothing that I could see.”

“Okay. That’s fine, then.” Anna bent down to examine Simone. She opened her eyelids, felt around her head, neck, and shoulders and finally seemed satisfied. “Well, we’d better get her to your car right away. Do you need to borrow some blankets, Rebecca? Or do you have enough?”

“Uh- no, I’m good.”

“Fine. Now—” Anna stood up slowly and looked meaningfully at Rebecca for a moment, but then averted her eyes to the floor. “I think it’ll be best to keep her home for a few days. Some of the kids, and well—staff members too—are quite upset about all this. Mila was a real favourite around here. Can I get in touch next week?”
“Oh—of course!” Rebecca agreed emphatically. It hadn’t occurred to her that they’d keep Simone home. But now that she thought of it—it made sense. Of course it did. Then just as she thought, it took a full twenty minutes to get Simone’s limp body dressed and moved out to the car. The sedatives, Anna explained, would take a full day to wear off.

4.

“That’s right,” Linda sputtered and then paused for effect. “Took its goddamn head right off!”

She was repeating this sentence fragment into her telephone receiver at a slower pace, so its accuracy could be verified and its impact weighed again by her friend Georgia, who presently sat with widened eyes and mouth agape on her lilac flowered sofa on the other end of the line. The normally talkative woman was rendered momentarily speechless by this news, and during the ensuing silence, Linda was surprised when a laugh that sounded dangerously close to a guffaw, escaped from her own lips. Really, she didn’t find the situation remotely funny. Her daughter had killed her school’s pet bird, and she had done it viciously; no number of scotches could prevent that from being a nasty and unsettling bit of news. But somehow saying the sentence aloud, casting it out into the world like this, stirred a nervous chord in her that caused her reactions to come out in awkward spurts that were rapidly diminishing in tact.

And also she was drunk. The almost empty bottle on the floor beside her attested to it—not to mention the telltale thickening of her voice, the slur and
weight of her tongue around her words, and the relaxed way the objects in the room seemed to slip and swim in front of her eyes like they'd come unglued from a child’s collage. Paul detected the signs early and had long ago taken himself out of the mix to curl up on Rebecca’s bed. He'd seen far too many of these scenes unfold, and he frankly didn’t care to witness another. It was a wise move; Linda’s demeanor was only getting uglier, and the scene was going nowhere pretty for anybody.

Georgia was momentarily unsure of what to make of her friend’s glaring gaffe; she normally didn't show the best judgment (which was exemplified by the fact that she had run out of gas on the highway exactly six times and had once been talked into paying off the credit card balance of a criminal type she’d met at 2am in a donut shop). In other words, she was normally up for an inappropriate laugh, but this news had caught her off guard. And to be fair, she was still considerably behind her friend in alcohol consumption. She was confused, frankly, and her confusion caused her uncharacteristically to sustain her silence a little longer.

Linda, shaken by Georgia’s missed cue to speak and then unconsciously interpreting her silence as criticism, shot her body upright from where it had been sprawled across her living room couch and spilled some of her drink onto her shiny green blouse. “Damn,” she muttered as she wiped it uselessly with her drink hand. Then she added, “It’s not funny!” as if Georgia had been the one to laugh out of turn. She stood up and tried shakily to negotiate the living room floor as it
rocked and careened beneath her red-slippered feet. Holding onto the mantle of the fireplace for balance, she saw fit to give Georgia a piece of her mind.

“Simone is one seriously fucked up kid, Georgia,” she slurred. “And I won’t have it! People laughing at her and taking advantage when she’s down like that. Because frankly—she’s not like other people. She’s a loose cannon and what she really needs is patience and acceptance and a mother who’ll—” she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror that hung above the fireplace and momentarily took in the frizzy tangle of dyed black curls and the features that looked more shockingly haggard than ever. Her eyes were bloodshot and there were smeared make-up smudges darkening the skin underneath them. For a fleeting second, she remembered with distaste the horrendous day she had just endured. Closing her eyes on her own image, she resumed her diatribe, but now she’d lost a degree of interest in what she was saying. She brought a hand to her brow, and added as if in an after thought that allowed her voice to trail off at the end, “What she needs is extra love and protection and shit like that.”

Georgia still held out another moment before she finally spoke. “Linda!” Her high pitched Brazilian accent only got higher when she was under duress, and now it threatened to sever the women’s telephone connection altogether. “I no laugh and I no think is funny! I know Simone really really fucked up and—”

“Hey now you watch what you say about my kid!”

“Come on—you know how I say!”

“I know nothing of the kind of how you say!” Linda’s index finger pointed into the empty air ahead of her, presumably at where her friend might be standing
if she’d been there physically to take the scolding. “Simone is my daughter and I had to raise her all alone. With no one to help me! Do you hear? Do you think that was easy?”

Georgia opened her mouth to protest, but she knew her friend well enough to know that she wasn’t actually soliciting any response from her on this score. Instead, she raised her sandy brown eyes to the ceiling, had another slurp of her white wine spritzer and glanced absently at the flower pattern adorning her fingernails as she waited for the tantrum to pass.

“Well, it wasn’t! And I’m sure my life would have gone very different if she hadn’t been around, let me tell you! I don’t think Leonard would have left for starters. And then Jacques! My God, Jacques was crazy for me in the beginning. But God forbid a needy child is there to interfere with a man’s pleasure! Then you see who the real needy child is! Do you know the stats on men sticking around once a special need kid comes into the picture?”

“Oh you right, Linda! And I remember—Jacques crazy for you, is sure!” Georgia agreed emphatically.

“That’s right.” Linda allowed herself to feel momentarily mollified. “But all I’m saying is that people can’t laugh at her like that! I spend my whole life making sure of that one little thing!”

“For sure, Linda! You right!” Although her voice betrayed only the utmost sincerity, Georgia truthfully was only half listening to her friend. Her teenaged son had entered the room, and now Georgia was more engaged in expressing to him through sign language and exaggerated lip synching that he could not borrow her
car. But the two women had had many telephone conversations unfold exactly like this one, with flare ups of minor (or major) disputes and dramatic diversions away from the main topics. And no matter how ugly some of these conversations had become, they would just call each other up the following day and resume their friendship as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Alcohol, they tacitly agreed, gave them free license to behave in any childish or morally reprehensible way they saw fit in the moment. It released them from the reigns of social niceties that they saw suffocating so many others and granted them the free expression normally so stifled in the city in which they lived. While Linda took full advantage of this freedom in the women’s friendship, Georgia tended to hold herself back more often if she sensed she was crossing a line. Normally, for example, she would have dropped the subject of Simone at this point, but this time, something was driving her forward. This time, morbid curiosity made her determined to drive the subject back to the question at hand.

“But Linda tell me, what going to happen now? Simone have to pay big money or go to jail or what?”

“No Simone won’t have to go to jail!” Linda snapped impatiently at her friend.

“I mean honestly—it was a puny little budgie-bird. Not a goddamn classmate!”

“Yeah today a puny budgie bird and tomorrow—”

“Georgia! Okay I have to get off the phone now, okay? I had a crap day and my girls are going to be home any minute.”

Georgia had also worked at the hospital that morning and unbeknownst to Linda, she already had a pretty good notion about her friend’s crap day. Apparently,
some rumours had been circulating the halls and staff room as to why Linda hadn’t been at the department meeting at 3:00 and then also not in the staff room at the end of the day. In fact, before she had been completely derailed by the news about Simone, Georgia’s original mission in calling her friend had been to get to the bottom of these rumours once and for all. But because she had no sense of timing, she sensed wrongly that now was a good moment to investigate, and she seized upon the opening greedily.

“Yeah, you know, Kim and I, we don’t know why you not at meeting with everyone at 3:00. We thought maybe—”

But Linda was in no mood to reveal anything and cut her friend off decisively. “That’s it, Georgia. I’ve had enough. I’m hanging up now,” she announced, and with a thud of the receiver, she did just that. Then, just in case Georgia got it in her mind to try her back, she took the receiver off its cradle. Frowning, she slumped back down onto the living room couch and tried to focus her drunken mind on what exactly this Brazilian upstart friend of hers might know about her transgression on the Wednesday of the evening before. One thing was for sure—if she did actually know something, then half the hospital would know by now. Great, Linda thought, and her lips curled into that wry smile of odd satisfaction she got at knowing that once again, she’d successfully messed up her life. She lay her head back onto the Indian-styled pillows that were stacked at the top of her couch, but when that still didn’t help to right the room from its intolerable spinning, she lay back onto the arm rest and stretched her legs out along the couch’s length.
After the incident with Mila, Rebecca now took it for granted that Simone would stay home for a week or so as a kind of “time out”, but then afterwards, her school schedule would resume as usual. And after hearing about her brief conversation with Anna, Linda begrudgingly agreed that this would also probably have to happen. But things didn’t pan out quite as smoothly as all that. Once the Monday morning came after her first week off, neither Simone nor her school was emotionally prepared for her to come back. In fact, Simone screamed and hollered at the suggestion and made herself so physically impossible to budge that Rebecca and Linda had practically given up on the idea even before the school informed them that they also weren’t ready to welcome Simone back into their walls. Linda would have normally argued this point to the bitter end, but she was so exhausted by Simone’s Herculean resistance, that she acquiesced much sooner than Anna had anticipated.

So Simone spent that second week very much like how she had spent the first. She stayed in her room and read her animal books and sulked her way heroically from daybreak through to night fall. For the first few days, she would scream and cry when anyone tried to enter her room, so Linda and Rebecca finally had no choice but to leave her meals by her bedroom door for her to come and get herself. But as inevitably happens, she gradually began to soften from red-faced and hysterical into the much more pleasant state of rigid and angry withdrawal. Now she would deign to come out of her room and sit down at the kitchen table at meal times, but she was still careful not to nod or shake her head, look anyone in the eye,
or give any indication that she thought or desired anything whatsoever. While Rebecca found this challenging and tiresome, Linda was half mad with frustration. Not only had she lost her job for three months, now she had to stay at home with her catastrophe of a special needs daughter all day. They were both doing what they could to roll with the punches. This holiday was temporary, and Simone would go back to school soon, or so they thought. That this might not come to pass was a notion that simply hadn't entered their heads.

Surprisingly, it was Paul who first managed to get through to her. When he got wind of the fact that she'd killed a bird with her bare hands, he was impressed and decided to strike up a conversation with her. This was a thing he had never done before with a person, but something about her quirkiness and difference had been making him curious about her and compelled him to take their relationship to the next level.

He found her one evening sitting in one of the brown leather chairs by the French doors at the back of the kitchen, wrapped up in Linda's favourite orange and red-checkered blanket. She appeared empty and shrunken somehow, Paul thought, as she stared out at the bare twisted branches of the late fall trees.

He settled himself down at her feet and gazed at her for a moment. She didn't acknowledge him—her face was solemn and expressionless. In fact, she looked almost sage-like with her eyes half closed. Then in anticipation of speaking, Paul puffed out his beautifully tabby striped chest. “Why did you do it?” he asked.

Simone flicked her eyes onto his without changing her expression. She stared at him for a moment as if he was an image plucked from one of her dreams
and appeared completely unmoved by the fact that a cat had just addressed her. She kept staring, but still, she didn’t respond.

“Why did you kill the bird?” Paul asked again. “You weren’t planning to eat her, were you?”

Simone paused as if she was waking up out of a deep sleep, and she’d forgotten how to communicate. Finally, she moved her head a little to one side, paused, and then, completing the gesture, moved it back again. “No,” she answered simply, in case Paul hadn’t understood her headshake.

“So was it for fun then?”

“Not fun,” Simone answered quickly but didn’t elaborate. Paul waited for more.

“You didn’t enjoy it, you mean?”

“Mmn. I was upset.”

“Oh.” Paul studied her without blinking as cats will often do. Simone thought his face seemed changed now that he was speaking. It was more animated somehow; it was strange to see it moving and forming words. In moments, it almost seemed as though he was eating something he found distasteful or difficult to chew, but then at other times, like when he formed a “w” sound for example, his mouth would purse together into a bow shape that Simone had never seen on the face of a cat before. But despite noticing these details, it struck her as perfectly normal and natural that her family’s pet cat should be speaking to her. And for that reason, she didn’t display any outward reaction. “Why were you upset?” he proceeded carefully.
Simone flushed a little, scowled, and looked away. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

Paul continued to fixate on her with his large glassy eyes. He was trying to work out why the memory of her kill was something she found upsetting; in the circles he moved in, she’d achieved something to be proud of. Unable to reach a conclusion, he finally accepted her resistance as something he couldn’t understand. “All right.” He crouched onto his knees to lie with his legs stretched out in front of him. “But don’t you think that your teachers and classmates will ask you questions about the bird when you go back to school after your holiday?”

“No, I don’t think they will do that.”

Paul looked doubtful. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not going back there.”

“Oh.” Paul blinked up at Simone and then, following her example, also turned his eyes toward the grey November sky out the window. Again, Simone’s words didn’t make much sense to him, but at least he had gotten her talking a bit. And that was something. But now, he allowed some silence to pass between them. He also wasn’t one for big conversations. He stared out at the backyard and watched the last remnants of light fading from the sky as he mulled over her answer and gradually began to feel impressed by her conviction.

6.

Rebecca and Patrick put off their dinner date a week so that the morning of Simone’s horrendous deed wouldn’t be quite so vivid in their minds when they met.
Of course they didn’t say this outright—rather, Rebecca complained of feeling under the weather and Patrick also mumbled something about weather—that it was too rotten to go out in anyway. The following weekend seemed like a much better alternative, and by the time it came around, they were both energized and excited at the prospect of seeing each other again.

The nights were getting colder by then, and the wind was blowing around the yellowed leaves that were now littering the streets in patterned quilts of bright and earthy colours. Rebecca cycled through them as fast as her old red hybrid bicycle would carry her. She was late, of course, which was woefully typical of her. It wasn’t that she wasn’t eager to go to this meeting; in fact, quite the contrary reason had made her late. She’d been trying on one outfit and another, tying her hair back, leaving it down, and skyping Jill on the computer for her opinion on each new alternative.

She finally arrived at the restaurant flushed and a little out of breath, about fifteen minutes after their scheduled meeting time. Patrick didn’t seem to mind. In fact, each time he saw Rebecca after a little while had passed, he was usually struck again at how beautiful she was. Rebecca sensed that he was admiring her, and it made her feel shy and playful.

She hugged him warmly when she saw him. “Hi. Sorry I’m late.”

“That’s okay. I just went ahead and ate without you.”

“What?” Rebecca laughed, and they slid their way into opposite ends of the pine booths they were sitting in. The huge glass chandelier that was hanging about
them gave off a cheerful glow, and the sound of tinkling silverware and animated conversation made the atmosphere of the restaurant bright and festive.

“It’s nice to see you again,” Patrick smiled at her after they sat a moment in silence that seemed to bubble with anticipation.

“Nice to see you, too.” Rebecca smiled back and felt a ripple of excited energy surge through her.

They ordered pizza and wine, and soon the conversation started flowing as if they were school chums catching up after years of not seeing each other. They covered all sorts of topics—their mutual disinterest and frustration with politics, books they had read and loved, books they had read and discarded half way through, their strongest memories from childhood, their passion for the arts and culture, their ideas of the supernatural, and their hopes and aspirations for the future. Both felt comfortable and expressive of who they were with the other, and both experienced the other as a natural vehicle to express themselves. They laughed more toward the end of the night, when more wine had been drunk and they were both feeling fully at ease.

But one subject that never seemed to enter the sphere of their conversation was Simone. It was as if in the process of getting to know each other, they’d temporarily forgotten what their original connection had been. They’d been so drawn in and fascinated at hearing how the other functioned, that each felt like an entirely new person to the other—and that initial impression, the grounded but serious Special Ed teacher or the attractive but slightly neurotic student’s sister
seemed so far away that it felt like an entirely different person from the one facing them now.

But when they stepped out of the restaurant and walked to their bicycles at the end of the night, reality came rushing back to them like indigestion.

There was an awkward silence through which Simone passed like a ghost over their heads.

“So. How is your sister?” Patrick asked cautiously.

Rebecca sighed and smiled self-consciously. Then she laughed a little. “I wondered if we were going to talk about her!”

Patrick smiled but there was sadness in his eyes that made Rebecca feel suddenly selfish for not wanting to talk about Simone for fear of ruining a great evening. She decided to answer truthfully. “Honestly, she’s not great.”

“Oh.” Patrick looked up at the sky, and a cloud passed over his face. “I kind of suspected as much. I’m really sorry to hear that.”

“Yeah, me too.” They started pushing their bikes west along the street.

Patrick was actually going east, but he wasn’t ready to have the night end just yet.

“She spent several days in a row up in her room – I was actually getting really worried- but now, well she still isn’t talking, but at least she’s started sitting at the table with us.”

“And is her being at home okay? I mean, don’t you guys have to work?”

“That’s been okay, actually. My mother is taking some holiday time right now. So in that respect, it’s been perfect timing.”
“Oh. Well that’s good anyway. And do you guys have any more ideas now as to what provoked the whole thing?”

“None. It’s still a big fat mystery.”

“So strange.”

“Tell me about it. It’s got to be something big, though. The frog thing happened just after our dad left.”

“Mm. I thought the same thing. I really wish I could talk to her. We started to develop quite the rapport there.”

“Yeah, I got that impression. Well, maybe she’ll be back at school soon.”

“Yeah.” Patrick looked at Rebecca soberly. “Although things have been a little funny there. I don’t know if you know this, but some people on the staff were really upset about Mila. It might be better to wait until things calm down.”

“Mm. I suppose. And we’ll have to see when Simone’s ready, too.”

They continued walking and talking for several more blocks until Patrick finally decided to ignore the wind and the dropping temperature and walk Rebecca all the way to her house. When they turned onto her street, their conversation slowed down in anticipation of parting, and when they reached her house, both felt suddenly awkward at saying goodbye. They turned to each other, at a loss for words for the first time in the evening, and Rebecca had a sudden, panicky impulse to turn away. But Patrick caught the moment quickly and moved in to kiss her warmly on the mouth.

They squeezed each other’s hands and smiled as they said their goodbyes, promising to talk again soon. When Rebecca got inside her house a few minutes
later, she felt like she was queen of the world and that nothing in it would ever be able to make her feel bad again. She was wrong, of course, but she didn’t realize just how fast her sister might orchestrate this change in her mood.

7.

From the outside, it appeared to everyone watching as though Simone had completely shut down. She had withdrawn into herself, she was unresponsive, and as far as Linda and Rebecca were concerned, she hadn’t uttered a single word since the day she had killed Mila two and a half weeks before. But as it turned out, they were wrong about that. In actual fact, Simone was going through little spurts of extensive communication, so much so that in some respects, she had never been so talkative before.

The individual she was conversing with was Paul. It might have been because he was a cat that Simone felt so liberated with him, or it might have been that the chemistry between them just worked. Whatever it was, Simone found that Paul was able to slip onto her wavelength effortlessly, and he didn’t carry those heavy chains of convention and social propriety that boggled Simone’s mind about the regular world at the best of times. As a result, she was able to follow the logic of her unique mind without jolting or confusing him and, in so doing, she could be herself without shutting down the conversation.

Subsequently, it was a funny time for Simone. On one hand, she was comforted and stimulated by her new friendship with Paul, but on the other, she was still aching from the sting of Patrick and Rebecca’s developing relationship and
what she had done to Mila in response to it. The whole night they were out on their first dinner date, for instance, Simone felt like she had been swallowed up by a black thundercloud. She moped around the house like she was in a trance, all the while radiating an intensity that was so repellant, even Paul steered clear of her for the evening. When Rebecca seemed so happy the next day, Simone’s mood deepened into darkness again, and Rebecca had to stay a good distance from her to hang onto her now teetering feeling of hope that her date with Patrick had inspired in her. But while these moments might scare off a human, Paul let the memory of them slide off his back once they’d passed like a duck shakes off water.

Over time, one might predict that Simone would eventually get used to hearing Rebecca’s phone conversations with Patrick and would start to anticipate her sister’s more frequent dates with him. On the contrary, Simone seemed to be getting worse in this respect. She was becoming rigid and unwavering in her reaction; her hurt and sense of injustice stemmed from deep inside her and refused to be reasoned with. She had decided without a moment’s doubt to never return to school again and not to talk to her mother and sister until she was good and ready. Which at this rate, looked like it might be never.

8.

Staying home and playing nursemaid to her second daughter was driving Linda into the ground. She was already worried sick about money and then having to face the daughter who made her feel like her life was a complete failure was proving to be a toxic combination. She had managed to set up some meager social
assistance for the three months she’d be off work, but the first cheque wasn’t due to arrive until the end of the month, and in the meantime she found herself having to scrape together funds to get the most basic supplies. She had already tried calling on her younger sister, Gwenyth, to help out, but she was still on assignment in Africa and couldn’t be reached easily. She even considered calling Leonard, a thing she never stooped to, and asking him to pitch in for the sake of his daughters. But she couldn’t bring herself to go that far just yet. No, so far this was a battle she was fighting entirely by herself. Even Rebecca and Simone (or anyone else for that matter) didn’t know the real reason she was off work because Linda was far too proud to tell them. Instead, she stoically stuck to her story about being on holiday and got angry when anyone pressed her to elaborate.

She’d pulled her head out of the sand enough to notice that Rebecca hadn’t been home as much as usual and while that left Linda alone with Simone more frequently, it also meant that her oldest daughter was asking fewer questions. And that was a good thing at least. But the stress of having to deal with Simone on her own was making her feel increasingly on edge. She was plagued with nightmares, she had trouble falling asleep at night and then woke up with chest pain, dizziness, and nausea. During the day, her irritability was out of control, and the only thing that would soothe it was drinking, which she started to do earlier and earlier in the day. She knew she was playing with fire when it came to looking after her health, but an irrational side of her personality was enjoying that fact and was even egging on this destructive streak to see what crazy and lonely places it might lead her.
As any doctor could have predicted, one morning it did lead somewhere. She woke up late after a particularly heavy night of drinking to discover that either Rebecca hadn’t come home the night before, or else she’d left in the morning without giving Simone any breakfast. The house was quiet; usually Rebecca was splashing around in the bathroom or making coffee down in the kitchen at this hour, but today only the sound of Paul padding around on his soft paws could be heard creaking the wood on the floor downstairs. It occurred to her that perhaps Rebecca was still sleeping (which also would have been an unusual habit for her oldest daughter), but when she struggled to sit up in bed and lean forward to gaze down the hallway, she could see that her daughter’s door was wide open—and she never neglected to close it before falling asleep.

So as she collapsed back onto her bed it dawned on her pretty fast that it was up to Linda to get some breakfast for Simone. Except her body felt weak and painful whenever she tried to move. Rolling onto her side, she pushed herself up with her arms but quickly found that this effort left her breathless and dizzy. To try to right the spinning of the room, she let her head hang down toward the mattress and, in this position, took a full minute or two to catch her breath. But instead of steadying her, her arms started to shake, and she suddenly broke out in a cold sweat. A wave of nausea erupted from deep inside of her, and she moaned without being entirely aware that she was doing so. Then, in a wave of frustration with her stupid misbehaving body, she heaved herself up to a standing position and practically toppled over once she arrived there. Panting and shaking, she held onto the edges of her dresser drawers to keep herself upright. But just at that moment, Paul
walked into her bedroom and looked up at her with some concern. When she raised her head to see what the creak in the floor was caused by this time, she looked a moment into Paul’s green luminous eyes that seemed to understand where this was all going before she crumpled unconscious into a sweaty heap on the floor.

9.

Paul sat a moment examining Linda’s body and the strange shape it had formed into as it lay on the hardwood floor. He walked over and gave her a sniff. She didn’t smell drunk, he decided, but he’d never seen a human collapse like that for any other reason. He supposed that in this case, Simone was the only one available to give him his breakfast. And he didn’t at all feel confident that she’d be able to carry out the task.

He found her lying awake in bed and staring at the plastic glow-in-the-dark stars and moons that were dotted onto her blue ceiling. Even though the sun was bright outside, she kept her blinds closed, so she could see these shiny stickers more easily.

“Time to get up, Simone.”

“Is it? Rebecca didn’t come to get me.”

“She’s not here.”

“Or my mother.”

“Yes, well—I think there’s something wrong with her.”

“Me too.”

“No, I mean— I mean she just collapsed.”
She turned to look at him and her expression didn’t change. “What’s collapsed?”

“Fell. She fell in her bedroom downstairs.”

“Oh.”

Seeing his little confidant not reacting, Paul considered the possible meanings of this. “I don’t really know, but she may need a doctor.”

“She may need a doctor?”

“Yeah. Do you know one?”

“You do?”

“No. Do you?”

“No.” They sat a moment in silence.

“Why is Rebecca not here?”

“I don’t know. Do you know where she could be?”

Suddenly Simone thought of Patrick, and her face darkened as she turned away from Paul. “No.”

“Hmm.” Paul understood Simone’s sensitivity on this point, and he didn’t press her further. “Do you want to come and see her?”

“Rebecca?” Simone’s eyes seemed to search the ceiling for something that wasn’t there.

“No. Your mom.”

“Oh. Okay.” She didn’t move and Paul sensed that she might need more direction on this point.

“Okay. So you just get up then and go down in your pyjamas.”
“You mean—just get out of bed?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay. Now?”

“Yes. Right now.”

Simone pulled down her covers and then got out of bed slowly. She was perfectly capable of doing all the actions involved in this process but always seemed to need an invitation to do so. She walked to the closet and put on her green bathrobe and then stepped carefully down the stairs toward her mother’s bedroom, following closely behind her cat, who looked back to check on her every few steps.

10.

It was a full forty-five minutes before Linda opened her eyes in the hospital room. Rebecca spent that whole time staring at the green wash of paint smeared over the walls with that utility flare so common in hospitals, the numerous machines that gurgled and beeped around the bed, and the intricate network of tubes that twisted around and poked into her mother’s face and body. And of course, she took this time to study her mother’s sleeping face. She was always drawn to that anger line between her mother’s eyes in particular—that line that seemed to deepen every year. She also examined the permanently darkened patches beneath her eyes, and the slightly parted lips that now looked so thin and pale—so different from the brightly painted, firmly held pair that she normally closed on the world. No, lying in this state today, she looked relaxed and almost peaceful—as if in its infinite wisdom,
her body had stepped in to put a stop to her mother’s shenanigans—the toxic and destructive lifestyle that couldn’t continue a day longer.

Rebecca arrived home minutes after her mother had collapsed, and moments after Simone had made her way into her bedroom. She found her sister staring down at their mother with a blank confusion and Linda crumpled into a heap beside her wardrobe. She flew immediately into action. It was lucky that their retired neighbour, Mrs. Sarazin, had been home and available to come and look after Simone because bringing her sister along to the hospital was the last thing Rebecca wanted to do. She was worried enough about her mother and she didn’t need to have her sister exacerbate the situation. Upon discovering her, Rebecca’s shaking hands punched out the number for the ambulance, and then she ran next door to see if Mrs. Sarazin was home. Simone darted into her bedroom when Mrs. Sarazin arrived and became so extra cautious that she wouldn’t let Mrs. Sarazin anywhere near her bedroom door. Rebecca wasn’t exactly comfortable with the arrangement, but at least Mrs. Sarazin knew Simone somewhat and had been called on to fulfill this duty before, so she tried to push some of the more disturbing images out of her mind of the things that could go wrong when Simone was left alone with a virtual stranger, and she tried instead to focus on helping her mother.

Before waking, Linda’s eyes rolled around under their lids, and then she winced as if a searing pain had suddenly blazed through her. She waited for it to pass before she opened her eyes.
“Mom?” Rebecca whispered to her. “Mom, you’re in the hospital.” Rebecca leaned over her and tried to speak slowly and with reassurance despite the message carried by her words. “You had some kind of accident. You collapsed.”

Linda didn’t look at all like herself as she took in this news. For a moment, she looked as vulnerable and scared as a child, and Rebecca felt strange—conspicuous as she held her mother’s gaze.

“They’re saying it’s your heart. The doctors say that if you continue with your lifestyle, if you keep—keep drinking as much as you do—”

“Oh please!” This warning was all Linda needed, for better or for worse, to bring her back to her old defensive self. Rebecca didn’t broach the subject of her mother’s drinking very much anymore—too many attempts that had ended in discouragement made her give up on that when she was a teenager—but Linda was still evidently very adept at shutting down anyone who tried.

“Okay, Mom. Don’t take it from me, then. Talk to the doctor. He says he’s very concerned about you.”

Linda’s expression was momentarily hard to read; it looked as though Rebecca might have actually touched a nerve. But finally when she did open her mouth, she disappointed Rebecca by changing the subject.

“Where were you last night?”

Rebecca reddened. “Excuse me?”

“Where were you last night? You obviously didn’t come home.”
Rebecca was mainly thrown off at the abruptness with which her mother was changing gears. Also, as she rightly sensed, there was some underlying suspicion behind the question. “I—I was at a friend’s.”

“Which friend?”

Rebecca paused and held her mother’s challenging eyes. Then she began to get angry. “Are you driving at something here, Mom?”

“No. Why? Are you hiding something from me?”

“No! I’m not hiding anything. We just haven’t talked in a while, that’s all.”

“Well, we’re talking now!”

Rebecca shifted uncomfortably in the hard wooden chair. “You’re acting like you know something.”

“Am I?”

“Yeah. And you’re acting like I’m betraying you or something.”

“Well, I wonder why that is? Let’s see. Maybe it’s because I don’t particularly like hearing about the goings-on with my daughter through other people.”

“Who have you been talking to?”

“Simone’s teacher Anna told me all about it.”

“Anna? Anna told you? What does Anna know?”

“A hell of a lot more than I do, apparently!”

“Mom—,” Rebecca looked around the room and felt suddenly confused at how quickly they had gotten onto this subject. A minute or two ago her mother had been out cold and now suddenly she was defending herself against her like this was any ordinary day. Evidently her mother was feeling back to her old self again. “I
haven’t been keeping anything from you on purpose. It’s all pretty new. Why can’t I have some privacy?”

“Well normally you can but these circumstances are different. He’s Simone’s teacher, Rebecca. Her favourite teacher so Anna says. And she thinks that Simone’s shitty behaviour recently might be in reaction to you two hooking up.”

“What?” Rebecca felt a hot surge flow through her spine. “Don’t be ridiculous, Mom. That can’t be true!”

“Well. She’s acting crazier than normal, right? She killed that bird for some reason. If you ask me, that sounds like something that might have pushed her over the edge.”

11.

At first, everyone at the Metropolitan Toronto Zoo was ecstatic over the news of Zoila the gorilla’s pregnancy. They had been trying to set her up for breeding for several years and were just starting to lose hope when it finally happened. That’s why when the other gorillas began to treat her differently once her belly started to swell up to a noticeable size, the zookeepers started to worry. It had been so difficult to get her pregnant and now that she was, they didn’t want any unpredictable behaviours upsetting the course of their plan. But soon they had very little doubt about it. The other band members were beginning to act very strangely toward Zoila, and it seemed to be in reaction to her pregnancy. They turned their backs on her and prevented her from joining their circles when they sat around and
groomed each other. When there was food to be had, they pushed and bit and made sure she was the last to get any.

This behaviour was perplexing to the zookeepers, who had never known their gorillas to be hostile to one another before. They tried to feed Zoila before the others, tried to give her toys and objects that might interest the rest of the band, but nothing seemed to work in giving her a leg up. Finally, not knowing how else to handle it, Manuel, the head zookeeper for the gorillas, made a point of observing the gorillas in detail to see what was going on. Without interfering with their strange new inclinations, he observed them from his windowed office above the gorilla pen for the better part of two days. Finally, it became clear to him that this aggressive exclusion of Zoila seemed to be largely instigated by one gorilla whom the others were imitating. This gorilla was Katie, the alpha female.

Katie was younger than Zoila by about five years. She had six children of her own, which was often the maximum number any female could have, and the youngest of her children was now about four years old, which meant that physically he was beginning to resemble an adult.

Katie was respected and evidently a little feared by the rest of the band. Manuel had been somewhat aware of this fact before, but after these two days it became clear just how much influence she wielded. She had coupled with George, the alpha male, and she was the only other group member who could stand up to him. Previous to Zoila’s pregnancy, Katie had always seemed to get along fine with her, and it remained a mystery as to where this sudden hostility was coming from. Manuel could only chalk it up to jealousy on the part of Katie, who took her role as
mother very seriously. He hoped the situation would work itself out on its own, and so he was disappointed to see it continuing a couple of weeks later. He considered isolating Zoila but ultimately decided that doing so might jeopardize her chances of reacceptance, and especially with her baby coming, this might do more harm than good. Consequently, Manuel could think of no alternative other than to have Zoila face what was becoming an increasingly difficult situation on her own. She ate by herself and passed many hours sitting and rocking her pretend baby while the other gorillas sat together in social circles. It was hard to tell if she minded this isolation or even if she was aware that it was happening to her. But at some point, she stopped trying to be included in the group, and eventually the others began to treat her as though she wasn’t there.

12.

“Linda—you can’t continue like this.” Dr. Ernie Fowler was standing at the foot of Linda’s hospital bed, her file clutched in his hand, with a serious expression fixed on his small rodent-like face. Linda had met him in passing before—at staff Christmas parties and hospital meetings, but this was the first time she’d ever been alone with him. In fact, thankfully she didn’t know many people who worked on the floor she’d ended up on. A number of nurses knew and recognized her, however, and Linda sensed that her reputation had preceded her here. Dr. Fowler paused, waiting for her to meet his eye, but Linda continued to look steadily at the wall behind him. She knew exactly the kind of patient she was being for Ernie, but she didn’t care.
“It’s the beginning stage of Atrial Fibrillation. And it means that your heart can’t take the stress of your excessive drinking habits anymore. This collapse you had was your body’s way of warning you that if you don’t begin to cut down, it could lead to a stroke.”

Again, silence swallowed up the last of Dr. Fowler’s words, after which he stood there feeling increasingly frustrated at Linda’s seeming lack of response. He was normally a mild mannered man, but he found himself most affected when his patients didn’t appear to take an interest in their own failing health. He shifted the weight on his feet and, lowering Linda’s file to his side, he let out another sigh.

“Do you have any questions, Linda? I realize it can be awkward to talk about a drinking problem with a colleague. But this is my profession, and you need help. Is there anything you want to ask me while I’m here?”

Again Linda didn’t respond and didn’t shift her gaze to look at this man who was trying so hard to reach out to her. At times like these, she very much resembled a sulking six year old whose favourite toy had been taken away from her and hidden on top of the refrigerator. And Dr. Fowler had had enough.

“Okay then. You can ask the nurses if you think of anything.” He turned and walked toward the door and just as he touched the doorknob, Linda made a sound.

“How—,” her voice was hoarse and congested from not having spoken in hours, and she had to clear her throat before continuing. “How am I supposed to—I don’t think I can stop drinking.”

Dr. Fowler returned to the foot of her bed and now his expression was open, and there were hints of compassion around his mouth and eyes. “Why not?”
Linda looked at him for the first time since he had come into the room.

“Because my daughter causes me too much stress,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Your daughter? How so?”

“She’s autistic. And a handful. She just killed her school bird with her bare hands and now she refuses to go back to school.”

“I see.” Dr. Fowler took in this information in stride. “Well—that is something, isn’t it? Is there someone to look after her while you’re at work?”

“No—and that’s the worst part. I’m—well, I’m off work for the next three months, so it’s just me alone with her all day.”

Dr. Fowler didn’t take his eyes off Linda as she said this and seemed to sense there was more behind this statement than Linda was letting on. He didn’t push her. But as he thought about how to solve her predicament, he again didn’t relax the intensity of his gaze. “I can’t tell you what to do with your daughter, Linda. But I can emphasize—urgently—that you avoid stress for the next few months at all costs. For the sake of your health you need to be able to relax and give your body and mind a good rest. If there’s someone who could come in and help with your daughter, or if there’s a place she could go for a while—to a relative’s, a friend’s, or to a professional’s, I strongly advise you to do that. If your conditions worsens, you won’t be any good to her at all.”

Linda and her doctor maintained sober eye contact for several moments once he finished speaking. “Thank you, Ernie,” Linda said finally, and Dr. Fowler left the room, leaving Linda alone with her own thoughts.
She shifted around in her bed. How strange it was to find herself back here in this role reversal. She wondered briefly if Mr. Winters knew she was here. She hoped not but doubted it at the same time. That man made the habits of the mice in the basement of the hospital his business. Still—there was something nice about just having to lie here and do nothing. Something nice about being with her thoughts. Now she found herself turning over in her mind this new idea that her colleague had suggested. Send Simone away. She mulled over this thought. At first it had seemed so impossible, but as she lay there overlooking the barren parking lot and the bright November sun, the idea took on more shape and potential in her mind. There wasn’t a relative that would do it—her own mother was too old, and now Leonard wouldn’t go near Simone with a ten-foot pole. Gwenyth might have been the only real contender, but she was in Africa and wouldn’t be back anytime soon. No, the friend and relative option wasn’t in the realm of possibility, but a group of professionals who knew what they were doing was sounding more and more appealing to Linda. Because the idea had always provoked so much horror and dread in both Simone and Rebecca, she had never considered it seriously before. But maybe as far as their limited options went, it wasn’t such a bad idea in the end. Finally, the more she thought about it, the more the doctor’s strong words about Simone began to fill her with something like relief.

13.

As it turned out, Paul had been following the story of Zoila, the pregnant gorilla at the zoo, from its very beginning. He first heard a report in passing when
Linda flicked on the radio while making a batch of spaghetti and meatballs one night. And since then, he’d been able to sit down on Rebecca’s lap a couple of times and steal a glance at an article or two in the newspaper as well. It wasn’t that these reports were particularly captivating (they consisted mainly of updates as to Zoila’s continuing health and countdowns to the projected date), but Paul took an interest in them because he’d always had a soft spot for little ones in general, he supposed, without going so far as to actually become a father himself. But that wasn’t for lack of trying. Several years before, he had tried to impregnate Mrs. Bergen’s calico cat with the unfortunate name of “Cattie”. (Mrs. Bergen’s English was not so good, and it was poor Cattie who suffered the relentless tauntings from the gang of neighbouring alley cats because of it.) Nonetheless, she was a beauty in her day, though a little on the older side for reproduction. It was a whim for Paul and Cattie, but one spring several years ago now, those two crazy kittens made a concerted effort at parenthood. Sadly, it wasn’t meant to be, and the moment passed them by like a raft floating lazily down a river.

After he and Cattie discussed the futility of their undertaking, Paul sank into a melancholy for several days. In his logical mind, he knew he could just pounce on a younger female and try again, but he was getting on in years at that point, and maybe he was a bit of a romantic, but now he felt that he had really been through something with Cattie. He didn’t want to sadden her at seeing Paul parade by with a litter of miniature cats that weren’t her own. So he accepted his fate and moved on. He wasn’t one to brood, and in no time at all, he was back to his old self again.
That was many years ago now. Since then, Cattie had long ago passed on after a tragic encounter with anti-freeze, and somehow to cope with her death, Paul took more and more of an avuncular liking to the little ones as he aged. So this story of Zoila really caught his eye; here also was an older female, no doubt a late bloomer like himself and Cattie, who was giving it a go. It was one of those uplifting, for want of a better term, “human” interest stories, and he found himself rooting for her.

14.

The atmosphere at the Rosemount Centre for People with Special Needs had been in an uproar ever since Simone left. A couple of members of the staff were so upset by the incident with Mila (and even with Flora before then) that they were doing everything in their powers to ensure that Simone not be admitted back to their school ever again. They felt she was a danger to others and that having her there was unfair to their other clients and staff members. But most of the others (including, most notably, Anna and Patrick) felt it was unjust to turn her away from their doors. They argued that people like her had no other feasible recourse to turn to; it didn’t make sense to refuse her access when she so obviously needed help.

As the boss, Anna of course had the authority to lay down whatever law she saw fit and let the messy chips fall where they may. But the staff members who were against her in the debate were so adamantly convinced of the validity of their demands, that Anna feared that turning against them would not only cause them to leave on the worst terms she could possibly imagine, but that their resignations might be followed by lawsuits. And she didn’t want that.
Consequently, Simone had been gone for two weeks now, during which time Anna’s school had transformed into a tense and stressful environment, the likes of which Anna never imagined possible before. Arguments broke out every day after they first called a meeting to discuss the issues, and once it became clear that the two sides were rooted beyond compromise in their beliefs, there were a couple of staff members who cut off all but the most perfunctory communication with the pro-Simone side. Worst of all, the students seemed to sense that something momentous was happening within the safe shelter of their walls, so suddenly anxiety and discipline became factors to contend with.

All of this was putting Anna over the edge. She was already high strung by nature, and this situation was proving almost too much for her to handle. She managed to put on a brave face in front of her staff, but every day when she got home, she had a good cry to her husband, Gregory, or to her best friend Meryl over the telephone.

The crisis seemed to reach a pinnacle one day when a young woman with dark brown hair that was cut in a square shape around the angular features of her face, knocked on Anna’s office door. The moment she introduced herself as Natalia from “The Animal Rights Coalition”, Anna knew this was the woman whose calls she’d been avoiding all week.

“Are you Anna Cavanaugh?” The young woman, who had a slight Russian accent, smiled almost shyly as she asked the question.

“That’s right.”
“I’m Natalia from the Animal Rights Coalition. I tried calling you few times this week.”

“Natalia!” Anna stood up and clasped the hand of this stranger with as much warmth as she could muster. “I’m sorry, but it’s been such a crazy week. I just haven’t had time to get back to you. Would you like to sit down?”

Natalia paused a little uncomfortably as if she didn’t want to begin this conversation on too friendly a note. She had come here on a mission, and she intended to see it through. Finally, she took a chair across from Anna, but, in a kind of compromise to herself, kept her coat on. “I’ve come about Mila, the budgie that your student Simone Malmquist has killed.”

“Yes, I assumed that’s why you were here.”

“I understand that you are considering this student to be allowed back at your school. And we in our organization want to prevent that action.”

“I see.” Anna leaned back in her chair and tried to appear calm. “Well—this student that you’re speaking about—”

“Simone Malmquist,” Natalia jumped in.

“Yes—Simone.” Anna spoke slowly, hoping that her pace would not only show her authority to this young activist, but also diffuse some of her bristling energy. “Simone is autistic. This school has been created expressly to help people with issues like hers. Sometimes the behaviour of these people is difficult, is challenging for an organization such as ours. But helping people exactly like Simone is the reason we exist in the first place. I honestly feel it would be irresponsible for us to turn her away.”
Natalia looked angered but also prepared for Anna’s response. She swallowed and straightened in the chair. “But isn’t it also irresponsible to keep her here where there are other animals, other classmates who you are putting at risk?”

“We are trained professionals who have learned to prepare for eventualities such as this.”

“But nobody prepared for Mila’s death, yes? Nobody here could prevent that.”

“No, unfortunately, we weren’t.”

“And many of those trained professionals you say about agree that Simone shouldn’t be let to come back here.”

“I’m aware of that.”

“In fact, many of them think media should get involved. That we should go to Simone’s house and request interview and let public judge—”

“Interview Simone? Oh that wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“I’m just letting you know what is discussed about this issue, Mrs. Cavanagh. I just want you to know what’s maybe will happen if you don’t do what’s right.”

“So you’re bribing me, then?” Anna felt a shot of heat fire in her blood at the protectiveness she felt for Simone.

“Not bribing, no. But, you know, there are consequences for our actions in life.”

“Yes, there are. And putting an autistic girl with great social challenges into the limelight–and God knows what would follow after that- also will have consequences. I just don’t believe that you know what they are.”
“I know everything I need.”

“Or everything you want to know, anyway.”

“I think this conversation is finish now. Have a nice day, Mrs. Cavanagh.”

And with that, Natalia got up from her chair, slung her brown corduroy bag over her shoulder, and made her way out the door, leaving Anna burning in her thoughts of how this would all turn out.

15.

Zoila just didn’t know what she was doing wrong. She’d always been calm and mild-mannered as far as gorillas went, and in spite of the fact that she kept a relatively low profile in the band, she had always felt she was basically well liked. Nothing could explain this sudden change in the other’s behaviour toward her; nothing made any sense. The only thing that had changed was the fact that she was pregnant, and the only conclusion she could draw from this was that the other gorillas didn’t like that.

Or rather, Katie didn’t like that. Zoila was no dummy, and it soon became clear to her that Katie was the one leading this group shunning of Zoila and her future baby. She was the mother of six and had always considered herself a veritable champion of parenthood. When she had had her first baby, she was considerably younger than Zoila was now, so Zoila thought that maybe she disapproved of Zoila’s getting pregnant at such an advanced age. Or perhaps she didn’t appreciate having her presumptions proved wrong—that someone she had pegged as one thing in her mind was becoming someone else entirely. Or maybe she
was afraid of losing importance in the band somehow—that Zoila’s new situation was going to divert everyone’s attention away from her.

Whatever it the reason, she was doing her best to make Zoila’s life a living nightmare. She stole her food and her toys, she sat in groups at a distance from Zoila, and she temporarily excluded anyone who seemed to take pity on her. And for better of for worse, Zoila gradually became accustomed to her predicament. She eventually got herself through the days without too much heartache. She had the benefit of the baby hormones pumping through her, which helped, and she was truly looking forward to this new direction her life was about to take. But she still secretly hoped that everything would turn around once her baby was born, that the rest of her band would forget its petty squabbling or jealousies or whatever it was that was causing the hostility and welcome her back into its fold.

As the days went on, her swelling frame literally pushed all other thoughts and worries out of her mind. She was getting bigger and more uncomfortable by the hour, it seemed, and the other gorillas, seeming to sense that she was very near her due date, eventually gave her a little bit less of a hard time. She was having trouble moving around easily and became cranky and more irritable with the other gorillas and zookeepers. She found herself increasingly impatient to get the baby out from inside her. Finally, early in the morning on a chilly day in December, her little one agreed that now was the time.
In the meantime, Rebecca was doing her best to try to push the thought out of her mind that she and Patrick were a major cause for Simone’s breakdown. Things had been going very well with Patrick, and this thought threw a nasty wrench into her otherwise thriving fantasy world and joyful reality. When she felt strong and centered, she outright resented her mother for planting the idea in her head in the first place, but when she felt more vulnerable and unsure of herself, the possibility slithered around like a snake through her thoughts and seemed ready to spread its venom.

She and Patrick hadn’t actually spoken about this particular subject just yet. In fact, they had still spoken very little about Simone, and the longer their courtship continued, the more conspicuous this omission seemed to both of them. As a result, Rebecca didn’t know for sure whether Patrick had also entertained this same possibility. She couldn’t have known, for example, that this same idea was keeping Patrick up nights ever since Anna had made it her business to express her views to him once she’d gotten wind of his developing relationship. Anna, who was usually very respectful of her staff members’ privacy, evidently felt wholly justified in butting in if that privacy encroached on the well-being of one of her students.

Needless to say, Patrick was also very excited about Rebecca, and he didn’t want to put their new relationship at risk by saying or doing the wrong thing anymore than Rebecca did. But the situation with Simone was starting to weigh heavily on him now; she had profoundly effected the calm of his workplace, and he couldn’t help but sense that both his mother and Anna’s hunches were at least partly
true. As a result, he felt the time had come in which to take some kind of action. He felt strongly that Simone had trusted him at one point and that he might be able to get that connection back if he had the chance. He wasn’t sure how Simone would feel if he tried to see her, but he thought it was worth a try. But first, he needed to talk it over with Rebecca.

The next time they saw each other, he was making her dinner at his apartment for the third weekend in a row. He was a good cook and, like many people with this hobby, felt the most inspired when he was cooking for people he wanted to impress. He took a lot of care in the presentation of the food, the way the table looked, and the overall atmosphere in which it was served. And his apartment was a good choice for occasions such as these. It was cozy and warm, and the cluttered kitchen looked cute and inviting in candlelight.

Rebecca had arrived about half an hour earlier in high spirits and was presently nursing a glass of red wine as she recounted the ordeal of her mother’s release from the hospital.

“So she’s fine now?” Patrick asked.

“I guess if you call railing on the entire nursing staff and then threatening them with a law suit fine—yeah, I suppose she’s fine now.”

“Doesn’t she work there?”

“Yeah—but not in that department.”

“I guess she’s not too worried about losing friends, then.”

“Linda? Oh God, no!”

Patrick laughed. “Well, they say that nurses make the worst patients, right?”
“Oh don’t let her off the hook that easily! I don’t think my mother is a typical nurse turned patient in that respect. But at least she’s back to her old self again.”

“And...” -Patrick anticipated the joke that might follow his comment- “that must be a relief?”

Rebecca made an exaggerated face to indicate that she wasn’t so sure, and Patrick laughed when he turned around and saw it. “I don’t know if that’s the word, really,” Rebecca said, also laughing. “No, no, I’m kidding. I was worried about her there, and I’m glad she got through it.”

“Of course. I like your mom, actually. She’s got spunk.”

“Oh yeah, she’s got loads of that, all right.”

Patrick was decorating some large tomato slices with parsley sprigs and he kept his back turned from Rebecca as he finished this delicate operation. He felt suddenly serious as he thought about bringing up the subject of Simone. Somehow, Rebecca seemed to sense this and there was an awkward pause. “And Simone? How’s that famous sister of yours?”

Rebecca smiled. “Famous or infamous?”

“I guess that depends on your point of view. It’s true that she’s fallen out of favour with some of the teachers at the school.”

Rebecca looked pained. “Really? Oh God, I was afraid of that. Anna’s not one of them, I hope?”

“No, no. Anna’s a devout fan—as am I. I really miss her around there. I thought I’d like to come around and see her actually.”

“Oh yeah?”
“Yeah. It’s some of the other staff members that are having issues. I haven’t really wanted to tell you the extent of it at this point, actually, but it’s getting pretty nasty. In fact,” Patrick cleared his throat, “a couple of them don’t want Simone to ever come back. They’ve even got an animal rights person backing them.”

Rebecca seemed to go pale as she heard this. She gazed down at the table and tried to collect her thoughts. “Really?” Patrick walked up behind her and put his hand on her shoulder. “You hadn’t heard that?”

“No.” Rebecca cleared her throat. “An animal rights person? What would they do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe get the media involved. Maybe try to interview her or something.”

“God—the media?” Rebecca stood up and folded her arms across her stomach. “Simone can’t be interviewed! They obviously don’t know who they’re dealing with.”

“I know, I know. They have no idea.”

“Oh God, this is a nightmare!”

“Well. It doesn’t have to go that far necessarily.”

Rebecca was silent for a moment. She chewed her thumbnail and scanned Patrick’s kitchen worriedly. Patrick turned slowly back to the counter, finished with the tomatoes, and then wiped his hands on a towel. Rebecca looked at him seriously. “And some people think that we are the reason that Simone got so upset in the first place.”
They looked at each other steadily, and she detected the heaviness and exhaustion emanating from his dark eyes.

“I know. I heard that, too. That’s why I wanted to come and see her. I thought maybe I could talk to her and explain things. Maybe calm her down.”

“I don’t know. She won’t even let me talk to her right now.”

“Maybe you’re too close. I don’t know. I’d feel so bad if that were true. And I’d feel like I owe her some kind of explanation.”

“Well. I suppose you could try.”

“Because I’m sure it’s something she’d get used to. You know if we—we were together for a while.”

Rebecca smiled shyly. “I hope we’re not the reason.”

“Me too. That would be awful.”

Patrick moved to her and hugged her tightly. He pulled away from her, and they looked at each other and something real but intangible passed between them. For a moment, they were purely driven by unselfconscious emotion and longing—and when they sensed this in each other, it only served to reinforce it in each of them. For a moment, Rebecca imagined that they might be driven away from each other through harsh circumstance, and a faint sound escaped from her lips. In the next instant, Patrick pressed his lips urgently against hers.

17.

The first few days immediately after giving birth were like a waking dream for Zoila. She felt weak from the ordeal for days afterwards, which left her feeling
exhausted, and there were many situations with her new one that she just didn’t have the experience to know how to deal with. The infant couldn’t latch onto her nipple without biting her, for example, and this became such a problem that finally the zookeepers had to take him away and feed him with a bottle. Then Zoila wasn’t used to holding onto something so delicate and demanding as a baby; her arms got tired so often that she frequently tried to put the baby down to give them a rest. But whenever she left him for too long, he would start screaming and squirming around until Zoila was forced to come over and pick him up again.

But on the good side of things, the situation with the other gorillas seemed to improve quite a bit after Zoila gave birth. They all wandered over to have a look at the new addition to their band, and they seemed mostly interested and supportive of the job that Zoila was doing. The sight of a newborn can soften the hardest of hearts, and Zoila was relieved that her baby had seemed to do the trick in leading her back into her band.

Or at least this is what she believed at the beginning. The real problem, of course, was Katie and not so much the other gorillas. Zoila sensed that if Katie accepted her back into her favour, then the rest of the gorillas would follow. And right after her baby had been born, Zoila believed or hoped for a moment, that she had succeeded in surmounting this tremendous feat. While it was true that it took Katie a much longer time to wander over and have a look at the baby herself, she didn’t try to prevent the others from doing so. Her power over them wasn’t so great as to squash their natural curiosity, it seemed. But for the first while, she acted as though she was wholly preoccupied by doing other things that were infinitely more
important than examining a newborn. She fastidiously cleaned and organized the bed in which she slept, for example, and spent a good hour picking the lint out of her youngest son’s fur, which served the dual function of keeping her busy and also ensuring that there was someone else with her while the others were busy with Zoila. No, while the other gorillas had all gone over to look, once, twice, or even three times in some cases, Katie stubbornly held out and wouldn’t even deign to look over in her direction. Zoila had become invisible to her and at that time, Zoila thought the situation would never change.

But she was wrong about that. Katie waited for the initial novelty to die down somewhat, and once it had and the atmosphere was calmer in the gorilla pen, she picked herself up suddenly and moved decisively over to Zoila and the sleeping newborn. The other gorillas couldn’t help but be curious about what she would do, how she would react once she reached the pair.

Zoila’s heart pounded fiercely once she realized what was happening, but she tried her best to remain calm. She knew this could be the much anticipated turning point in their relationship, and now she understood just how vital Katie’s acceptance of her was to her future well-being in the band.

Katie shuffled toward her with a purpose and determination that indicated she felt giving this baby her blessing was the long awaited and anticipated event on everyone’s mind. Her eyes were fixed on the infant and not on Zoila as she came over, and they remained that way until she crouched right next to the mother and child. It was only then that she looked up at Zoila with an expression that Zoila had some difficulty reading. It wasn’t friendly, but it didn’t feel outright hostile, either.
Zoila relaxed her grip on the baby as if to let Katie have a better look at him and then suddenly and without any warning, Katie snatched the baby out of Zoila’s arms and with a nasty whooping cry of victory, carried the screaming infant over to the other side of the pen, leaving Zoila shocked by what had just happened, and then quickly wailing and hysterical with loss.

18.

The next day, Patrick showed up at the Malmquist home to visit Simone, and the temperature had dropped considerably in the city and a light snow was falling that made the neighbourhood look quiet and peaceful, like a picture taken from a storybook. He and Rebecca had purposely chosen a day that Rebecca would be working at the bookstore; they agreed that it would be better for Simone if he came when Rebecca wasn’t there. And, they reasoned, it might also be better for Linda to see Patrick on her own as well. Unbeknownst to either his girlfriend or her mother, Patrick had something he wanted to discuss with her.

Rebecca had warned Linda that Patrick was coming, but she was undecided at first as to whether or not to warn Simone as well. Her sister was still being so unresponsive to her and Linda—she still wouldn’t speak to them or give them any reactions if they tried to communicate with her. Telling Simone that Patrick was planning on coming might have sent her into a frenzy of rebellion that could have prevented the visit before it even had a chance to become a reality.

So Rebecca decided ultimately to keep quiet about it. She knew it was a potentially risky choice, but she was frankly a little desperate to change something
in Simone’s behaviour and hoped that the element of surprise might help to jolt her out of the rut she had gotten herself into.

And fortunately, Patrick supported her in her thinking. He had been trained to believe that more stimulation and challenge was better for Simone than things remaining predictable and easy for her. Giving her a little push at this point might actually do her a lot of good.24

When he arrived at their house, Linda was the one to answer the door. She was somewhat surprised when she heard the doorbell and saw the looming figure of a man on the other side of the clouded glass because she had put the visit completely out of her mind after Rebecca mentioned it the day before. In fact, since her argument with Rebecca about Patrick in the hospital, she hadn’t been feeling up to par and found herself entirely distracted by her own thoughts and preoccupations.

She gathered her red bathrobe around her and left the dishes soaking in the sink before she answered the bell to the front door. When she saw him, she looked at Patrick coldly at first as if he were a neighbour coming to complain or an overly-casual delivery guy. She hadn’t seen him in a while and didn’t recognize him under his winter hat.

“Hi Linda,” Patrick smiled and immediately registered that he wasn’t being recognized. He scrambled to explain himself. “I’m Patrick, Simone’s teacher. I’ve come to see her. I think Rebecca told you I was coming.”

Linda looked at him ironically. “Simone’s teacher, eh? Right. Well, come in then.”
“Thanks.” Patrick stepped onto the fake Persian carpet that lined the warm hallway. He had never actually been inside this house before, and he wasn’t sure what to expect from the combination of his girlfriend, his favourite student, and their overbearing mother. It was inviting, and he was a little bit surprised by that; the inoffensive cream coloured walls were covered in art and photographs, and there were mirrors and bookcases covering the walls in the living room beside the hallway where he stood. The smell of coffee permeated the hallway.

“Simone’s upstairs. You’re going to scare the bejesus out of her, you know. Do you want tea or anything?”

“No thanks. I’m fine.”

“Okay. Well just drop your coat anywhere. I’ll just leave you to it.” Linda started to walk back to the kitchen and continued to speak to Patrick with her back to him. “She’s all the way on the third floor. The door straight across from the top of the stairs.”

“Thanks.” Patrick waved at Linda’s disappearing back before he ascended the stairs to the darkened hallway on the second floor. His heart was suddenly in his mouth as he felt like maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all.

On the other side of the door, Simone heard what sounded like different footsteps approaching her room. They were heavier than Linda’s, Rebecca’s, or certainly Paul’s, and they were approaching with a different sort of energy than she’d been accustomed to hearing lately. There was some purpose in the stride, and yet some hesitation, too, as if the person making them had a definite reason to visit her and yet was somehow uncertain about it, too.
Without warning, Simone felt like some animal of prey as she waited to see this mysterious visitor that was surely going to knock on her door in mere seconds. Her heart pounded in those few seconds after the footsteps stopped before the knock came.

“Simone?” came a man’s voice from the other side of the door. “Simone can I come in? It’s Patrick.”

The blood rushed to Simone’s head in a hot flood as she heard the visitor announce his name. She had been sitting on her sheepskin rug under the window and looking at her animal books with Paul lying next to her, and now she stared, frozen, at the picture of the baby armadillo without seeing what it was. Knowing that Simone might not respond to him in words and would likely not jump up to open her door, Patrick announced gently that he was going to open her door himself. Simone made no outward reaction to this news but rather continued to sit transfixed in front of her book. Patrick pushed the door open gingerly and walked inside her room.

“Hey Simone!” he said when he saw her, his voice almost in a whisper so as not to frighten her more than she probably already was.

He could see the enormous fear in her eyes as they stared fixedly at the images in her animal book, and he remembered how, at times when Simone felt most close to him, she would describe how her heart would beat so fast in these moments that it felt like her chest might explode. Patrick wanted to reach out and touch her arm to try to calm her, but he knew enough not to attempt this. He also tried not to stare at her too intently and looked away for long enough to allow her to
sneak a quick peek at him out of the corner of her eye. She did this, and at the same
time, she could smell and feel the cool outdoor air that he had brought into the room
with him. For a moment, she felt acutely how long she had trapped herself inside
her home, and she felt a sudden, almost primal desire to be outside herself. In an
instant, she burned with envy at his fearless freedom and independence—an
independence that she desperately yearned for and feared she would never
experience.

“Hey—I've missed you, Simone!” Patrick sat down beside her and was
careful to leave a gap of space between them. “How have you been doing?”

Simone paused. Her mother and sister had stopped asking her direct
questions in the past week or so, and she’d almost forgotten how to deal with one
that didn’t come from the mouth of a cat.

“Mmm,” she answered finally and looked quickly into Patrick's eyes for a fast,
hot second, marking the first tiny attempt at communication she had made in weeks.

“The school’s not the same without you, you know. It feels so quiet, so
lifeless. I miss seeing you every day.”

Simone wasn’t entirely sure how to deal with this information. If she’d been
able to look at what lay under her panic, she would have discovered that she
actually enjoyed seeing Patrick; she felt real affection and connection with him that
she knew was real. But on another level, she was still very angry with him for
betraying her. She continued to keep her eyes glued on the book in front of her,
with her heart still pounding wildly. She snuck another little peek at her former
favourite teacher, and this time, Patrick was able to smile at her. In that second,
Simone remembered their connection, how comfortable she used to feel with this man, and about some of the conversations they’d shared. Patrick sensed this silent opening and in whole body warmed to her in response. “That’s right, Simone. It’s me. I’m still the same as I always was.”

Simone began to relax a little, but as she did, the reality of Patrick’s betrayal of her grew larger in her mind. Then suddenly as she thought of this, something stronger than her considerable fear welled up in her heart. Her face scrunched up into its terrible angry expression and in a moment of bravery and forgetting herself, she glared at Patrick again, only for a moment or two but with such intensity that he was momentarily very unnerved. She looked away and a silence passed between them.

“You’re angry at me, Simone.” Patrick shifted uncomfortably on the floor.

“Can you tell me why? Is it because of Rebecca? Is that why you hurt Mila?”

Every word that Patrick uttered was like glass piercing Simone’s skin. She found that her breath started to come more rapidly and her body started to rock back and forth seemingly of its own accord. Then gradually, terribly, a low groan began to take shape in her mouth. Clutching onto her knees, she rocked herself backwards and forwards more urgently as the groan gained in volume and intensity and fierceness. Paul got to his feet and slinked over in the direction of the door. Patrick also got up onto his knees in alarm and leaned closer to Simone, hoping to calm her down. The last time he had seen her like this was the last day she’d been at the school and that awful memory was etched deep in his memory.
“Simone, shh...Simone. It’s okay; it’s okay. Please talk to me. I care for you. Look at me, please. Shh...I don’t want you to be angry with me.”

But Simone was far too gone to hear his words. Her groan was so loud now that it filled every corner of the room, and Paul was suddenly desperate to get out and take cover. Patrick shot to his feet and as he did so, he could hear Linda mounting the stairs and hollering up to the third floor. “Oh for God’s sakes! What did you do, teacher-man?”

19.

Linda was about to burst into the room just a moment before Patrick had decided it was in everyone’s best interest for him to leave it. Consequently, the door flung open just as Linda laid her hand on the doorknob, and Paul flew by her down the hallway as fast as his four furry legs could carry him.

“What the hell have you done to her?” Linda’s booming voice matched Simone’s in volume now. Her hand still held onto the door, and her dark hair seemed extra frizzy in all the chaos and confusion.

Patrick reddened at the accusation and threw his hands into the air in a gesture of hapless innocence. “Nothing! I’ve just been talking to her!”

“Oh! Well that’s just brilliant, isn’t it? Lucky for us that we have a professional to come in and do all the talking with her, eh? Weren’t you the one she was with when she killed the bird, too?”

“Look—Linda—I haven’t done anything here.” But Patrick was too shocked by Linda’s rudeness to make a coherent defense of himself.
“Yes—I can see that!” Linda’s sarcasm was particularly nasty when she was in the middle of a tirade. “You know—I knew this would happen. I don’t know why I ever allowed you to come here and fuck things up more than they already are.”

Patrick felt utterly humiliated as he shuffled out into the hallway and away from the screaming Simone. But despite this fact, as Linda ushered him down the corridor in front of her, something struck him as slightly funny about the way he was being shooed out of the house, and he almost laughed. He continued down the stairs at a slower pace and addressed Linda without fully turning around. “Linda—I know this looks bad, but she needs more stimulation than what she’s getting here. I’m sorry, but this might help to get her communicating more.”

“Oh yeah. It’s really helpful to have a screaming daughter in the house. And now that you’ve got her all stimulated and everything you can just leave me to deal with her! How convenient for you!”

Once Patrick got to the bottom of the stairs, he stopped and turned to face Linda, hoping that he could still leave with a modicum of his dignity still intact. “Linda—I know it’s been really hard for you lately. I heard about your collapse and the stress you’ve been under. I want to make it clear that I came here to try to help. I wanted to discuss some options with you.”

Linda folded her arms across her chest and looked at him suspiciously. “What sort of options?”

Patrick hadn’t at all envisioned this conversation unfolding quite like this, and now he tried to adjust himself to the present less-than-desirable circumstances. It seemed wrong at this point to suggest that they have a seat together in the living
room, so instead he leaned slightly on the wall in order to settle in for this exchange.

“Anna and I were talking—you know, things at the school have been quite crazy since Simone left. Some of the staff members are really upset at what happened with Mila and well, it’s hard to know what’s going to happen.”

“I know all this. What’s your point?”

“I just wondered whether you’ve thought about other alternatives—maybe sending Simone away temporarily might be good.”

Linda squinted her eyes at him and suddenly looked very tired. “I’m looking into group homes if that’s what you’re implying,” she said flatly.

“You are?”

Linda just stared at him as a response.

Patrick shifted uncomfortably. “Okay—well, I know some good ones, then, if you’re interested. As I said, I’m here to help and not make things worse.”

“Oh yeah?” Linda was leaning against the banister at the bottom of the stairs. “Well, in that case—do you know how you could really help, Patrick? If that’s what you really want to do in that noble heart of yours?”

“What?” Patrick was trepidacious about what this suggestion might be.

Linda leaned her head closer to Patrick’s and spoke the words slowly. “Stop fucking Rebecca!” Linda held onto Patrick’s eyes in a challenging look as the impact of her demand sank in. Patrick didn’t know how to respond to this, but once the initial shock passed, he found himself oddly a little more relaxed suddenly now that Linda had put her cards so sloppily on the table.

“I don’t quite know what to say to that, Linda,” he confessed, simply.
“Well. I’m not looking for words here. Plain old action will suit me just fine.”

Patrick continued to stare at her and finally he shook his head. “You’ve got a lot of nerve, you know that?” He turned and moved toward the front door, and Linda followed behind him.

“Yes—I’ve been told that before,” Linda almost smiled in pride. “You can’t control other people’s lives, you know. You can try, but it’ll never work.”

“Hey—you’re the one who wanted to know how he could help.”

“Well—now I know where I stand with you at least. Thanks for your honesty.”

“Anytime.”

“I better be off now, I think.”

“Yes, you’d better. You’ve done enough damage here already.”

And with that, Patrick opened the front door for himself and left Linda standing in the hallway with the muffled sounds of Simone’s screams in the background. He couldn’t have known it then, but Simone stopped screaming for a long enough moment for her to listen to the front door opening and closing behind him. At least on some level, she was sadly aware that she had missed out on some opportunity at reconciliation with her favourite teacher. And that left her feeling worse.
Hours later, Simone lay back on her bed and stared up at the ceiling. She was usually left feeling weak and depleted after a freak out, and often this depletion was accompanied by a sinking depression that could range from mild to severe depending on how bad the initial meltdown had been.

After Patrick left, Simone’s freak out reached its peak and then eventually passed, but then, the real hard part was what followed. And this part left her in consolable for hours. Seeing him had made her feel more lonely, more cut off from the world, and more of a hopeless case than ever before. She still desperately wanted to be normal, to live a normal life, to have friends and live on her own. But her freak outs served as a constant reminder of how out of control she was of her own emotions and reactions. They made her feel freakish, untamable, and beyond all hope.

Paul lay on the bed with Simone. He sensed how deeply his friend was being affected by her emotions and even though he was a cat and didn’t like to admit to fleeting moments of sympathy, he did feel bad for Simone. But he was a little at a loss as to how to deal with her unshakably dark mood. He was feeling more and more that he had a responsibility to warn Simone about her mother’s plans for a group home, but he never seemed to be able to find the right time to broach the subject. Not coming up with any alternatives, he just lay there and preened himself for the time being. It seemed as though Simone was too wholly consumed in her own world to even realize that he was there, anyway. And once she did notice Paul, her exhaustion had already overwhelmed her, and she quickly nodded off to sleep.
That was the morning following her breakdown. In other words, after screaming and throwing things around and banging her head for the bulk of the evening after Patrick left, Simone had spent the entire rest of the night lying awake in this strange comatose state. Paul had crept back to her room once things had quieted down and now that daylight was breaking through the curtains, he was suddenly famished. He looked to the door, but of course, found it closed. Linda’s last visit was some time ago and now she seemed to be avoiding this room altogether. Well, that was typical of her, he thought. But unfortunately, it seemed as though Rebecca hadn’t come home that night because she surely would have been up in Simone’s room trying to cheer her up if she had been. Oh well. Got to help myself, I suppose, he thought. Jumping to the floor, he walked over to the door, and began to scratch. This got no response. He tried meowing then but glancing quickly over at Simone’s sleeping face (with its open snoring mouth), he realized that there was no way that she was going to wake up to let him outside anytime soon.

He had no choice but to persist. Now that he was up and moving, he realized that he also had to go to the bathroom, and this need was becoming more dire by the minute. He knew his best chance was with the people downstairs—judging from Simone’s wide-open snoring mouth, she looked as though she could be hit by a truck at the moment and still wouldn’t be roused awake. He just hoped that Linda wasn’t drunk—after an episode like the night before, it wasn’t out of the question. He stood at the door and listened patiently for several minutes. Finally, he heard the front door open.
It was Rebecca. She had spent the night at Patrick’s and was now arriving home irate at her mother for how she had treated him the day before.

“Mother!” she cried when she flung open the door and walked inside. (She saved the full address of “mother” for those times when she was most angry.)

“Mother! Where are you?”

Paul couldn’t hear Linda’s response because she answered very quietly, almost timidly, really—as if she knew she’d behaved badly and some cluster of cells acting as a conscience inside her was sorry for it. He moved over to the vent on the other side of the room, so he could hear better, careful to move so as not to aggravate the full bladder of urine he was holding. Linda was in the sitting area at the back of the kitchen slumped in one of the two big leather chairs and still in the same red bathrobe that she’d been wearing since the afternoon of the day before.

Her hair was a frizzy mess and her bloodshot eyes peered out from her pale and splotchy face like a pair of bruised tomatoes.

“In here,” she said, and the slur of her words immediately gave away how she had been spending her time there.

“You’ve been drinking!” Rebecca plopped her bag down onto the kitchen counter and started to take off her coat. Linda didn’t answer.

“You’re drunk!”

“Sure am.” Linda smiled grotesquely and showed her teeth to her daughter.

“And so much better for it.”
“Well yeah—I guess if it makes you less of an asshole. But apparently that characteristic is pretty deep set in you.”

Linda sighed and chuckling to herself, she lay her head on her hand as if to keep it from lolling around on her shoulders. It was almost the cute and coquettish gesture of a three year old, but her drunken lack of control and the stinging stench of alcohol quickly reminded Rebecca that it was a far cry from that. Linda spoke slowly. “You think I was an asshole to Patrick. And don’t let me hear you using that word!” She opened her eyes and pointed her finger at Rebecca for this last sentence as if she suddenly realized that Rebecca had used it.

“Oh please. Let’s not try to parent when we’re three sheets to the wind, shall we?”

Linda snorted again in a laugh despite herself. In truth, she was a little bit uncomfortable with Rebecca’s intensity; she and her oldest daughter frequently had squabbles and disagreements, but she wasn’t too far gone to see that her daughter was more upset than usual now. “Yes, I’m really angry at you, Mother. Patrick came here to help us, and you treated him terribly.”

“Oh help, right. Is that what you call it? Funny—when he left, Simone was screaming and yelling and banging her head against the wall. I’d say he made everything a lot worse.”

“Mom—he’s a professional. I think he knows what he’s doing.”

“Oh,” she burped. “So coming here and giving Simone a breakdown is a good thing in his professional opinion?”
“Yeah, actually. Maybe crying and having a freak out is better than sitting around and not communicating to anyone. Patrick says Simone needs more stimulation than she’s getting here, Mom.”

“Well.” Linda slumped down lower in her chair. “On that point, I think we agree with each other.” She motioned to her laptop that Rebecca now noticed was open on the little table beside her. “I’ve been looking into group homes. I’ve been calling them all morning, in fact. I think at least she’ll get more stimulation there. And Patrick agrees with me. He told me he could recommend a good one.”

Rebecca didn’t answer for a moment and just stared bug eyed at her mother, who looked directly back at her with a maddeningly smug smirk. “He said that?” she finally asked.

“Sure did!” Linda’s smile betrayed the victory she felt on this score. Rebecca took a breath and then sauntered over to the refrigerator where she took out some orange juice. She had never discussed the idea of a group home with Patrick, and now she found herself completely shaken and surprised at hearing his support of the suggestion. Linda took this lull in the conversation as an opportunity to lean her head back against the wall and close her eyes. Rebecca found a glass in the cupboard and poured herself a generous serving before she sat on a stool and avoiding the subject of Patrick, spoke again, loudly enough to startle her mother into semi alertness. “Well, I’m sure you made a great impression on them when they heard that drunken slur of yours!”

For a second, Linda seemed confused. She had evidently dozed off for a moment, and now it took her a moment to realize where she was. “Oh I don’t care
how I sounded! For God’s sakes I’m just trying to get her off my back, so I can take
care of my health.”

“And you’re doing a great job of that, I see.”

Linda pulled herself gracelessly to her feet and leaned on the chair, so she
wouldn’t stumble. “That’s right, Rebecca. You stand there and judge me. You
weren’t here to look after Simone, were you? You’re never here anymore! You’re
off with this new teacher-boyfriend of yours all the time!”

“Is that what bothers you so much about him? That he’s Simone’s teacher or
that he’s taking me away from my duties here?”

“I don’t know. Those are both pretty good reasons.”

“Why are you constantly alienating yourself from everyone around you?
Patrick could be a big help with Simone if you only let him!” Rebecca paused and
looked down at the table in front of her and tried to push this group home idea out
of her mind. “But I think you owe him an apology before he does you any more
favours.”

“Apology! Well, maybe he’s the one who should apologize to me, maybe!”

“Oh God, I just can’t talk to you, can I? Don’t you get it that you can’t treat
people that way? People who are trying to help?”

“Not if they actually aren’t helping!”

“Oh God.” Hearing this news about Patrick had suddenly put Rebecca into a
terribly foul mood. She stood up and looked around the kitchen. “Where’s Paul?”
she snapped.
Linda scanned the floors of the kitchen and hallway absently with her eyes.

“Don’t know. Haven’t seen him.”

“Great. He’s probably locked in Simone’s room. Which means you haven’t checked on her lately, either.”

Linda waved her hand dismissively as Rebecca stomped down the hallway toward the staircase.

22.

Paul’s opportunity to talk to Simone about the group home came later on in the day. At that point, he’d finally gotten outside, he’d been fed and watered, and Simone had passed through the worst of her comatose state. He didn’t really have an idea of what it meant and so had no way of knowing how Simone might react, but he’d gotten used to keeping Simone informed of what the others were saying about her, and in truth, he kind of liked this spy-like role he was playing.

She was still up in the room after he came in from outside. He could see evidence of Rebecca’s having been in the room because Simone’s clothes had been changed, her face washed and hair combed, and there were fresh sheets lying across the bed. She still looked a million miles away from where she actually was, but at least these surface and hygienic details seemed to penetrate through to a deeper place and made her feel somewhat lighter.

Paul jumped up onto her bed and perching himself a fair distance from her, he watched her face as her pale blue eyes darted from star to star on her ceiling as if
animated by a life of their own. Finally, her eyes settled on Paul, and she looked at him for several seconds before either of them spoke.

“They’re talking about you, you know.” Paul stated matter-of-factly.

Simone just continued to stare at Paul unblinkingly as if both he and his statement weren’t real. Paul was probably the only individual that she had no problem making eye contact with, but the extra exertion of speaking still came slowly after a meltdown. Paul waited it out patiently before he tried to explain.

“Did you hear, Simone? I said they’re talking about you.”

Simone’s breath came a little faster now, she looked away from Paul as though she were trying to find how her body might support the weight and effort of words from within her fragile birdlike frame.

“Mmm...” Simone answered and felt her chest and throat vibrate with sound.

“You’ve been asleep for quite a few hours.”

Simone put her hands over her eyes and pressed down. “Mmm... Yeah.” She hauled herself to a seated position, but her head felt so dizzy and achy when she got there that it felt as though the world had suddenly and without warning changed the direction of its rotation. She had to hang onto her night table to steady herself.

Paul waited until she looked over at him again, which she did finally with an expression of such exhaustion and defeat that Paul almost didn’t recognize her. He wasn’t entirely sure she would hear what he had to say, but he thought he’d try anyway. “Your mother has been making plans about you. She wants to send you to a group home.”
Simone stared, expressionless, at Paul as she took in this information. It was as if this normally would have sent her into another freak out, but her body and mind weren’t up for the strain.

23.

Rebecca hadn’t been able to fully concentrate on anything since her mother told her the news that Patrick was supporting her idea of sending Simone to a group home. She was having trouble accepting the fact that he would side with her mother on this point—and she was experiencing the slight as a betrayal of her to the utmost extreme. Now she was beginning to question how well she really knew him.

She went through the motions of looking after Simone and getting her cleaned up and her room organized and all the while, she fought off a lump in her throat at the thought of her sister leaving the warmth and security of their home. Her sister—who had no idea how vulnerable she really was—looked so shrunken and wasted that it broke her heart to see her. She knew she could promise to be here constantly—to devote her life to Simone, but in her heart she knew that wasn’t realistic. With the play, her job, and her new relationship with Patrick, she had too much going on to simply drop everything. And why should she have to? she thought with a flash of anger. For once in her life, she felt happy and together—it wasn’t fair that she was always asked to make sacrifices for other people. But what could she do? With her mother not working now, she was needed more urgently to make money to help with the bills and the groceries. Like it or not, this was her reality for the time being.
Her mother was in her own bedroom and, at Rebecca’s urging, was about to take a shower and get dressed. Rebecca was finally sitting down on the couch in the living room as the late morning sunshine poured into the room and made things look bright and cheery in stark contrast to how Rebecca was feeling. She was taking a minute to gather her thoughts before calling Patrick and speaking to him about the group home issue when she saw a young woman coming up their walk and mounting the stairs to their front door. She had gotten out of the passenger side of a large white van that stood and waited for her as she approached their house. The woman was nobody Rebecca recognized, and she looked too young to be a friend of her mother’s. She moved quickly and with such purpose that Rebecca was compelled to jump up from her seated position and go to the door just as the woman rang the bell.

Natalia introduced herself before Rebecca had a chance to ask what her purpose was in coming there. There was something eager about her; her small dark eyes were hungry with bravery and righteousness and her short cropped hair was tucked up smartly inside her red cap. She held onto a clipboard and a large black bag that she clutched to her side protectively, as if she feared it might be snatched from her. Her whole body seemed tense and straight.

“My name is Natalia Petrovich, and I’m coming to you from The Animal Rights Coalition. Is there Miss Simone Malmquist which lives here?”

Rebecca flushed with annoyance and paused as she thought about how to handle this question. “No.” She folded her arms across her chest. “No, there’s no one here by that name.”
Natalia smiled conspiratorially. “Come on. I think you are Rebecca, her sister? I know Simone lives here.”

“Well if you know that then why did you ask?”

Natalia turned briefly and looked to the white van. The driver’s door opened, and a large bearded man in a heavy blue parka got out. He was holding a film camera. “We just want to talk to her.”

“Oh for God’s sakes. Who do you people think you are?”

Natalia generally needed very little provocation to get fired up, and now she was all ablaze with passion and indignation. The man with the camera started to film as he hurried up the walk. “I told you we are from The Animal Rights Coalition. Your sister Simone killed bird with her bare hands and now she can’t go back to school!”

Rebecca tried to shut the door, but Natalia put her foot there to block it in order to finish her sentence and enable her friend to have more to film.

“Hey! Get out of the way of the door! Do you want me to call the cops?”

Natalia released her foot but continued to speak through the door. “Simone can’t to get away with this! This is terrible thing she did!”

Rebecca was beside herself with rage and frustration after she had closed the door. Her heart was banging in her chest; she felt crazy with protecting her sister. She grabbed the cordless phone and held it up to window where Natalia and the cameraman still stood. She held it up so Natalia could see it and pressed the buttons 9-1-1 slowly and deliberately so Natalia wouldn’t miss it. It worked. Natalia and the
cameraman turned and walked back down the walkway where they climbed into the van and seconds later, disappeared down the street.

24.

Natalia knocked on the door just a few short minutes after Paul had warned Simone about her mother’s plans to ship her off to a group home, and Simone was still sitting motionlessly absorbing this information. Consequently, every word spoken or screamed by Natalia or Rebecca that managed to seep up to her third floor bedroom was interpreted by Simone as somehow related to the imminent group home. She couldn’t hear every word that was said, but it was abundantly apparent that somebody had arrived on their front doorstep who was most definitely not welcomed by Rebecca.

Linda also heard the ending of the argument as she stepped out of the shower, but her reaction to it was very different from Simone’s. She was exhausted from having stayed awake all night long, and now that she was finally beginning to sober up somewhat, a hangover from hell was beginning to blaze behind her eyes. She was dizzy and disoriented and the heat from the shower was suddenly making her head swim.

The shouting match unfolding downstairs also aroused Paul’s curiosity. He propped himself up to the window in time to see the large man getting out of the white van, and evidently overlooking the film camera, deduced that this must be the people from the group home who’d arrived to take Simone. In truth, he was a little surprised that they had arrived so quickly, but really he didn’t know too much about
how these things worked. “Hmm... I think the group home people are here for you, Simone.”

Simone stared at Paul, and a freight train of panic welled up inside her. She got up from the bed but still felt weak and dizzy from not having been upright for such a long stretch of time. She stumbled and moved over to the window to have a look down herself. She couldn’t see anyone, but she could hear the punctuations and yelps of voices through the window and wafting up from the staircase below her. Her knees were weak and she had to hold onto the windowsill to keep herself standing. Finally, she saw a man and a woman moving toward the sidewalk and then heard footsteps leaping up the stairs two at a time. She looked wildly around the room as if searching for a corner of it that could swallow her up into invisibility. Finally, almost without thinking, she burst out of her room and began to run down the stairs.

In the meantime, Linda had managed to reach for her bathrobe and put it halfway on as her hand grabbed for the doorknob, the other side of which had the cool fresh air she was craving. But just as Rebecca and Simone were bounding their separate ways to almost collide at the second floor landing, Linda opened the door to the hallway and collapsed in the entranceway in front of them. Rebecca, who had just tried to catch Simone, lost hold of her when she saw her mother crumple to the floor, leaving Simone free to continue her breathless flight down all the stairs until she reached the safety of the furnace room at the very bottom. There, she dashed inside as if running from a wild animal and locked the door behind her.
PART THREE

1. When I heard that lady at my door, and she was yelling so angry at Rebecca I didn’t even think, and I just started to run because Paul told me about the group home and I knowed for sure that I didn’t want to go there. And I’ve always knowed that, ever since Lila from my school told us about when she was in a group home for one summer and an old woman went into her room every night and put her smelly feet right up on her pillow. So I didn’t even have a plan and I didn’t even know where I would go but my legs kept going until I went down to the furnace room because I feel safe in there and I locked the door.

And Linda and Rebecca hate when I go down in there and they always try to change the lock so I won’t can lock it, but they don’t know at first that I like to play with locks and so I always figure a new way to lock myself in.

And when I first got there I just laughed to myself and hugged my knees to my chest because I was proud that I felt I was making my own decision and I wouldn’t go to the group home ever even if they tried to made me.

And Rebecca followed me down at first and tried to get me to open the door, but I wouldn’t and I heard her say, “Oh shit!” like she does when she was really upset, and then she went upstairs again. But then she didn’t come back for a really long time and I didn’t knowed what happened. At first, there was a lot of noise coming from upstairs and then there was nothing at all and then there was noise again and I heard men’s voices, even, and I thought it was the group home people, and I was so scared that I made myself into a ball and I went to the back where
there’s a storage space under the stairs. And I heard a car driving and a siren and I thought maybe the police were coming to get me except then the car went the other way.

But then after that, it was quiet for a while, and I thought that maybe I would need some food and water and maybe some stuff to do if I was really serious about locking myself down there, which I really was. I like to draw so I brought my pencil crayons and I like to eat and drink so I brought some food and water but only a glass of water, which I drank too fast and then I got thirsty again. Also I like to be warm so I got a blanket and a pillow too but I had to do everything so fast because Rebecca or my mom would come back and I didn’t know when. But once when I went upstairs I looked in the living room and I saw that woman from next door sitting there sleeping straight up on the couch and I got scared and confused because I don’t like her and I didn’t know why she was there. Then I remembered how Patrick told me that sometimes when I write stuff down that it can make me calmer and so I tried to be brave and I got a pen and paper and I started to write some stuff down, and it’s true that it made the time move faster.

And then I just waited but I was surprised that nobody didn’t come back downstairs to check on me. And then I just didn’t hear anything for a long long time. So long that I even felled asleep.

2.

Once Rebecca closed the door on Natalia, everything happened so fast that she barely had a moment to register the significance of the flurry around her. Paul
flew down the stairs, and Simone, who shot a look of terror at Rebecca as she bolted past her, quickly overtook him on the stairway and bounded directly for the basement. Guessing that she was headed for the furnace room, Rebecca tore after her, but as she did, her mother flung open the bathroom door on the second floor and then dropped with a heavy thud in the entranceway. Rebecca hesitated over her mother’s body for long enough to enable Simone to pull into the lead ahead of her. She paused for another split second—feeling herself stretched between these two opposing poles of her mother and her sister and temporarily not knowing which to choose. Not sure she was making the right choice, she pursued her sister, hoping that it might still be possible to wedge her foot in the door of the furnace room before Simone shut herself in. However, Simone had gained the extra foot or so she needed to get her safely out of reach, and Rebecca could hear the click of the latch bolting behind Simone as she scrambled to get her hand on the door handle. When she found it locked, Rebecca cried out in frustration.

“Oh God. Simone! Open the door, do you hear me?” She rattled the door, but it just jangled uselessly on its hinges. “Simone? Oh shit!” she said to herself but then turned immediately to check on her mother upstairs, who she found toppled like a tree on the floor and tangled up in her red bathrobe.

Rebecca didn’t have time to bemoan the unlucky turn of fate that events had taken over the last hour or so. Her mother could be in serious danger, and she had to think quickly about how to get her to safety. She called 911 for the second time that morning, but this time she followed through on the call.
Next she ran over to Mrs. Sarazin’s house, cursing herself for not getting the old woman’s phone number the last time she asked her to carry out this favour.

“Please be home, please be home, please be home,” Rebecca repeated to herself as she paced around on her neighbour’s porch like a five year old who desperately had to get to a potty. Mrs. Sarazin’s demure owl-like face appeared behind the dark glass a minute later. Upon seeing Rebecca, a cloud of judgment and impatience passed over her face like she was experiencing a gas cramp. She was a woman of very few words, which made her unnerving at times, but as much as she feigned to be put out by her neighbour’s demands on her time, Rebecca suspected that these increasingly frequent requests were in fact doing a lot to make her feel needed. Or maybe Rebecca just couldn’t imagine that a single woman over sixty could be doing anything interesting with her time.

“It’s my mother. She’s collapsed again.” Mrs. Sarazin nodded and peered out at Rebecca from behind her large round glasses that took over most of her face. “I’ll get my coat,” she mumbled.

Once Mrs. Sarazin was set up on the living room couch, her white tennis socks resting up on the footrest and flipping through the stack of People magazines she never failed to haul over with her for these occasions, the paramedics arrived and Rebecca rode with them to the hospital.

3.

And then I woked up and the house was still really quiet for so long that I had a chance to think of more stuffs that maybe I needed or wanted in the furnace room
with me. And I almost was going to bring my bed down there but it was too heavy and besides, I kept thinking that maybe Rebecca and my mom were trying to play a trick on me and really they were going to come out and try to catch me and stop me from going to the furnace room and make me go to the group home, and I didn’t want that at all. And so I never left the furnace room for so long. But I started to feel more brave, so I stood on some boxes and looked out the window on the street. And I saw some squirrels playing and some snow and a black car and a grey car but no Rebecca and no my mom.

And it was already afternoon time when I heard Rebecca came home. But I didn’t knowed for sure because that’s one thing I forgot to bring down with me was a clock. But I felled asleep mainly because I was so bored down there when I got tired of writing and drawing like I did after a while.

And when Rebecca came she talked to me through the door and she told me that our mom fell down again and she had to take her to the hospital and that’s why I didn’t hear her or anyone. And that’s the second time our mom is went to the hospital if Rebecca is saying the truth except I don’t really know if she is because maybe it’s just another way to try to get me to go to the group home. But anyway, I could hear that Rebecca was crying also when she told me and when she asked me to please please open the door because she couldn’t take my games right now. But I don’t want to go to a group home and that’s something I know for sure, so I won’t open the door ever if that’s where I’m going.
By the time Rebecca got her hands on a phone to call Patrick, she was so angry and stressed out that she felt like she’d swallowed a bomb that was about to explode inside her. All that had been happening to her in the past few hours she now irrationally linked to her poor boyfriend and the fact that he had gone behind her back and supported her mother’s idea of a group home. As her sweaty fingers punched out his number on the phone keypad, Rebecca suddenly felt as though she had no friends, no support network, and her entire life was crumbling to bits around her. Without being entirely aware of it, she was poised and ready to take it out entirely on him, whom she happened to know, was on his afternoon break at work at that very moment.

“Hey you!” The unsuspecting man smiled when he saw her name light up on his phone screen. He clearly had no idea what he was about to walk into.

“Hey you, yourself,” Rebecca snapped back. Patrick paused a moment, unsure of what he had just heard. “Rebecca? Is everything all right?”

“No, actually. Nothing is all right.” Rebecca pulled her legs up under her on the red couch in the living room and concentrated on keeping angry in order to keep her tears at bay.

“What?” Patrick glanced around at his coworkers who were milling around the kitchen area in the teacher’s room and chatting. “Why? What’s going on?” He scanned the room for some privacy and stepped out into the hallway.

“Well—for starters, my mom is back in the hospital. She collapsed when she came out of the shower this morning.”
“Jesus! That’s terrible!”

“And I’m not done yet. A woman came to our house this morning from some animal rights group and she wants to interview Simone!”

Patrick considered this. “Oh God. I think I know who that is. Is she about twenty-five or so? And Russian?”

“That’s the one.”

“Shit.” Patrick started pacing the hallway now, his eyes absently scanning the photographs on the walls of the school’s past graduation days without really seeing them. “She’s been here before. I’ve never spoken to her, but...” and now Patrick lowered his voice and looked cautiously around him, “Some of the teachers here I think have been conspiring with her.”

“How did she get our address?”

“I have no idea. I mean—there are records here of contact information for all our clients, but that’s all totally confidential, of course.”

“Yeah, of course it is!” Rebecca mumbled sarcastically.

“Well I told you that there are teachers here who feel pretty passionate on the animals rights issue.”

“Yes—you mentioned.”

“But what did you do? Did you get rid of her?”

“Eventually. I had to threaten to call the cops before she’d leave.”

“Hmm. Well that’ll work. Let’s hope she doesn’t try again.”

“I’d say that’s pretty unlikely.”
Patrick nodded and raised his eyebrows. “Yeah. I’d have to agree with you there.”

“And to make matters worse, Simone got so scared when she heard this woman at the door that she ran downstairs and locked herself in the furnace room.”

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes! She’s been down there for over three hours now.”

“Oh poor you, Rebecca. Do you want me to come over and try to help when I get off work?”

“No actually, I don’t.” In the re-telling of the morning’s events, Rebecca had almost forgotten that she was supposed to be angry at Patrick. Now the ugly fact reared its head at her like a neck boil. “I’m really mad at you, Patrick.”

“What? Why?”

“Why did you tell my mother that you’d help her find a group home for Simone?”

Patrick hesitated. Strange as it suddenly seemed, it hadn’t occurred to him that this might upset Rebecca. He quickly concluded that he had no choice but to stick to what he truly believed. Gathering some sudden sobriety to fit the occasion, he answered. “Because that’s what I would do. If she’s serious about the group home idea, I would help her do it. Frankly, I think it could be a good thing for Simone.”

“A group home, Patrick? Those places are terrible!”
“That’s not true. Well, okay—some of them are terrible, but some can be really great. If Simone’s not able to come back to our school, she’ll need more stimulation than she’s getting at home.”

“What do you mean if Simone’s not able to come back to school?”

Patrick reddened. He hadn’t meant to be so cut and dry about what he knew to be a delicate matter. “Sorry, Rebecca. But I’ve told you how things are here at the moment. You may have to start thinking about alternatives for Simone.”

“Well obviously. But we can’t afford those good ones. And that would mean breaking up our family.”

“It wouldn’t have to mean that, Rebecca.”

“Don’t tell me about my own family, Patrick. My mother’s a total freak, remember? I think I know what might happen. And I don’t appreciate you talking to her about it before talking to me!”

“Rebecca, come on!”

“Come on? That’s all you can say in your defense? Whose side are you on, anyway?”

“Well, it isn’t really about sides, Rebecca. But do you have to ask that?”

“I never thought I had to until you went behind my back and supported my mother!”

“Rebecca—”

But Rebecca had worked herself up now and was too angry to continue the call. In a burst of drama that was not dissimilar to her mother, she slammed down the phone and then left it off the receiver in case Patrick tried to call back.
For the first few hours, Zoila was frantic and tried untiringly to get her baby out of the suffocating clutches of Katie. She wailed and screamed as if limbs were being torn off her body, and in so doing, managed to alarm the entire gorilla zookeeping staff into action in mere minutes. At first, she tried wrestling her baby out of Katie’s strong grip using sheer force, but she quickly realized the danger this approach might put on her tiny infant. Following this, she tried to sneak up on the pair and catch Katie unawares, but her attempts at doing this in the large open pen would have been almost comic to witness if they hadn’t been so heartbreaking.

It soon became clear to the visitors to the zoo that something significant was happening inside the pen but what exactly it was nobody could say for sure. Once the zookeepers arrived, however, the news gradually began to leak out to the inquisitive public, and eventually a large crowd started to accumulate around all three windows that looked into the pen. People were rooting for Zoila and doing what they could to distract Katie whenever the mother gorilla approached her. But their cheers and boos were ineffectual. The other gorillas were all acting very passively about the whole thing—some of them choosing to ignore both squabbling females altogether, as if they were fighting over something as mundane and petty as who would walk away with the last pair of pumps on sale in a shoe store.

The zookeepers, on the other hand, were at a complete loss as to what to do. Nothing like this had ever taken place at their zoo, so nothing in their experience or training had equipped them to handle it. Not unlike the band of gorillas, some of
them hoped that if they turned their backs on the matter, Zoila would be successful at getting her baby back by herself.

But not all of them were so passive. Manuel called an emergency impromptu meeting up in his spacious and many-windowed office in order to brainstorm some ideas on how to proceed. The zookeepers rarely held meetings and so the office wasn’t designed for this purpose. Four zookeepers sat along a long dark green couch that lined one of the windowed walls, while Manuel was seated with his back to his desk in his tall swivel chair, looking worried with his arms folded.

“Can we trick Katie, somehow?” This question came from Jesse, the newest and youngest member of the zookeepers, who was standing and leaning against one of the windows framed by tropical plants climbing up behind him like a jungle.

“Like how?” Manuel asked flatly.

“I don’t know. Maybe we could distract her or something. Like with her favourite food or toy or something.”

Manuel sighed and fingering his black beard, spun around in his swivel chair as he considered the idea momentarily. “I don’t think she’s so stupid.”

All the zookeepers in the room held him in their gaze, waiting for what he would say next. He had worked at this zoo for close to two decades now and was the only person present who had known Zoila and Katie in their youths. He had also seen Katie through all her pregnancies and births and had been part of several attempts to get Zoila pregnant before he took over as head gorilla zookeeper. These gorillas had become a part of him—nobody else knew them or loved them better. They’d become like the family he never found the time to have. He’d seen them
squabble before, had seen fights—even long-lasting family feuds between members
of his gorilla band—but never anything like this. And what’s more, he’d been so
excited for Zoila’s new experience of motherhood—now he wondered whether he’d
let himself become too emotionally involved. But this situation was so puzzling for
him. He’d always known that Katie liked to be the top female of the band, and she
didn’t like it when other females got too much attention, but he never suspected that
she would be capable of doing anything like this. It was disgraceful, unimaginable,
and above all, highly dangerous. Everything depended on the cooperation of Katie.
That baby would surely die if deprived of his mother’s milk, so if Katie wouldn’t
allow them to give the infant a bottle, then Zoila’s newborn was in real jeopardy.
And Manuel just didn’t know if they could count on Katie. Something about her
behaviour was making him very worried. Apart from stealing the baby (that was
worrisome enough), she seemed to be clutching onto this new little life with a
fervour that verged on desperation—as if holding onto the new infant literally
meant life or death for her.

Manuel frowned and dragged his left hand down his face in a gesture of
fatigue. “I think for the time being, we can do nothing. Let’s wait for these tempers
to calm down a bit. It could be dangerous for us to try anything, and we don’t want
that baby to get hurt.”

Jesse was disappointed with this verdict, and he looked around from face to
face to see if anyone shared his feelings. Susana, who was next in seniority to
Manuel, was the only one to meet Jesse’s eyes for a fleeting second, but then she
quickly looked back to Manuel. Albert (who was better known as Zilch for his habit
of betting away all his money at cards) looked bedraggled and sleep-deprived, and
Jennifer looked momentarily down at the floor as if she might cry. Seeing no other
evidence of fraternity, he spoke out again. “But how long do we wait? What if it
doesn’t work?”

Manuel looked exhausted by this inquiry. He spoke slowly in response.
“Let’s wait 24 hours. Then we can try to drug Katie’s food. Keep the other gorillas
away from it and monitor her so she won’t try to feed the baby any.”

“But Manuel—can the baby survive without milk for 24 hours?” Susana
asked.

Manuel raised his eyebrows and clasped his hands in a prayer gesture as he
rested his elbows on his knees. “Yes, the baby could survive that long. He would be
frail and weak, but he’s pretty strong now, thank God, so I think he could survive up
to three days.”

Silence swallowed the last of his words as the five zookeepers sat back and
thought of the poor little infant and the sudden precarious hold he had on life.

6.

Natalia and her brother Boris were sitting in their scantily-furnished living
room and waiting to watch the footage they had filmed the day before. There wasn’t
much in the way of the furniture in the rectangular room that was chipped away
with old paint, but the siblings more than compensated for that fact with sheer
clutter. Stacks of books littered the white-tiled floor like stalagmites lilting up from
the floor of a cave, reels of film, newspapers, and notebooks covered the two
wooden desks, the coffee table, and the chest of drawers that was pushed up against the far wall and partially blocked the small window through which only a dim orange sparkle of streetlight could be seen at the moment. The last remnants of take-out Chinese food lay in the middle of the floor and gave the room a sugary fried smell of sweet and sour chicken balls.

Apart from junk, there was also a large brown and white Boxer named Laika, who lay sprawled across the floor, and Igor, the red and green parrot, was chewing the metal bars of its large cage and cawing intermittently. The mother and son cat team that the siblings also owned (known as Anastasia and Alexei after the Russian czar’s two children thought to have survived the brutal Romanov family murder) were curled up on Natalia’s bed at the moment.

It was already 1:30 in the morning and Natalia, who had been the sole bread-winner for the two since they arrived from Russia five months before, had to work at her dreaded data entry job in the morning. She had been lying back on the floor with her head resting on the soft spot between her dog’s hip and rib cage, sleep threatening to take her over, when her brother announced that the footage had finally finished loading.

“You ready to see this now?” he said.

“Yes, yes.” Natalia wiped her face with her hands and shook her head to help wake herself up. They spoke to each other in Russian, of course; Natalia had heard Boris speak in English only once when she picked him up at his English school. And at that time, the normally loud and confident man had blushed to have his sister
hear him stammer and spew out this second language that, try as he might, just
never seemed to take.

“I’m ready,” Natalia groaned. “I’ve been ready for hours.” She dragged
herself up to a seated position and forced her heavy eyes open. Laika was still too
tired to stir, and she stayed where she was, apparently completely unaware that the
weight of Natalia’s head had been lifted from her.

“Oh—well, get the lights, then, will you?”

Silently, Natalia picked herself up from the floor and switched off the bleak
wash of fluorescent light that came from the bare overhead bulb. Then she took a
seat on a wooden chair and saddled up behind her brother.

As Boris pressed play, Natalia suddenly felt very awake and excited as the
images they had filmed earlier that day came into view. First there were some
grainy, fast-moving shots of a busy street that she had taken from the truck on the
way to their ultimate destination: a woman in a green hat with a dog, an old man
shuffling along beside an oak tree. Traffic lights, a swirl of movement as the camera
jerked and pointed at the sky, cars, buildings. This five second sequence cumulated
in a blurry close up of her brother’s face as he was driving the truck and talking—or
at least his full lips were moving as if he was talking because Natalia had filmed with
the sound turned off. After two seconds, his pale blue eyes flashed at the camera
and scowling, he turned to the camera with a look of frustration and impatience. He
pushed the camera downwards and away from his face, and soon after, the blurry
image went dark.
Natalia and Boris laughed at this sequence. The siblings frequently had little tiffs such as this one, which the pair always found hilarious in hindsight. They were close, as twins often are, and these skirmishes only seemed to reinforce the intimacy of their bond.

“Okay, okay. Now.” Boris waved his sister into silence as the image returned to his computer monitor. The Natalia shown in the film was looking quite serious now as she applied a frosty lipstick to her mouth and gazed at her own reflection in the passenger front mirror. She turned to the camera and pointed at it, asking in Russian if it was on. The sound kicked in half way through her question. Boris never answered. Natalia gathered up her notebook, looked to the house, and then sighing, through the front windshield again.

As she watched this sequence, Natalia made a sound through her teeth that wasn’t quite a laugh. “Nervous, nervous,” she said, commenting on how she’d been feeling before they arrived at Simone’s house.

She saw herself climb out of the truck and make her way down the front pathway, a surprisingly small figure she always thought when she saw herself on film, and much squarer from the back than she imagined herself to be.

The scene with Rebecca unfolded unspectacularly—really, it barely looked like anything through Boris’ lens in the truck, and there was only the very short sequence at the end when Boris ran up to the doorway and got some close-ups of the conversation with Rebecca that they thought could be at all useful for the future.

Finally, Boris switched off the computer, and they sat in silence for a moment. Then they turned to each other.
“Well.”

“We’ll see.”

“Maybe there’s a minute or something.”

“If that.”

“Hmm. Yes. Maybe less.”

“I think.”

“So what do we do now?”

Natalia leaned back in her chair and stretched. Walking over to the sofa, she grabbed the dark blue blanket they had taken from Air Canada on the flight over to this country and threw it over her shoulders. Then switching on the light, she stood in the middle of the room and thought. Boris sat back and watched her. He liked it when his sister took control.

“We watch her. We watch the house. We call Sergiy and Irena—who else? We get others to help us.”

“Hmm.” Boris looked suddenly serious. He faced the blank monitor and his mind appeared to be wandering and worrying about new unforeseen problems. Natalia knew this trait of her brother’s but her exhaustion made her not want to indulge it in the moment.

“Boris—let’s talk this over tomorrow. I’ve got to be up early. I’m going to drop.”

Boris looked at her as if he hadn’t heard a word of what she’d said. “Hmm?” Natalia smiled and then laughed. “Goodnight, brother.” She turned on her heels, and Laika followed her out of the room.
I didn’t think I would really do it but I stayed in the furnace room even when Rebecca told me to come out for dinner and even I was so hungry. And then after dinner I got so bored but still I didn’t come. So I started to look out the window because it was more interesting but it started to get dark and I didn’t want people to see me down there so I turned off the light which was scary at first that it took me a long time before I could do it. But then my eyes got used to the no lights on and I could watch the outside and that was okay.

And I sawed two womans walking with a crying baby. I sawed some seagulls fighting over a old crusty roll. I sawed a man try five times to park his car parallel style and I sawed two big men cheer for him when he did it. Then just as I was starting to get bored again, I saw a guy get off his bicycle and lock it across the street from our house. Then he walked right toward me and I was shocked because I sawed it was Patrick and I ducked down out of the way so he wouldn’t seed me. But then I got too curious so I came back again and I watched him.

And he stood in front of our house on the sidewalk and he took out his cell phone and put it to his ear. And our phone rang upstairs about ten rings and I heard Rebecca walking around but she didn’t answered it. And then Patrick put his phone in his coat pocket and he walked up to our front porch. And when I heard the doorbell ring it made me scared even though I knewed it was him and I hid my head a little to make sure he wouldn’t seed me. And I didn’t hear Rebecca move around but I heard Patrick waited and then knocked and waited and then knocked and then I saw him take his bike and leave. Then after he left for a couple of minutes I heard
Rebecca walking around again. After that she came downstairs and she said she was going to leave me my dinner outside the door. And after I heard her go upstairs again I opened the door and gobbled it all down because I was that hungry.

8.

It had been ten hours since Linda was admitted to the emergency ward at Sunnybrook hospital, and still the interminably stubborn woman wouldn’t open her eyes. The small clutch of nurses that had been assigned to her care were keeping a close eye on her, but there had still been no significant developments worthy of notifying her daughter about.

Dr. Ernie Fowler was particularly disappointed at seeing this patient again. Disappointed—but not altogether surprised if he had been pressed to admit it. Even though he knew her somewhat from working together at the hospital, after dealing with her as a patient, he recognized what type she was. Someone who had lost that natural interest in her health somewhere along the way—someone reckless with her body—taunting and toying with death as if it was some stuffed squeaky toy to dangle in front of the narrowing eyes of a cat.

But Ernie Fowler was one of those doctors who felt that if patients weren’t going to care for themselves, then somehow it was doubly important for him to care about them. It wasn’t that he was a religious person, but deep in his bones he did feel that his job on this earth was as a healer; that his divine purpose in life was to improve and sustain the lives of his fellow human beings. He saw such life in the eyes of his own children—that spark and energy that didn’t question why they were here but rather simply loved and embraced existence. He remembered that impulse
from when he was a child, and whenever he lost his faith, he conjured their images in his mind and told himself that, in a greater way, all people were like his children.

He felt this so strongly that he found himself baffled by people like Linda. It was like they were a different species from him altogether—these tragic and irresponsible life-haters. They were pitiful. But instead of indulging this idea, he found it more productive to push it as far as he could from his mind and work even harder for her.

But he was worried. He was worried for her and he was worried for Rebecca, whom he had met twice now, and whom he knew was looking after her autistic sister on her own. Apart from Rebecca, there didn’t seem to be any other family members around. And that was simply too much pressure for one young woman to deal with on her own. Linda seemed to have some friends in the staff that had come down to visit her, but he wondered if there was anyone around who could be called on to help Rebecca. When she was due to show up the next day, he decided to make a point of talking to her about it.

9.

Paul was beginning to think he’d really screwed things up by leaking the news about the group home to Simone. He’d just intended to warn her and sure, even prevent it if it was in his power to do so, but he never expected this sort of overblown reaction of camping out in the furnace room and refusing to come out for days on end.
At first, he’d assumed that the whole thing would just blow over. There was only so much you could really involve yourself in with these humans, and he’d frequently get to the point where he’d have reached his fill. So he let Rebecca and Simone hash it out on their own terms for a while. But once Rebecca left Simone’s dinner in front of the furnace room door and headed to bed, he was hit with the sudden certitude that things had gone too far. It was true that he’d exercised some good influence over Simone lately, so now seemed like an obvious time to put that influence into action. The problem was that he didn’t have much of a plan.

He waited until he saw the glow disappear from under Rebecca’s bedroom door before he sauntered into action. Then he descended the two flights of stairs—the first flight hardwooded and well-used, and second carpeted and dingy—that led to the furnace room door. The sound he made as he did this was barely discernible to most people—but since they’d made their connection, Simone’s ears had become attuned to it.

Paul sat in front of the door and perceived Simone stop moving. Neither spoke for a moment, but both knew the other was there.

“Simone?” Paul broke the silence.

“Mmm?”

Paul knew he’d have to try a different approach from what Rebecca had been trying. “Rebecca forgot to feed me tonight.”

Simone shuffled around. She licked her finger and put the remaining crumbs of cold meat pie in her mouth. She felt that something was being asked of her, but she wasn’t entirely sure what it was.
“Oh.”

“What’d you say?”

“Oh,” and then she mumbled to herself again, “oh”.

Most would have found this response insulting, but Paul knew Simone and took the seeming lack of interest in his well being in stride. He waited to see if this information was going to penetrate any further and generate any other reaction or whether he’d need to spell out his wishes a little more comprehensively. After a few seconds, he settled on the second alternative.

“Think you could come out and feed me? Rebecca’s asleep and there’s no one else here.”

Simone felt herself overheat at this request. She’d done so well up to this point. She felt safe in the furnace room and out of reach of any danger. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Paul, but out there was uncertainty, darkness, strangers, and noise and in here was solitude, safety and quiet.

“Are—are you hungry?” she queried.

“Yes.”

She paused. Clearly, that wasn’t the answer she was hoping for. “Really hungry?”

“Yes.”

She looked down at her dinner plate and at the dinner roll she had only half eaten. Her own memory of being hungry was still quite fresh in her mind and although usually she couldn’t put herself in another’s person’s shoes to save her own life, in this moment, Paul’s experience seemed to ignite some lonely cell of
empathy, rarely used, but still at work in her brain. "I can let you in here and you could eat my dinner roll."

Paul could think of nothing he wanted less than a dinner roll, but if she wasn't going to come out, then getting inside was better than nothing.

"Okay."

He heard Simone slide off a surface that sounded like wood, maybe, and begin to walk slowly—agonizingly slowly—toward the door. Next he heard her lay her hand on the metal door handle and stop.

"Wait," she said. "Are you alone there?"

"Of course I am."

"How do I know?"

"Don't you trust me, Simone? I'm the one that told you about the group homes to begin with."

"Mmm." Simone considered this. "Okay." She fumbled around with the lock, pausing in between attempts at actually opening it. "Just you?" She checked again.

"Yes," said Paul.

Then, leaning her body weight against the door in case she needed to slam it shut at the last second, she opened it up a small crack and glimpsed her beautiful tabby's green eyes looking up at her.

"Just me," Paul repeated, and he stepped inside, nodding his head in satisfaction as he looked around.
Rebecca’s entire morning the next day started off chaotically. She woke up late—the stress of the day before seemed to have seeped through her body and left her limp with fatigue. It took her sleepy brain a while to get into gear, so when she checked in on Simone, she tried her first in her bed but of course didn’t find her there. It was only then that the events of the day before came rushing back to her in all their ugly detail. Her mother in the hospital, the fight she’d had with Patrick, and Simone—apparently still locked away in the furnace room. It all suddenly felt like she was alone on a little boat that was sinking far from the shore.

She had planned to drop by the hospital to see Linda and then she had a rehearsal for Romeo and Juliet. But at this rate, she risked being late for the 12pm rehearsal call if she spent any kind of quality time at the hospital. And then what was she supposed to do with Simone? She didn’t want to use up all her favours with Mrs. Sarazin, and she’d already called on the old lady twice in the last month. Maybe Simone had had enough herself, she thought, hoping this was true, as she walked into her kitchen that always seemed so quiet and untouched when her mother wasn’t around. Mechanically, she took down two green bowls, and reaching for the cereal box they kept inconveniently over the stove, filled one for herself and one for Simone.

She finished hers standing up and leaning against the counter and then rushed down the stairs, readying herself for her encounter with Simone. Sometimes her sister responded to a business-like tone where she kept her voice clipped and professional and which (Rebecca hoped) might give the impression that
circumstances more urgent than her stubbornness had swept Simone up in their vortex and become too powerful to ignore. Then sometimes good old fashioned reverse psychology worked well. Letting her feel as though switching her position was actually her own idea worked magic on many children and some adults and Simone was no exception. But of course, Rebecca couldn’t use both approaches at the same time. She’d have to choose carefully.

She settled on the business approach that particular morning because it operated at a fast clip, and she was rushed anyway. But she was too stressed out and distracted to really act the part with any real conviction.

“Okay, Simone,” she announced through the door. “I’ve got your cereal and toast upstairs and a change of clothes laid out for you on the bed. First, I’ve got to go the hospital to see Mom, and then I’ve got rehearsal. So if you want to come with me to the hospital, we’ve got to leave in like 15 minutes at the latest, okay? I’m sorry about the short notice, but I overslept.”

That there was no sound on the other side of the door immediately struck Rebecca as a bad sign. But in spite of the charade, she’d convinced herself of a certain momentum in this professional persona that she wasn’t prepared to let drop just yet. If there was any chance of it working, she couldn’t let Simone detect any glimmer of doubt in her voice.

“So I’ll be upstairs getting ready while you get yourself organized down here. Eat fast, Simone. I’ll be down with a change of clothes as soon as I can. It looks like you’ll have to take a shower after we get home.”
Just as this last part exited her mouth, Rebecca regretted adding it. Simone hardly ever took a shower—she’d sense that something was amiss. And with that, Rebecca hurried up the stairs, now seriously doubting whether her plan would have any effect at all. She began to get ready but kept an ear tuned toward the hallway for any signs of movement from below. When she had still heard nothing after 15 minutes, she concluded with some exasperation that she’d have to call on Mrs. Sarazin again.

11.

Simone felt safe enough to release Paul from his captivity in the furnace room once she heard Rebecca’s car leave the driveway. And it was none too early for the poor kitty. While it was true that he’d stretched the truth a little the night before about being quite as hungry as he’d claimed, now he was prepared to rip the head off a squirrel just to get a little nourishment. He’d tried a few morsels of Simone’s dinner roll mainly to keep up with the pretense of his hunger story, but in the end, it just wasn’t food for a cat, and he found the dry crusty pieces getting stuck in his throat on their way down. Luckily, as he entered the kitchen, he found that Rebecca had remembered to replenish his food dish before she left, so Paul gobbled down his entire bowl of kibbles in a greedy instant. Once his belly was full, he found a sunny spot on the living room couch and curled up for a little nap.

About 45 minutes later, he woke up to a quiet house feeling rested and refreshed. Simone is still in the furnace room, he thought. What a crazy kid. What’s it going to take to get her out of there? He contemplated this problem for a little
while, but then got distracted by some juicy-looking cardinals hopping around on the banister outside the window and imagined himself hunting them instead. Contentedly, he blinked his eyes to a slow close, and curling up his tail around the front of his body, rested his head down onto his paws.

But wouldn’t you know it—an image of Simone lying curled up on the hard furnace room floor popped back into his mind as soon as his eyes shut. Hmm, he thought. What a pain. And it’s not like you see cardinals every day in December, either.

Paul scanned the room as if searching for a clue to help shed some light on this problem. Finally, they settled on a copy of that morning’s newspaper, which was littered across the coffee table and anchored down with an empty lipstick-stained mug. He focused on a close-up picture of a baby gorilla, who was being carried by an adult gorilla. The gorilla who was carrying it had its back to the camera and the expression on the baby’s face as it looked straight at the viewer was palpable in both its intelligence and helplessness. The poor thing looked weak and scared and Paul immediately realized it was the baby gorilla who had been kidnapped at the zoo. Sure enough, the headline confirmed this: “Baby Gorilla still hostage as Health Weakens to Danger Level”.

It’s Zoila—the gorilla at the zoo. This was the story that Simone had been following with such interest. And then, finally, the first inklings of a plan began to tinker around inside of his head. He wondered if Simone knew this was happening. Maybe this was just the thing she needed to hear about right now. Maybe this could serve as some motivation to get her interested in the world outside of the furnace
room. Maybe—just maybe this could get her out of there. If Paul played his cards right.

12.

As she had been afraid of, Rebecca rushed in about half an hour late for her rehearsal. And once she got there, her ripped knapsack falling off her shoulder like some motherless school kid, she made her apologies and excuses, but then found herself wholly preoccupied and unable to concentrate on 16th century Italy. When she arrived at the hospital two hours earlier, she found her mother still unconscious, which frankly took her a little by surprise. The last time this had happened, Linda regained consciousness again over the first night and Rebecca realized she had been assuming that this would happen again. Instead, the doctor had sought her out and asked her a lot of intense questions like “who was Linda’s next of kin?” and “who else can help you with your sister?” that made Rebecca feel as though her mother was going to remain unconscious forever.

Rebecca realized pretty quickly that she must have been acting strangely because of how the other members of the cast were reacting to her. Her closest friend in the play was Beth, who was a natural jokester and who, appropriate to that role, was playing the part of Juliet’s nurse.

She elbowed Rebecca playfully as she dumped her coat and bag onto one of the auditorium seats. “Anything wrong?”

As a response, Rebecca just rolled her eyes and shook her head and was surprised to feel a sudden tightness in her throat that temporarily took away her
ability to answer with words. Her expression must have conveyed more serious
distress than she’d intended because Beth reacted with respectful gravity and
subsequently proceeded to tiptoe around her for the rest of the rehearsal.
Whenever she caught Rebecca’s eye, she maintained a sort of scrunched up worried
look that made Rebecca feel increasingly impatient.

And then to Rebecca’s surprise, it seemed that the other members of the cast
started to follow Beth’s lead. Lord Capulet—her husband—kept looking at her with
paternal concern and Mercutio—who couldn’t handle it when anyone or anything
got serious—avoided her altogether. Soon she found that the more others treated
her with these kit gloves, the further Rebecca sank into her funk. Brenda Callaghan
was the only one who wasn’t tiptoeing. In fact, she seemed to be feeding off
Rebecca’s low energy and general bad mood like a shark feeds on the remains of a
giant tuna fish. So the lower Rebecca sank into her despair, the more buoyed up and
energized Brenda became. Rebecca tried to push the annoyance she felt with
Brenda out of her mind, but that became next to impossible when the director
announced that he wanted to rehearse a scene with the two of them.

The director, Tim, was a nice enough guy—a little too studious and reserved,
perhaps, to be a typical director. To boot, he was surprisingly unaware of the social
dynamics that were happening around him even though he was very talented at
getting his actors to express these sorts of complexities in their scenes. So Rebecca
could pretty well bank on the fact that he had no clue about the lack of love between
herself and Brenda.
“Okay, can I have Brenda, Beth, and Rebecca on stage for Act 1 Scene 3, please?”

Rebecca could have sworn she sensed the tension in the rehearsal hall go up a notch as Tim proclaimed this order—so much so that Rebecca and Beth exchanged a quick look. Brenda, on the other hand, painted on an extra wide and bright smile as if she wanted nothing more than to go over the scene that introduced all three of their characters into the play. Without looking at Rebecca (she was so good at not looking at Rebecca that Rebecca wondered if she’d be able to pick her out of a police line-up) she flashed a gorgeously insincere smile at Beth and hopped up onto the stage. Rebecca felt the air deflate from her lungs as she shuffled along behind her friend.

It wasn’t until she got up on the stage and gazed out at the rest of the cast settling into chairs in the auditorium or sneaking up the aisle to take a break that she realized how completely removed she felt from this situation. And in the same moment she felt this, she noticed with some horror that neither Brenda nor Beth had their scripts with them. It suddenly dawned on her that they were expected to be off book that day. Tim also noticed this detail right away.

“Still on book, Rebecca?”

“Sorry.” Rebecca dropped the script more dramatically than she intended onto the floor and put her hands up to her head. “I can try and see if I’ve got my lines down.”

But as soon as they started, Rebecca realized just how far she was from having the scene memorized. In fact, after her first line, “Nurse, where’s my
daughter?” she was surprised that Beth didn’t answer right away. There was an awkward pause in which Beth whispered the rest of the line to her as a prompt, “Call her forth to me.”

“Shit. Sorry,” Rebecca said and parroted back her entire line without anything resembling persuasion.

Brenda played mainly to her nurse in the scene and smiled and laughed with extra sparkle and vigour. And even though her character of Juliet was supposed to feel more close and trusting of her nurse than her mother, Rebecca couldn’t help but read every flirt and giggle as a direct and premeditated taunt. She tried hard to focus but became more and more frustrated by Brenda’s childish behaviour. She struggled, with two more promptings, through her longer second line but needed Beth to point at her secretly to tell her when to begin her third and fourth. Suddenly, there was a pause in Beth’s long speech and Brenda and Beth turned to her, Brenda with a direct look of frustration and Beth with eyebrows raised in a friendly embarrassed warning.

Tim sighed and folded his arms in resignation as Rebecca called out again, “Line?”

The stage manager drew in a breath to give the line to Rebecca, but Tim held up a hand to stop the assistance. “Rebecca. Is everything all right?”

A note of compassion and warmth underlying Tim’s question disarmed her. She’d gotten herself so far from tears since she climbed up on the stage, but now she was surprised and embarrassed by another quick formation of a lump in her throat. Time seemed to slow down. With a quick sweep of her eyes, she managed to take in
Brenda’s hard stare and Beth stepping toward her in motherly worry, her mouth forming an “oh!” but the rush of tears had started, and before she could stop herself, Rebecca flew off the stage and ran for cover.

13.

“I read the newspaper this morning.” Paul thought that now that he was sitting outside the furnace room door, he’d come straight to the point. He’d given Simone a few hours to sit in there by herself before coming back to see her; he figured that she might be more responsive to any suggestions of leaving her self-imposed prison once she’d had some more extensive time to get good and bored of it.

At first, she didn’t respond, so Paul tried again. “Simone? Did you hear me?”

“Mmm..”

He could make out her response faintly. But any answer, Paul knew, was an encouraging sign. “You sleeping?”

“Mm. No. I’m hungry.”

“Well,” Paul paused. “Come out and get yourself some food, then. Rebecca’s not here.”

Simone didn’t answer right away. “No,” she said finally.

“Okay. Well don’t talk about being hungry, then.” Paul listened for a moment and heard nothing. “Okay?”

“Okay.”

“Okay. Do you know what I read about?”
“Where?”

“No. What I read about.”

“What did you read?”

“In the newspaper.”

Simone paused, confused by the direction the conversation had taken. “No,” she finally said. She couldn’t have sounded more uninterested, Paul thought, but he kept his mind focused on the goal he was aiming at.

“I read about Zoila the gorilla and her baby at the zoo.”

“Oh.” Now Paul could detect a perceptible shift in her tone.

“Another gorilla stole her baby from her, Simone. Did you know that? Now it looks like the baby could die if he doesn’t get back to his mother.”

“Oh.” Simone still didn’t sound particularly worried. But Paul knew her well enough to know that this sort of information would stir something deep inside her even if it took a while to penetrate. Then, he heard her get up off the floor and shuffle closer to the door. Another good sign. After a pause, she asked, “Why don’t the zookeepers take the baby away from that other gorilla?”

Paul hadn’t thought through the logistics of the whole scenario, and he didn’t have time to read the whole article. He thought fast. “Er—too dangerous, I guess. Now Simone,” -he let his voice drop down to a more serious register- “Is this something you could help with? I mean—with your talent with animals, I bet you could save that little baby’s life.”

“Talent? What do you—I don’t have talent.”
“Of course you do. Look at how you can communicate. I’ve never known any human that could—”

Simone paused, considering. “But I just hurt animals when I get upset.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well—I killed Mila and that frog—”

“Yes. That’s true.” Paul still found it such a foreign idea that Simone considered this a personality defect as opposed to a triumph. Still, he tried to play along. “Yes, but—come on, Simone; it was a frog and a bird—that doesn’t really count as killing does it? And besides, both times it was because you felt frustrated. Frustrated that no one takes you seriously or thinks that you could actually live independently one day. They’re even calling group homes now!”

“I won’t go to a group home!”

“I know. I know you don’t want to go. But maybe instead of hiding in there away from the world, maybe if you showed them what you’re capable of, you could change their opinions about you. What do you think about that?”

On the other side of the door, Simone had been sitting with her hands gathered around her knees and with her eyes examining the little specks of dirt and rubble that had collected on the floor. Now she looked up. “Capable of?”

“Sure. I bet you’d be more than capable of talking that gorilla out of keeping the baby.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Didn’t you say you talked to Zoila the last time you went to the zoo?”
Simone reflected back. “She told me she was afraid to be a mother. That she had a bad feeling about it all.”

“Well, that shows you something, doesn’t it? I bet she knew this would happen.”

“But what could I do?”

“You could find out the problem between them. You could make the other gorilla see reason.”

“Oh.” Now Simone’s eyes were focused and clear as they followed along the length of the pipes on the ceiling. In her mind, she was sitting at the gorilla pen at the zoo. It took her a while to speak, but when she did, she sounded thoughtful and calm. “How I know you aren’t telling a story to get me out?”

“I brought the newspaper article to show you.” He knew Simone could never appreciate the effort this had cost him without opposable thumbs. He batted it under the door for Simone to pull through and look at, which she did.

Grabbing a hold of the first corner that came through, she immediately became mesmerized by the photograph of the baby gorilla. She was silent again for several moments. It was like Paul could hear her thinking.

“How would I even go to the zoo?”

Luckily Paul, always practical, was ready for this little detail. “Take a cab,” he announced proudly and preceded to push a crisp five-dollar bill under the door that he had found folded up on Rebecca’s dresser.

“What’s a cab?”
The dressing room was empty when Rebecca ducked into it, and as soon as she swung the door safely to a close behind her, she began to sob as if her insides were turning to liquid. She didn’t understand what was happening to her; she never acted this way—particularly in public, but she was too overwhelmed now to question or resist it.

She heard a light tapping on the door a few minutes later and wasn’t surprised. She expected it to be Beth, maybe, but since everyone in the cast had witnessed her outburst, she supposed with some humiliation that it could have been any of them.

She opened the door reluctantly to find Tim standing there, who had such a look of concern on his face that for a moment Rebecca almost forgot to feel embarrassed.

“I’m sorry,” she sniffled, and turning from him, she plunked herself down on a rickety wooden chair at the far end of the small room next to a clothes rack that was draped with an array of Shakespearean costumes.

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Tim’s eyes nervously swept around the small female change room as if he expected it to be filled with nothing but bras and tampons. Relieved that it wasn’t, he sat himself next to Rebecca and looked at her through the reflection of the mirror in front of them that was surrounded by small round light bulbs.

“I just—” Rebecca fingered the lacy rim at the bottom of her white shirt.

“There’s been a lot going on lately.”
“Yes. Beth just filled us in briefly. You should have told me, Rebecca.”

“Yeah, I suppose. But when? There wasn’t time.”

Tim paused and watched her in the mirror. “Right,” he said, and he nodded slowly.

“I’m just feeling so overwhelmed suddenly. And today the play just felt like one more pressure I didn’t need. I’m starting to wonder if I can handle it, frankly.”

Tim scrunched his forehead into a pinched, anxious expression and answered quickly, as if he didn’t want to indulge that possibility at this point. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. But in the meantime, why don’t you take the rest of the day off? Go home and see to your sister. She’s all alone, I understand?”

“That’s right.”

“Okay—well get yourself home and maybe get some sleep or something. Whatever you need to do. Then I’ll arrange the schedule, so I won’t need you for a couple more days. In fact, maybe you can come back next Monday. In the meantime, if you have time, start looking at your lines, but don’t stress about it if you don’t, okay? There’s till plenty of time before opening night. How does that sound?”

Rebecca looked him directly in the eye for the first time since he arrived—first in the mirror, and then she turned to him beside her. “Thanks. I’d appreciate that.”

“It’s no problem at all.” Tim smiled. “Do you want me to send Beth in here with your coat and stuff?”

“No, that’s all right. I can go in and get them.”

“You sure?”
Rebecca smiled, and the muscle relaxation that accompanied it felt like such a relief. “Yeah. I’m sure.”

“Okay suit yourself!” Tim exaggerated his reaction and put his hands up to face the ceiling in a gesture of surrender. Rebecca laughed, and he joined her. After he’d closed the door, Rebecca did feel a little better. But now she knew she’d have to go home and face the problem of Simone.

15.

Simone was captivated by the image of the baby gorilla she was presently holding in her hands. She studied the way his head fell limply onto the shoulder of the female who carried him, the eyes that still showed such spark and determination despite their obvious depleted look—and the incredible wisdom that they transmitted as they gazed evenly out at the photographer’s lens, as if this creature had lived more extensively in its few days on Earth than individuals who had already reached full adulthood. Yes—many believed this photograph was this baby’s best hope. If anything would cause a public outcry to help poor Zoila get her baby back, then this was it. But the problem—as Simone well understood—was that public outcry might do very little in this situation. Snatching a baby away from a full-grown and aggressively single-minded gorilla was dangerous to say the least. Or rather, it was dangerous for most people.

Simone instinctively agreed with Paul that she might be able to do some good for this baby, but she was slow to admit it to herself. Her cat’s words kept reverberating around inside her head and something in them made her feel whole
and excitedly angry in the most satisfying and energetic way. Nobody takes me seriously, she thought. I have to show them what I could do. It’s true. Not everyone can talk to animals like I do. She smiled to herself—a shy secret smile and suddenly and irrefutably she felt proud of herself for the first time in what felt like a long long while.

She stood up and faced the door, and immediately afterwards she felt herself break into a sweat. The five dollar bill hadn’t left her sweaty palm, and while it made her feel free and independent, it also made her feel scared to death. Could she really do it? A cab. Take a cab to the zoo. She wanted to so badly, but now that this chance was in front of her so naked and urgent could she really follow through with it? Did she really want it?

As she stared at the door with her heart pounding like a metal drum, she suddenly heard a car on the street that seemed to slow down in front of their house. Then the lights from the headlights flashed in the room and swung from one dark wall to the other. In the next second, the car began to motor up their driveway.

It was Rebecca. What would Simone do now? In a few seconds, she’d be inside the house, and Simone would be trapped. If she ran out the front door, she risked being seen and surely followed. No—there had to be another way.

She swung around and looked wildly about the room for an answer. Her eyes finally settled on the window. That was it. Rebecca probably wouldn’t even notice it was open until tomorrow morning. Simone darted toward it, grabbed a chair, and stuck it underneath. Clutching the newspaper and the sweaty five-dollar bill in her
hands, she opened the window and stuffed herself through and out into the middle of the afternoon.

16.

Natalia could think of nothing more boring than sitting in her brother’s van and enduring the endless stretch of nothingness until something actually happened at the Malmquist home across the street. That’s why she coaxed some of her friends who were also members of The Animal Rights Coalition to share the job with her and her brother, Boris. But after these others had each completed a single six hour shift, they were usually less than eager to do another. Especially since given their scant numbers (there were eight of them, which was four pairs) a new shift came up every day.

But Natalia was nothing if not determined, and she manipulated her brother into being the same. Although her helpers were dropping like flies, she made up for the slack and found herself doing longer and longer shifts.

That wasn’t to say it wasn’t difficult. Boris had been heroically stoic about the whole thing, but now she sensed he was beginning to doubt the worthiness of their venture. Maybe Simone would take ages to come out of the house. Maybe she’d actually become one of those seriously reclusive types and only eventually come out feet first. It was a creepy idea, but it had occurred to Natalia as well. It was true that the long wait was taking its toll on her as well, and in the grand scheme of things, it wasn’t like Simone had been in there that long, either. It was murder to think about that.
The worst moment for both Natalia and Boris probably came early on in their fourth shift together. They received a call from Svetlana about a family in the suburbs who found themselves in what Natalia deemed to be the enviable position of having a deer stuck in their garage. Their garage door was broken, and they needed to either get the door fixed or else coax the deer through the only other entrance to their garage—which happened to be through their front hallway.

Natalia loved to do wildlife rescue missions. She felt it gave all the meaning to her work with animals. She loved the exhilaration, the danger, and the drama, and afterwards, she loved people’s gratitude, and the feeling that she was being heroic. It fed her more than anything else did in her work, and the idea that Svetlana and Sergiy were off handling that little gem of a job while she and her brother rotted away in the van waiting for a whole lot of nothing made her want to give up on the autistic demon child and go make a documentary film about the deer. But that was irresponsible, and she knew it. She needed staying power if she was ever going to make anything of herself. She hadn’t successfully completed any film longer than three minutes since she’d left school, and she actually wanted this to be an important story that could make people think.

She’d been staring out the window at the icy gray street with its bare branches of trees that tended to look like gnarled hands in December when it occurred to her that she hadn’t been looking at the Malmquist house for a while now. Frustrated with herself, she pointed her eyes mechanically over at the unassuming small Parkdale home, which also happened to be in the direction of her
brother, whom she noticed in a sudden fury, had his eyes closed and was breathing as if he had fallen asleep.

“Boris!” She hit him hard on the chest and startled him into wakefulness.

“You’re sleeping? What are you sleeping for?”

Boris looked amused by the harsh treatment he was getting from his sister. Laughing, he protested. “No, no! I wasn’t sleeping! Just for a minute I closed my eyes!”

“Hmm,” grumbled Natalia skeptically. “Sure.”

She was just about to suggest that one of them walk up the street and pick up a late lunch when she saw what looked like the basement window being opened from the inside of the Malmquist home.

“Hey Boris—look!”

Then she saw a figure—a girl with brown hair cut into a curly bob—appear behind the window and begin to wedge herself underneath it.

Boris and Natalia exchanged a quick look of alarm and surprise. “Simone!” Natalia whispered, and her brother nodded, reaching into the back seat for his camera.

“Yes, yes, start filming. Let’s follow her.”

Simone, who looked so small in her bright yellow hooded coat, had successfully gotten herself out from under the window, and she stood up on the grass in front of her house and looked around like she was in a dream. She paused as if she didn’t know what to do next and wandered down to the sidewalk. Finally, looking up toward the main drag, she began to head north.
17.

I went through the window in the basement like Paul told me to do. And I felt so weird because I never went through a window like that before and also I never even went on the street by myself like that before, too. And I was so scared, it's true, but I kept touching my five dollar bill and I said to myself to not be scared and I tried to only think about Zoila and her baby and what I was going to do. And I wished so bad that Paul was with me but he said forget it because they don't let cats go in cabs ever unless they're in a cage and he hates cages as much as I hate group homes so I didn't wanted to do that to him. And when I walked along the street I thought the trees looked bigger and the houses looked tall and slanted all to one side and at one point I started to breathe all hard and so I had to do a breathing trick that Anna showed me once to calm me down.32

And when I came to the main street there were lots of people walking around and I felt so scared of them but I just tried not to look at them or even think about them and I just tried to concentrate on my five dollar bill and on Zoila and her baby.

And I saw there were so many cracks in the sidewalk and somebody's white gum and water bottles that were all crushed and then I saw that I was watching the sidewalk so much that I forgot to get a cab like Paul told me how to. He said people just lifted up their hands to the sky if they want a cab to stop like how Anna tells us to do at school when we want to answer a question. So even though I didn't have an answer to a question, I raised up my hand as I walked to Queen St. and hoped a cab would stop if they saw me like that.
Rebecca arrived home from rehearsal feeling emotional and drained. She walked past the furnace room door to deposit her stuff on the kitchen counter and in passing, quickly concluded that her sister hadn’t left her little cave just yet. God, she thought. She has the stubbornness of Mohammed. Even so, she decided to wait a bit before trying to speak to her.

She’d been through too much that day to engage in another battle so soon. Her nerves were frayed, and they’d likely snap altogether if pushed too far. No—she’d make her some lunch and leave it outside the door but wait until she felt good and ready before she tried to talk with her.

Having this plan already made her feel marginally better and after she’d plonked down the ham and cheese sandwich outside the closed door and announced (responselessly) to Simone that it sat there waiting for her, she checked the landline for messages. There was one from her aunt Gwenyth and two from Patrick. The two from her boyfriend she had been expecting—even though it was one short of yesterday making Rebecca feel slightly preoccupied about the fact that he might be starting to give up. She couldn’t have that. She’d only been really angry for twenty-four hours after all. But the one from her aunt was unusual considering that she was still on assignment in Africa, and phones were hard to come by. Her message didn’t convey much, and Rebecca couldn’t tell if she’d heard anything about the recent happenings at the Malmquist home. Her high-pitched melodic voice just betrayed its usual warmth and lightness, and in the few seconds that she listened to it, Rebecca sensed the far-away places that Gwenyth inhabited—she could almost
smell the foreign soil, feel the culture and excitement and possibility of such a
different world, and it made her almost want to cry again. If only her aunt could
come back here for a visit, if only she’d come just for a few days, Rebecca wouldn’t
have to feel like she was carrying this tremendous weight all by herself. She was so
sick of being responsible, of being the one keeping this family together. Before she
could stop them, her tears started to flow again as if they’d never stop.

Suddenly, however, the phone rang, and when she saw Patrick’s name
illuminated on the call display, she sobered up in an instant. Ha. Good, she thought.
So he hadn’t given up just yet.

She wasn’t about to answer it (although now she felt she might do that the
next time), but immediately, she felt considerably better. Instead, she waited out
the time he needed to leave a message and then listened to what he had said eagerly.
The information wasn’t at all what she’d been expecting.

“Hi Rebecca.” His voice didn’t have the low sheepish quality that Rebecca
was growing used to of late. Rather, it sounded energized, and as if he had
something definite to say. “I rode by your house just now on my bicycle to see if you
were around. And I noticed the basement window was open. I just thought it was
strange because I thought I saw Simone down there yesterday. Anyway. Just
thought I’d warn you in case there was something wrong. Let me know if you need
my help.”

Rebecca shot to her feet on hearing this news. Frantic, she hurried down to
the furnace room and yelled for her sister. Not getting an answer didn’t tell her
much, so she bolted up the stairs and out onto the front porch. Sure enough, the
window had been left ajar from the inside. Rebecca ran down to it and, getting
down onto her stomach, peered inside. She saw an empty plate on the floor, a heap
of blankets where Simone had probably camped out for the night, but no sign of her
sister. Not knowing what else to do, she ran back upstairs and stared dumbly down
at the telephone with her heart pounding. Who should she call? She could try the
number that Gwényth had left, but she knew from experience that the likelihood of
actually speaking to her aunt was low. Still, the idea of trying appealed to her. She
tried the number, and after three attempts, finally connected to something that
might have been an answering machine. She wasn’t sure since there was no
outgoing message, but the idea of her aunt possibly listening to all that was going on
here was so enormously comforting to Rebecca that she spilled out all the
information she could manage before the machine cut out.

She felt momentarily better after that but knew she should probably call
someone else. It still didn’t feel quite right to call Patrick, and her friends Jill and
Beth probably couldn’t be much help. Then it came to her: Anna. She cared so much
about Simone, and she always seemed to know what to do.

19.

“Do you need some help?”

Simone stared up at the two brown leather boots that stood before her as
they waited for an answer to the question they had just posed to her while shifting
their weight from side to side. She didn’t answer them.

“Are you okay?”
Now the boots tucked together and in one slow but deliberate gesture tilted up on their tippy-toes only to be replaced by a woman’s whole red-capped head with bits of blonde curls sticking out at the sides, which came plunging down from above and now sat looking at Simone directly in front of her face.

Simone squirmed and looked away from her.

“Can I ask why your hand is up in the air?”

“Cab,” Simone mumbled. She was trying her darndest to be brave and frank.

She had already waited 20 minutes on this strange and hostile street where everyone seemed to be looking at her, and now she was getting very tired and cold.

“Hmm? What’s that?”

“I need a cab,” Simone said more loudly and clearly than she had probably ever spoken to a stranger before. To most people, she probably would have sounded angry, but this stranger didn’t seem unnerved by Simone’s abrupt tone.

“Oh!” Confused, the woman looked up and down the street in earnest. “Well, I don’t think you’ll find one like that!”

“Why?”

“Well—first you need to stand up and go right to the edge of the street. And well, you have to face the cars coming toward you. Then you only raise your hand when you see one pass.”

“Oh.”

“Do you want me to help you do that?”
“Yes,” Simone said with determination, but her body didn’t budge. Noticing this idiosyncracy, the woman laughed—not unkindly—as if she were suddenly finding the situation uproariously funny.

Simone wasn’t sure what to make of her joviality, but there was something about the woman that she liked or at least felt easy about.

“Okay—well—you’ll have to stand up, you know!” the woman said, still laughing.

Simone did so, and allowed herself to be directed toward the edge of the street and then caught on the elbow before she stepped out into the middle of it. This was a bit too much for Simone, and whirling around, she let out such a yelp, that for a second, the woman thought she had accidentally touched a broken arm. The smile dissolved from her face, and disarmed, she looked into Simone’s for some kind of explanation. But when she detected the naked fear in those eyes, her surprise slowly turned to protectiveness and concern. This woman clearly wasn’t somebody who was afraid to meet other people’s eyes, and Simone felt herself hypnotized by her long steady gaze.

“Do you have money for a cab?” the woman asked finally.

Simone nodded; now that the spell had been broken, she resumed her normal attitude of avoiding eye contact.

“How much?” asked the woman suspiciously and again with a note of the humour she had unleashed earlier.

Instead of answering, Simone pulled out her five dollar bill and showed it to the woman.
“Hmm...” said the woman a little playfully. “And where do you want to go?”

“I’m going to see the gorillas.”

“The gorillas?”

“At the zoo.”

“The zoo?”

But the woman could see by Simone’s face that this was no joke. And she was perceptive enough to see by Simone’s whole demeanor that she probably had no idea how to joke even if she’d wanted to. She paused and looked at the street, pursing her lips together and seeming to be lost in thought for a moment. Finally, she appeared to make a decision for herself. Holding out her hand, an orange and blue taxi veered behind another car and pulled up in front of them. The woman opened the door for Simone and then handed the driver some money.

“She’d like to go to the Metro zoo.”

The cabbie, a man with a turban around his head and half closed, disinterested eyes, nodded and briefly checked out Simone in his rearview mirror. The woman smiled warmly at Simone. “What did you say your name was?”

Simone met her eyes again and felt at ease. “Simone.”

“Very nice to meet you, Simone. I’m Tanya.” Tanya extended her hand, and waited to see if Simone would shake it. Simone paused for a moment, and then wrapped three fingers and a thumb around two of Tanya’s fingers.

“Maybe we’ll see each other again.” Tanya smiled.

Simone smiled back and felt almost relaxed as the door closed.
As Tanya watched the taxi drive away with its helpless cargo, she thought over her options for a few moments. Finally, she decided there was no other recourse to take. But before she notified the police, she thought she could wait a little while. Maybe not quite as long as an hour. But enough time to let Simone get to the zoo and see the gorillas and do whatever it was she needed to do.

20.

Patrick was feeling sick about the whole thing. He believed that getting Simone to a good group home was the right thing to do, but he had so obviously botched it all by offering his help to Linda without clearing it first with his girlfriend. Now, because he had jumped so hastily out of the plane, he felt he was free falling with what might have been a faulty parachute. In other words, he might have lost the battle with Simone and he might also have lost Rebecca. His guilt got so intense that in moments he irrationally believed he was single-handedly responsible for putting Linda in the hospital and forcing Simone down into the furnace room. He wasn’t sure how that all worked itself out logically, but he felt it nonetheless.

And maddeningly, none of his advances toward Rebecca seemed to be having any effect. None of the usual strategies were working; he’d left phone calls, he had visited—pretty soon he felt desperate enough to try climbing up her window with a ladder and carrying her off like in some fairytale. But at this point he wasn’t sure even that would win her back. Rebecca seemed more angry than he ever would have predicted. He still didn’t know her that well—and now he suspected that his
self-righteous determination as to what was the right way to deal with Simone might have caused him to stumble onto her deal-breaker.

Patrick left the message about the open furnace room window almost 30 minutes ago and since then, he’d been trying to attend to some overdue paperwork that had been staring up at him for weeks from a neglected corner of his kitchen. Why he decided to tackle it in that particular moment remains a mystery, and so try as he might, he predictably found his heart just wasn’t in it. He’d jot down a note or two but then stare out the window again and watch the pigeons fight for space on the roof across the street.

When the telephone finally rang, he leapt for it, believing it might actually be Rebecca. But when he heard his boss’ voice on the other end of line, it was difficult to mask his considerable disappointment.

“Hi Patrick—it’s Anna.”

“Oh, Anna. Hi.”

“I just got a call from Rebecca.” Patrick’s ears perked up. “Simone has gone missing.”

“Jesus.”

“Rebecca told me you had called to tell her about the window.”

“That’s right.” Patrick’s voice hardened. Now it felt like Rebecca was communicating with him through a third party, and that made him feel like a child. To make matters worse, his boss was among the last people he wanted to get mixed up in his personal life. “So what’s happening? Have you called the police?”
“Yes. I reported it right after I got off the phone with Rebecca. Patrick, I know this must be hard for you—it’s hard for both of you—but I know Rebecca would want you to know what’s going on. Do you have any idea where Simone might be?”

Patrick tried to steer his brain onto this question but was temporarily too distracted by the image of Simone wandering around the city by herself and by the fact that he wasn’t talking this over with Rebecca to give the question the thought it required.

“I don’t know. No—I can’t think of where she’d go.”

Anna was silent a moment. “Well, okay. I told Rebecca to stay at home in case the police call or Simone comes back on her own. But Gregory and I are going to drive around the neighbourhood. I can’t imagine she’s gone very far.”

“No probably not. I’ll do the same. I’ll get my bike and ride around.”

“Great. Call me if you need anything. I’ll have my cell phone with me.”

It was like Patrick was in a daze as he got his gear together to go out. Things were going from bad to worse now. But maybe if he could find Simone he would be a hero in Rebecca’s eyes, and his whole nightmare could come to an end. Thinking these thoughts, he strapped on his helmet, rolled up his pant leg and turned the doorknob to go out the front door.

21.

I didn’t like that cab man so much as I liked that woman with the boots who helped me to got to there. The cab man tried to talk with me, but I didn’t understand him and so I didn’t never answered. And then he laughed and said
“Okay if you want to be that way!” and he smiled even if it wasn’t funny and put his elbow out the window even though the wind blewed on me and it was cold.33

And I tried to look out the window and be brave and think about Paul and Zoila and how I don’t never have to be scared at the zoo because the animals are so nice like me and they wouldn’t never hurt me. And then the cab man moved that mirror he has so he looked at me really hard until I got scared and I tried not to look back at him. And then he laughed again and he said “you’re a funny one, aren’t you?” but I didn’t say nothing because one thing I knowed is that I’m a not funny one because I never even understand people what make jokes and laugh and stuff. So I didn’t say nothing and then he just stopped trying to talk to me and that made me happy and so he called his friend on the phone and he talked for a long time in a different language that I didn’t understand. And only then I felt more calm and I could watch the other cars going really fast on the highway. And then I felt like I can’t believe I’m taking a cab all by myself like an independent person and for one moment I didn’t even feel scared but only happy and strong and powerful like maybe one day I could really live all by myself and have a job and stuff. And maybe that was possible even. But it was such a long drive to the zoo and so at some point I just closed my eyes and thought about gorillas and tried not to felled asleep.

22.

It wasn’t exactly easy keeping up with the orange and blue taxi cab that insisted on accelerating 20 clicks over the speed limit and weaving its way through cars on the busy highway. Boris fancied himself to be a good driver, and if that
means you can send a vehicle hurtling down the highway nose to bumper to keep up with your target, perhaps he was. In any case, he was certainly keeping up a pretty decent clip behind the taxi, almost losing sight of it occasionally, but then quickly coming back on track. Speeding, however, always made Natalia extremely nervous. She had been in a minor car accident in high school in Russia, and even though no one had been seriously hurt at that time, the experience had been enough to put some lasting fear into her. She buckled up her seatbelt, and with an ashen face, she went more or less silent. Her natural impulse of course was to be quite a mouthy backseat driver, especially when the driver in question was her speeding twin brother, but today she knew it was vital for Boris to maintain this pace behind Simone. This was their big chance after all. So she resorted to cringing, sticking her fist in her mouth, covering her eyes, and filling her lungs with large amounts of air to fight back the urge to bark commands. Boris, who was fully aware of his sister’s conflicted reaction to his driving, was enjoying this silent permission to speed just a little too much.

Once they exited the highway, Natalia relaxed considerably. But that only lasted a moment. Now, her worry changed from getting killed to losing Simone. There were more cars on this street, more people making turns and entering or exiting the roadway, that the siblings soon began falling behind the taxi. They were about six cars behind it when Natalia saw the taxi approaching a stale green light just ahead.

“Oh no, Boris, you have to make that light!”
But just as she finished her sentence, the green light turned to yellow, the
two cars ahead of them squeaked through, but Boris hit the brakes. He surely would
have been hit if he had tried to get by.

But this didn’t matter to Natalia. “Boris!” she yelled in exasperation. Her
backseat driver tendencies had lost all inhibition again.

“What! You want to kill us?” You could still see some hint of his amusement
at his sister lurking around his mouth.

“Now they’re getting away!” Natalia screamed.

“So watch them! What else can we do?!”

Natalia sighed and shrugged, rolled down her window and leaned out a little.
The light was still red and so far there were no signs of it changing.

“Can you see them?” she asked her brother.

“Yeah,” Boris squinted into the distance ahead of him. “They’re coming to the
gas station on the right.”

“Oh this light! We could die and be buried before it changes! Oh—oh. I think
that’s them turning left up there.”

“You sure?”

“How can I be sure? I don’t know! But hurry anyway!”

Natalia added this final command just as the light changed and Boris put the
gas pedal to the floor with such force that the car screeched and started. The other
cars around it seemed to sense there was a crazy person behind the wheel, so
luckily for them, they gave the truck some undeserved space.
Boris acted like lightning now, and Natalia temporarily abandoned all her fears of speeding. They shot like a bullet out of a gun down the stretch of road ahead of them, swerving into the spaces between cars, and gained ground on the taxi they hoped contained Simone. The cab turned left as Natalia said it would, and less than a minute later, Natalia and Boris approached the spot where it had stood waiting to turn.

“There it is! I see it!”

The taxi was still in sight once the truck was finally able to turn. It was weaving down a windy side street into a remote forested area.

“Where’s she going?”

No sooner had the question been posed than the taxi, with the truck now close behind, pulled into a parking lot with a giant sign reading, “The Toronto Zoo” on the entranceway.

Boris and Natalia looked at one another. “The zoo!”

They followed the cab to the entrance and parked at a distance still close enough to see what was going on.

Nothing happened for a while, and there was a second in which Natalia thought they had been following the wrong taxi. But just then they saw a small and rather disheveled-looking young woman in a yellow jacket crawl out of the taxi that Natalia immediately recognized to be Simone.

“There she is!”

Boris made a move for the door handle, but Natalia sucked in air through her teeth, which was a sound intended to instruct him to stop.
“Idiot! Wait for her to move along a bit.”

Boris smiled and rolled his blue eyes. Then they sat in the car and watched as the taxi cab drove away, and Simone stood like a lilting lily who eventually walked slowly and hesitatingly toward the entrance of the zoo.

“Okay. Now we go,” Natalia instructed, and Boris reached for his film equipment.

23.

Gwenyth lay her head back on the little flap of pillow the airline had provided and stared down at the fluffy blanket of white clouds that stretched out below her like a God-sized trampoline. Flying always instilled a feeling of freedom and exhilaration in her. No matter what was happening in her life—no matter the stresses or challenges, she’d get up into the clear blue air like this and feel like she’d gain a perspective on whatever it was that had been bothering her before. One time, she’d boarded a plane just after having lost a long-term client over a petty misunderstanding, and by the time she’d gotten off six hours later, she felt genuinely good —excited even—by the opportunity for change the loss would provide her. Flying made everything fall into place, somehow, and seem a little less dire. But now as she stared down into the clouds and tried to let them work their magic, she realized they really had their work cut out for them.

What she was coming back to now was a biggie. Her sister’s alcoholism had finally landed her in the hospital, her autistic niece had locked herself in the basement for over 48 hours and was now running around who knew where, and
Rebecca as usual was trying stoically to hold it all together. It all sounded so extreme. Luckily, Rebecca’s return message had actually reached Gwenyth on her cell phone at the airport where she was waiting for a connecting flight. In fact, Gwenyth’s original purpose in calling her sister and sister’s family was to let them know that she was coming home early. Her contract in Africa had ended unexpectedly and by the time she got the desperate message from her niece, she had already crossed the Atlantic and was more than halfway home. She tried calling Rebecca back to let her know this, but lost the signal to connect to her again. Oh well, Gwenyth thought. Turning up will be a surprise, then. And she had to admit that part of her loved that idea.

She had enjoyed this trip to Africa, though, she had to admit. She’d been coming back to the same small village for almost five years now and in that time, she had developed some friendly relations with many of the natives who lived there. So that made the place feel a little more like home. And to make things more interesting, Jacob, her on again off again boyfriend, had also been stationed there to write a story for the same magazine she was taking photos for. So their status had been on for the past two months and in the predictable straightforward way they tended to operate, now that she had left, they were off again. But to tell the truth, Gwenyth had been sensing lately (and it was particularly apparent on this trip) that Jacob wanted to get more serious with her, but she just didn’t know if she was ready. Or maybe Jacob just wasn’t the guy for her. Frankly, she was a bit sick of having this conversation with herself.
She looked around for a flight attendant but couldn’t see any around. The service wasn’t great on this flight, but at least it had improved considerably since the first plane she took that left Africa. That plane was woefully bereft of anything smacking of service or luxury, which wasn’t surprising. No matter what the airline, no extra expense was doled out on that great dark continent she had just left behind.34

So in a way, it was a bit of a relief to be coming home again—back into the first world with its own, extremely different brand of hardships and challenges. She was going back to her only family, who always felt so much more precious to her after she had seen Jacob, and they had gone splits again. She knew they regarded her as some kind of heroic free spirit—someone who might float in and fix everything. But this time, she could only hope she could live up to that status.

24.

I gave to that cab man my five dollars and he looked at it and he said, “thanks for the tip!”, which I didn’t understand, so I didn’t say nothing and I just closed the door and waited for him to go away. Which he did after he just looked at me again for a while. And I don’t understand why people do that sometimes. They just look at you and don’t say nothing but you can see they’re talking to themselves inside. Then I looked for the entrance of the zoo and I sawed many people going to a line up behind me and so I went there, too. And there was a man and a baby in front of me and the baby had red hair and maybe she was tired because her eyes were closed.
Then it was my turn and the woman behind the glass talked to me and what's funny is that she said “for how many?” and she didn’t even looked at me when she spoked. And so I didn’t understand and so I didn’t say nothing. And that made her looked at me and she talked again and she said, “how many?” and still I didn’t understand. So I just tried to be brave and said “I want to see the gorillas.” And she said, “That'll be $18.00.” And I said, “I gave all my money to the cab man.” And that’s when she made her eyes go all small and hard and like that cab man she didn’t say nothing for a minute but just looked at me with her eyes and then she said, “If you don’t have any money, then you can't go into the zoo.” And then I didn’t knowed what to say, so I just said, “But I need to help Zoila.” And the woman just stared at me until I almost felt embarrassed but then I tried to think about Zoila and that helped me to be brave.

But then she said, “Step away from the counter, please,” and the man behind me moved forward like he was going to pay for himself and his sister and I didn’t wanted him to touch me so I moved out of the way.

But then I didn’t knowed what to do. I didn’t have more money—only that five dollars that Paul gave me and I didn’t knowed how I could go to see Zoila with no $18. And I just stood there and wished that Paul thought of this before and suddenly I felt so scared because if I didn’t even have money to go to the zoo then I knew then that I didn’t even have money to take a cab to go home. And for a second, I felt that feeling that I always have before a freak out, and there started a groan inside me like I wasn’t even doing it, and then my breath started to go all fast and hyperventilated.
But then as I started to do all that something happened what never happened before. I looked up and I sawed a picture of a gorilla looking at me and I seen that it was Zoila and she was holding her newborn baby, Zachery. And as I looked at her face, I could see she was a mother now like she wanted to be and as I was looking, I thought about her and not about me. And then I thought no—I can’t have a freak out now because Zoila needs her baby back or else he’ll died and that would be terrible if I could stop that like Paul said I could.

And suddenly I felt like I had to go in the zoo no matter what and I turned and then I seen a teacher in the line with lots of kids like in a school and she was looking for her money and there was a different woman behind the glass what was talking to someone behind her and she didn’t look and I thought now is my chance and so I walked up to that people and I walked through the entrance just like that and nobody even sawed.

25.

News of Simone’s disappearance had reached the hospital by now. Rebecca felt trapped at home waiting for more news from the police or Anna or anybody, so she used the opportunity to spread the word to everyone she could think of who either needed to know or who might be of help. It seemed unlikely, but it occurred to her that maybe Simone might go looking for her mother at her workplace.

After he heard, Dr. Fowler put his staff on alert. Linda was still unconscious, and the nurses were keeping a close eye on her. Dr. Fowler didn’t know what to think with this case—it was difficult to know what patients experienced who might
be slipping into a comatose state. Sometimes it seemed they responded better when surrounded by their family or friends—other times it seemed to make no difference at all. Linda was still being visited regularly by her friends on staff, but the longer she was there, the more these visits were slowing down. Her friend Georgia visited her at the beginning of her shift and during her lunch break as well. She’d sit on the edge of the bed and recount the highlights of her working day to her unconscious friend and seemed to relish the fact that for once she could talk without fear of interruption. Even Mr. Winters made a single ghostly appearance to Linda’s bedside when no one else was around and the second day was drawing to a close. He didn’t stay for long—but watched her from the safe distance of the doorway as if he had just come to confirm that the rumours of her being there were actually true.

But despite the visits, Dr. Fowler believed that so much of recovery came down to basic willingness on the part of Linda—something he knew he couldn’t instill in anyone. In the meantime, he secretly hoped that someone might show up—this autistic daughter maybe—who might trigger some fight response in his patient. Otherwise, he believed the consequences could be severe.

26.

When I gotted myself into the zoo, then I had to find out where was Zoila. And what’s confusing is that all the zoo people were maybe so happy about Zoila and her baby that they put up photos of them everywhere and so I just started to follow that pictures. But then I got really lost and far away because the zoo is really big and scary especially if you are there all alone. And soon I came to a place and I
hardly sawed any people at all there or even animals and I started to feel really scared again like I maybe walked too far and maybe I wasn’t even still in the zoo anymore. But then I sawed some giraffes and they were a boy and a girl and a baby. And I remembered how Rebecca always told me to ask someone if you are lost and usually I feel too scared to do that, but then I remembered to be brave for Zoila and anyway there weren’t any people around only giraffes so I asked them and they are animals so that wasn’t scary at all. But they didn’t know Zoila because they don’t really know any of the other animals that are too far away.

The boy said, “Zoila? Never heard of her.” He had some kind of funny giraffe accent.

And I said, “She’s a gorilla. She has a baby and another girl gorilla stole it from her.”

“Oh her, yes,” said the girl giraffe. “She’s been in the news. I think she’s in the African pavilion.”

And the boy said, “The African? No—that’s the chimps –or-hmm.”

“The orangutans,” they agreed together.

“I think she’s in the American Pavillion.”

“She’s not in the American Pavillion,” the girl laughed at her husband. “Dear, there aren’t any gorillas in America.”

“Fine. Well, maybe it’s the Asian Pavillion, then.”

“Or the Indo-Malayan,” said the baby.

Then the girl turned to me and smiled. “We don’t really know, I’m afraid.”
“In any case, you go that way. Everything in the zoo is that way,” said the boy and he gestured with his head back to the road I just took so far to get there.

“Okay,” I said. “Thanks.” And I started to walk back the way that I came. And I was tired but I tried to be patient and not tired for Zoila. Then eventually, I started to see more and more people and then I sawed on the ground there were gorilla footprints, and I followed them all the way to the African Tropical Pavillion.

27.

Patrick felt as though he had been circling the same fifteen blocks for hours. Really, it had only been about twenty minutes, but the task was very monotonous and the worrying was exhausting. On top of that, he had a growing poison-like sense that what he was doing was utterly besides the point, which made it so much worse. He started getting off his bicycle more frequently and hunting in people’s backyards or between their houses. He rode up alleyways, he ducked into stores and cafes on the main street, but he continually came up empty-handed. He passed Anna and her husband, Gregory, in their car several times, and they would exchange perfunctory updates that whittled down in content each time.

“Still nothing?” Anna said as she slowed down her car.

Patrick just shrugged his shoulders. “’Fraid so.”

Patrick was growing more and more despondent. After passing Rebecca’s house for what felt like the fiftieth time, he caught a glimpse of his girlfriend (or should he say his ex-girlfriend?) looking out her living room window. She saw him,
too, and froze. He was just lifting his hand up from his bicycle handlebars in a
greeting as Rebecca abruptly broke the eye contact and moved out of sight.

Patrick’s heart sank. Here he was trying to help—even in what he was being
blamed for by Rebecca he had been just trying to help, and now he suddenly and
momentously felt himself plummet into depression and discouragement. He rode
away a couple of more blocks and then dismounted and sat down on a little stone
wall that separated someone’s stone garden from the sidewalk. He had an impulse
to cry or to take up smoking again, but he quickly decided that neither action would
be a real solution to his problem.

Instead, he trained his thoughts toward Simone. He imagined her smile, her
green eyes, the way her mind worked. He felt his body relax as he pictured her—so
much so that he lost himself for a moment. And then when he returned to his
surroundings, a thought came to him with the force and conviction of true and
glittering inspiration: the zoo. Simone was at the zoo. It seemed insane, fantastic,
but suddenly he absolutely knew that he was right. She’d gone to see Zoila and her
baby. He had no idea how she would have gotten herself there—but for some
inexplicable reason, he couldn’t shake the idea from his head. Then with renewed
energy and hope, he got back on his bicycle and rode up to the main street. A taxi all
the way there was bound to be pricey, but it was the only thing that would be fast
enough. And he didn’t want to waste any more time. Thumbing through the bills in
his wallet and determining he had enough to cover the fare, he shot up his hand just
in time to bring a speeding taxi to a screeching halt in front of him, and after locking
up his bike, he climbed inside.
It hadn’t been easy tracking Simone in the taxi cab, and now it was proving equally difficult to follow her on foot through the zoo grounds. At least without being detected. And to make matters worse, Boris was lugging his camera equipment along behind him, which made ducking behind trees and scampering off the path at a moment’s notice challenging to say the least. But luckily for the Russian twins, Simone wasn’t paying the least bit of attention to them. In fact, the very notion that one person might want to follow another for some devious purpose was something that had never even entered the young woman’s head. While it was true that her anxiety level was extraordinarily high, it didn’t necessarily worsen in situations where most people’s fear would. Rather, this particular mind wasn’t usually focused on people—the only people she ever thought of were those who were very close to her already. Strangers might as well have been invisible.

Boris and Natalia, however, felt far from invisible. Their feet ached and their hands and faces were becoming covered in scratches from the branches and pine needles they were forced to continually crash into each time they ducked for cover. For Boris, this mission was becoming exhausting and tedious. For Natalia, it was becoming increasingly more urgent and exhilarating.

And whatever Natalia felt about a subject normally became the pervasive mood. Or that was the unspoken agreement between the siblings. Boris might grumble—he genuinely enjoyed grumbling and putting on a sour face—but he could be counted on to follow through on his sister’s crazy impulses. And once Natalia
was really enjoying herself, he would usually come around, too—although to save face, he’d never drop his grouchy demeanor.

The worst part came for him when Simone turned back after approaching the giraffes. It was clear from her body language that she was lost—that she had no idea where she was headed.

“What kind of documentary will this be?” he shouted at Natalia in frustration. “She walks around and looks at animals. So what? Budgie-killer has a day at the zoo. It’s not interesting.”

“Boris will you be quiet? That’s the risk you take when you make documentaries, you know, is that maybe you won’t have a story.”

“Oh I feel better now.”

“But I have a feeling about her. She’s up to something—I know it.”

It wasn’t until Simone finally found her way to the African Pavillon and sat down in front of the gorillas that Boris entertained the notion that his sister might be right. They tucked themselves behind some bushes close by the hippo pen and after rubbing their feet and setting up the equipment, Boris began to film.

29.

The crowd in front of the gorilla pen had been more or less constant since the catastrophic incident that had taken place almost 72 hours ago now. Manuel’s face drooped as if it had irretrievably lost its natural shape, and the rest of the zookeepers almost competed in looking stressed out and worried.
Much to his dismay, Jesse had been given the unenviable task of crowd control—unenviable because it mainly consisted of answering the same dull questions over and over again, and occasionally making sure the people didn’t upset the gorillas by getting too close or too loud. But that almost never happened. In other words, Jesse’s job was boring to say the least. In fact, whenever any of the rest of the zookeepers went into the pen and actually accomplished a task, or even when they gathered together to talk, Jesse looked on with envy. And the more time that passed, the more ill equipped he felt at answering the crowd’s questions. So much had probably changed since he last had an update himself that he was beginning to feel like just another Joe in the crowd.

He didn’t notice Simone right away—there were just far too many people—but eventually the sheer focus and concentration on her face set her apart from the others. And what seemed amazing to Jesse was that the gorillas gradually seemed to notice her, too.

It didn’t happen at all quickly, so at first Jesse assumed he was merely imagining it. The young woman sat back on the bench at first and seemed to react less, if anything, to what was happening inside the pen than the other spectators did. But then each time Jesse happened to look up at her again, he saw that she was moving closer and closer toward the pen, and the expression on her face was becoming more severe and intent.

At first, he caught glimpses of Simone accidentally. But slowly thereafter his interest was piqued, and he began to seek her out purposely to see what, if anything, in her demeanor had changed and what had remained the same. That was around
the time that he noticed the gorillas. First, it was Zoila who sat gazing at her with
the same sudden rapt attention she would give if Simone had just banged a mallet
down on a drum and shook the entire pen. Zoila’s eyes clung to Simone for ten
straight minutes, and then still without taking her eyes off of her, she moved up and
sat as close to Simone as the walled partition would allow. Some of the other
spectators took notice of Simone at this point and instinctively stepped away from
her, giving her some space.

Little Zachery was the next to notice Simone, and he did so as soon as his
mother travelled the pen to get closer to her. He, too, despite the weariness in his
little eyes, blinked slowly in her direction. Now some of the other gorillas began to
wonder what was going on. One high strung male began to beat his chest while a
few of the others stole apprehensive glances in her direction. But it still appeared as
though Katie’s attention was going to be the hardest to win over. She didn’t react to
Simone at all but rather kept her gaze steadfastly fixed on two other gorillas using
the climbing gym.

Finally Jesse, who had been observing Simone and the uncanny reactions she
appeared to be causing, took it into his head to approach her.

He hesitated before speaking to her, momentarily unsure that he should
break her concentration with a question. But his curiosity was too aroused now not
to follow through. “Do you know anything about gorillas?” he asked, not knowing
how else to begin.

Simone had worked herself up into an almost trance-like state, and
unfortunately for Jesse, she didn’t even hear his question let alone answer it.
There were a couple of other people nearby who had heard Jesse speak to Simone, and when she didn’t respond, an older man smiled at him sympathetically. Jesse felt embarrassed and tried again, trying not to show it.

“It seems as though Zoila likes you or something.”

A second time there was no response from Simone, and now Jesse made eye contact with the old man, who laughed and said, “Looks like she’s focused on something else!”

30.

Usually Patrick’s instincts weren’t particularly honed, nor was he accustomed to following through on them to the extent that he was right now. But there were times, like this one, where he was hit with a certainty so strong that ironically, it seemed rational to believe the information was coming to him from a higher realm.

So he travelled the long distance to the outskirts of the city, and although each kilometer he passed made it seem more and more incredible that Simone could have undertaken this journey on her own, he never once wavered in his idea that he was right about where she had gone.

Because of this certainty, he arrived at the zoo driven by a sense of urgency. He beelined to the entranceway, paid his admission, and hurried off to see the gorillas. It was only as he was following the giant blue footprints that he had a moment of doubt about what he was doing. If she wasn’t here, he had certainly wasted a lot of precious time and money following through on this hunch. But as
soon as this doubt crept in, he shook it off. No no, she’s got to be here, he told himself. It just made so much sense.

He had managed to convince himself so thoroughly, in fact, that by the time he actually reached the gorillas, he didn’t feel in the least surprised when he saw Simone standing by the window with Zoila there right in front of her. He wasn’t surprised, but he was certainly relieved to see she’d made it here safely.

He breathed out a long sigh as he watched her but thought twice before approaching her just yet. Instead, he pulled out his cell phone and texted a simple message that he sent first to Anna and then, after a moment’s consideration, to his girlfriend, Rebecca. “Found her at the zoo.”

Then he pocketed the phone and watched. And what he saw did seem incredible. Simone appeared to be muttering wordlessly to herself as she fixated on Katie and Zachery with attention that approached a trance. Despite the crowd, there was a bubble of space around her that the people had presumably made out of respect or fear or a combination of both. With the exception of Katie, the gorillas also appeared to have fallen under her spell. Zoila crouched in front of her as though she were worshipping at the foot of an alter, and the others were reacting with excitement that indicated they anticipated something extraordinary to happen at any moment. Patrick observed this scene for about ten or fifteen minutes before finally deciding to approach her. And as he did, she was still and so concentrated that she didn’t hear him walk up behind her, but rather remained scowling and bending forward to look at Katie and the baby she had so ruthlessly stolen.
“Simone?” Patrick said, but he got no response. People stepped back and made a wider ring around them. Jesse noticed Patrick speak to her and watched with curiosity.

“Simone?” Patrick tried again. He didn’t want to resort to touching her because in this state she was in, there was no telling how she might react. Instead, he gently put his hand on the glass in the direction that Simone was looking, and slowly, she turned to face him.

31.

Gwenyth’s plane arrived at Pearson International Airport at 4:12 in the afternoon, and by 4:35, she had packed herself into a cab and was heading over to her sister’s house. She wanted to go there straight away as she sensed that her help might be needed immediately. She always held onto her own key to her sister’s place—a habit that made her feel a little less rootless when she yearned for the comforts of a stable home—so she was set in case her niece wasn’t home.

As the taxi zipped along the highway, she took in some of the uglier sights of this city she’d grown up in. She was accustomed to seeing it from an ex-patriate perspective at this point, but there was always that initial shock in which the contrasts and colours of this city never seemed so plain. She was always struck by the bigger, shinier cars and their miniature license plates, the wider cleaner streets, and of course how oversized and white the people were. Living in Africa was such a daily grind, and everything here was so remarkably easy in comparison. There were no flies, the air was cool and fresh, and everything oozed a sense of wealth and
luxury. She’d long since laid aside her guilt about having these luxuries. In fact, she usually lapped them up for the first few days that she was back home. The world was grossly unfair, and Africa was a titanic-sized blight on the face of it that no one in power wanted to acknowledge.

Gwenyth felt suddenly very excited and happy at seeing her family as the taxi pulled off the highway and drove into her sister’s neighbourhood. But as it turned onto her sister’s street, her heart suddenly sank in worry about what she was going to find there.

32.

“What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

“I came looking for you.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. Everyone’s really worried about you, Simone. Rebecca, Anna, me.”

“And my mom? She’s not worried.”

“Well—she’s still in the hospital, Simone. I don’t even think she knows you’re here.”

“Oh.”

“But what are you doing here, Simone? How did you get here?”

Simone smiled a wide smile that was a little uncharacteristic of her. “I went in a cab.”
“A cab?” Patrick’s confused smile revealed his many reactions to this news: bewildered, impressed—even a saddened that he didn’t know Simone as well as he thought he did. “A taxi? How did you—where did you get the money for that, Simone?”

“From Paul.”

“Who’s Paul?”

“My cat.”

“Oh, okay.” Same old Simone, Patrick thought to himself and decided not to pursue this particular tidbit of information any further. “And you came here to see Zoila.”

“Yes. To see her and help her.”

“Help her? Help her do what?”

“Help her get her baby back.”

Patrick, who hadn’t been following the news in the last couple of days, looked up at the gorilla pen again and suddenly saw it as if for the first time. He’d been so preoccupied with Simone since arriving there that he hadn’t noticed that something far from normal was happening around him. That explained the crowd and the unusually excited energy in the whole Pavilion that afternoon. And that explained why Zoila was looking so forlorn and helpless as she sat close to Simone and gazed up at her.

Several people in the crowd had overheard what Simone claimed to be able to do and (perhaps because Zoila already seemed to be responding to her) a stir of excitement began to spread amongst them. This was not lost on Patrick. He studied
Zoila’s face and imagined he saw trust written there, and he looked over at the baby Zachery and saw that same quiet submissive faith.

“And how are you going to do that?” Patrick asked.

“By talking to them.”

Patrick recalled how Simone had been muttering to herself earlier. “Are you talking to them now?”

“Not now. Now I’m talking to you.”

“Oh,” Patrick laughed and exchanged some glances with the people around him. But afterwards, he took Simone’s cue and remained quietly attentive.

33.

Rebecca received Patrick’s text message about Simone less than five minutes after the police called and told her about the tip they’d received from the anonymous stranger. And afterwards, relief poured through Rebecca’s veins like a powerful sedative. She felt so happy, so grateful, that Patrick was there with her now, she fought back tears as she hurried to get her things together to go there. The zoo. It hadn’t even crossed her mind that Simone would have chosen to go there of all places, but the fact that she’d been able to get there on her own successfully was just mind blowing to her. She was full of surprises, her sister.

Paul also listened with interest when he heard Rebecca on the phone with the police, but of course, his interest was entirely different from Rebecca’s. After Simone left through the window, he wasn’t entirely convinced she’d make it all the way there. He had to admit to himself that he didn’t really understand how human
money worked, so he was pleasantly surprised to learn that the five dollar bill he’d stolen for her had been enough to do the trick. Now he’d have to wait and see if she’d had any luck with that other bit of business with Zoila and the baby.

He sat back as Rebecca zipped around the house—forgot something, went back up the stairs and descended again numerous times. Then just as she had her hat on, gloves tucked up under her arm and keys in hand, the doorbell rang.

Rebecca expected it to be the police since they’d arranged to escort her to the zoo. That’s why for half a second, she didn’t even recognize her aunt standing on her front porch, blonde hair cascading out from under her black hat and dressed in a long turquoise coat that buttoned fashionably up the front.

“Rebecca!” Gwenyth smiled a wide warm smile that broke out into laughter as she embraced her niece. Rebecca, completely overcome, burst into tears of joy and pent up stress and frustration.

“Oh Rebecca! It’s okay, it’s okay, my love. I’m here. I can help you now. You’re not alone.”

“Auntie Gwenyth! I can’t believe you’re here. Where did you—how did you—”

“I was more than halfway home when I got your message. I tried to call you back and when I couldn’t, I thought I’d surprise you. Maybe it’s silly, but I love to surprise you. But tell me—how are things? Have you found Simone? How’s Linda?”

Rebecca looked up at Gwenyth and her eyes shone bright with tears. She filled in her aunt about everything that had happened in the past two days including about how Patrick and her had had the argument and about the terrible rehearsal
she’d had earlier that day, and through it all, her tears started to flow like she was eight years old.

Gwenyth had a habit of looking at her with such compassion and understanding that Rebecca often felt liberated to bare her whole soul to her aunt. And whenever she did, she’d feel relieved but also vaguely embarrassed that she’s acted like such a child around someone she admired so greatly.

“It sounds like you did a great job of holding things together on your own, Rebecca. That can’t have been easy for you.”

“It wasn’t,” Rebecca confessed, and as she did, the police cars pulled up in front of her house. Rebecca, Gwenyth and Rebecca agreed, would keep her plan of going with them to the zoo while Gwenyth would go to see Linda in the hospital. And as Rebecca climbed into the police car and met short and red-faced officer Lyons, she felt much stronger and more secure knowing that Gwenyth was there to help her.

34.

Thanks to a microphone that Natalia had clipped onto herself before going to stand next to Simone, she and Boris had caught the autistic girl’s entire conversation with Patrick on tape. Natalia had donned a wig for the occasion; she recognized Patrick from Simone’s school and couldn’t risk being recognized in return. Luckily, she had a whole host of disguises for occasions such as this, and there were times she thought that putting them on and changing her look actually vied in appeal for
her to the whole animal rights bit. She loved going from a blonde to a redhead, a bookish be-speckled librarian guise to a long-haired sultry actress type.

And luckily for her, Patrick didn’t look at her twice. He was wholly focused on Simone, and since he arrived, Boris’ filming had improved considerably. Before that, he hadn’t missed the gorilla’s reactions—their expressive faces and intelligent eyes always made for good raw footage, and Simone herself was looking intense and mysterious enough to capture the attention of many curious onlookers. But once Patrick arrived, Simone’s plan became clear, and so now they knew what they were watching for.

Boris had set up his camera beside the hippos, which was about twenty feet away from the gorilla pen, and only people who walked directly past him saw what he was doing. But after a while, once the crowd focused a certain amount of attention onto Simone, Boris felt himself to be less and less conspicuous. Digital cameras began to appear, and quickly Boris realized that he wasn’t the only one documenting this freakish occurrence. Two studious-looking young women in glasses walked by him, and he overheard one of them say, “Oh! They’re making a film!” as she passed, as if Simone had been an actor and the whole set-up had been concocted beforehand.

He had a good lens and managed to get some decent close-ups from this faraway angle, but the more the dynamics changed around the pen, the more emboldened he felt. Soon, he moved sideways out from behind his bush so that he wasn’t covered by it any more, and pretty soon after that, he even dared to move closer. At one point, Patrick raised his head and gazed over at him, and a flash of
annoyance crossed over his face, but at that point, things seemed to have moved beyond the point where he could control the people surrounding his former student.

35.

Gwenyth had to brace herself before walking through the door of the intensive care unit at the hospital. She had been told what to expect, but she doubted whether anyone in her position would ever be ready to see a close member of the family in a state like Linda’s. It still seemed impossible to have her be so unresponsive—this was her big sister, the one who had been such a good singer in the high school band, who had married Leonard the trumpet player and who, for an entire summer and part of a fall at least, was the unmarried and pregnant envy of all her friends. But for Gwenyth, this adoration had stretched out much longer than that. It had taken her longer to find her footing, to feel like she was an individual with unique talents who had something to offer the world, and her older sister had always been such a support to her during those searching times. At times like this, Gwenyth forgot about all the fights, the door slamming and the name calling that siblings close in age inevitably go through, and recalled only the happier times of harmony and communication.

Gwenyth knew that people criticized her sister for being harsh or cold, and although Gwenyth recognized what people were talking about, she knew Linda far too well to reduce her personality to that lowest common denominator. Linda could be biting, it was true, but underneath all that she was vulnerable and sensitive and needed more attentive handling to maneuver.
She took a deep breath before depressing the door handle and entering the room where her sister lay. Then the first thing she saw were machines—wires and beeping machines of all sizes and shades of grey that seemed to cover the entire wall behind her sister’s head. Linda’s bed stood at the end of the room a few feet out from the back wall. When Gwyenth first laid eyes on her, Linda looked like an old lady. Gwyenth was somewhat ready for this but of course not entirely. Her sister was thinner and more withered than Gwyenth had ever seen her, and all the wires attached to her reminded Gwyenth of how frail people really were underneath it all. Just a thin cover of skin over bones and muscles that wore down and weakened over time. It was strange to see her without any make-up on; Gwyenth knew that her sister would hate people seeing her this way, and she even considered smearing a little red onto her lips. But then Dr. Fowler walked into the room. She was relieved to see him, but she didn’t realize that her relief in that moment was negligible next to his. All he wanted for this patient was some support from someone important to her. Somebody who might break down the iron barricades she’d constructed around herself and actually reach her. By the concern Gwyenth was showing, Dr. Fowler thought they may have finally found the right person.

They exchanged a brief handshake along with greetings and introductions. Then Gwyenth began asking questions. “How long has she been like this?”

“Just over 72 hours now.”

“And how long do you think she’ll continue like this?”

“It’s hard to say at this point. She could come out of it any time, or she could continue like this indefinitely.”
Gwenyth chewed her fingernails, and wiping a long strand of blonde hair out of her eyes, she gazed down worriedly at her sister.

“Is there also a chance she’d never come out of it?”

Ernie looked at her soberly and then, sensing that Gwenyth might need privacy, shifted his gaze to his patient again. “Yes. There’s that chance. But I have to say, with Linda, my instincts tell me that won’t happen.”

“What makes you say that?” Gwenyth looked at him almost suspiciously.

“She’s still young. And I know her well enough to know that she is fiery. She pulled through when this happened last month.”

Gwenyth looked like she’d been hit with a rock. “This happened last month?”

“Yes. You didn’t know that?”

Gwenyth looked reflective for a minute, and slightly hurt, but she refrained from answering. After a moment, Dr. Fowler added, “But it was for considerably less time that this. I’m sure people just didn’t want to worry you.”

“Oh—I’m impossible to reach when I’m working anyway. I just happened to be coming home this time.”

“I see.”

Dr. Fowler and Gwenyth settled into silence as they looked at Linda and listened to her breathe. Finally, Dr. Fowler excused himself from the room.

36.

The girl at the window with the crazy eyes and the crazy concentration had been fixated on Katie and Zachery since she arrived almost an hour ago. Katie had
done her best to ignore her—she was usually no slouch when it came to shutting out unwanted distractions and focusing on her own business, but this kid was relentless. At first, Katie could ignore her as if she were an annoying mosquito, but after a certain amount of time had passed with very little change in intensity, Katie found herself compelled to check out where this incredible focus and energy was coming from.

So she looked over at the girl—it was just a glance, but it was enough to weaken her. This girl was on fire, she was speaking to Katie loudly and clearly and Katie couldn’t deny for a moment what her message was. The baby. This little baby that Katie told herself she was rescuing from someone who didn’t have the faintest clue about motherhood—this sweet little baby couldn’t be helped by Katie. And as much as she tried to ignore this message and hold fast to what she was doing, a nigging sensation that she was doing something wrong began to grow in Katie’s mind. It wasn’t that she disliked Zoila. In fact, Katie had to admit that she’d never done anything particularly to annoy her, but Katie had beliefs about child-rearing that, it was true, some considered to be inflexible. And Katie was the champion mother and alpha-female, here. She also didn’t like having any competition in that department. But as she had these thoughts, it was as if the girl at the window could hear her and understand her and try as she might, Katie felt herself weakening under some enormous and inexplicable pressure. Soon, it wasn’t just from the girl, but she felt that pressure from every gorilla and human around the pen. And even for Katie, that became a little much.
Gwenyth had been sitting alone with Linda for almost an hour when her older sister finally opened her eyes.

As she saw those first flickers of awareness returning, Gwenyth immediately stood up and took Linda by the hand. Linda’s eyes rolled around the room as if coming out of a deep dream, until at last, they settled on her younger sister’s face. At first, Gwenyth appeared to her like a figment in her dream. Linda took her in blankly, and then closed her eyes with some contentment. Later, she would vaguely recall that she believed Gwenyth to be a giant fly sitting on the edge of her bed and rubbing its wings together. But in her state, this all seemed to be perfectly right and normal. Finally, though, the fly spoke to her. “Linda? Linda, honey. It’s me. It’s Gwenyth.” Hearing her sister’s voice was enough to help bring her out of her delirium somewhat. At last, a thought began creeping into her brain that Gwenyth was actually not a fly, and that there was something wrong with this picture manifesting in front of her eyes. Linda opened her eyes wider and, as the sheer silky wings began to dissolve and be replaced by a purplish blue sweater, she presently looked more shocked and confused than ever. She stared at Gwenyth almost suspiciously for several moments and held her breath until she looked more and more like her real sister.

“Honey—,” Gwenyth spoke gently and slowly so as not to confuse Linda any further. Instinctively, she seemed to understand that she had just transformed from being something like a giant fly into her real self. “You’re in the hospital, honey. You’re okay—everyone is looking after you here really well.”
It took Linda a moment to find the strength to speak. “What—what happened?” It would have been strange for anyone else to hear Linda whisper meekly like this, but Gwenyth had heard it many times before.

“You collapsed the other morning in your bathroom. And you’ve been out ever since.”

Linda allowed this news to sink in for a moment. “Am I going to be okay?” Her eyes teared over just slightly as she asked this question, and Gwenyth gripped her hand tighter.

“You’re going to be just fine, honey. You’re going to be perfect.”

Linda looked up at Gwenyth and her eyes shone in gratitude and happiness at seeing her sister. “I’m so glad you’re here. I thought you were in Africa.”

“I was. This was just happy timing.”

“Things are disastrous at home right now.”

“Yes, I heard. But now they found Simone at the zoo. Rebecca went to get her.”

Linda looked confused, and then quickly quite panicked. “What do you mean the zoo? Simone was lost?”

It quickly dawned on Gwenyth that Linda must not have even known that Simone had locked herself in the furnace room let alone escaped through its window. She kicked herself for speaking too soon and upsetting her sister. But there was no backpedalling now.

“Ah—yes, she was. You didn’t know that, I guess. But she’s fine now. Patrick’s with her. And Rebecca should be there any time.”
Linda’s thoughts seemed to be firing at a rapid pace now until it became too much for her, and she closed her eyes and scrunched up her face. After a moment, she let out a surprising moan, and Gwyenth realized with some horror that she was crying. She leaned her body down, and hugged her tightly.

“Oh Gwyenth. What have I done?” she moaned pathetically between sobs.

“Shh...shh... What do you mean? You haven’t done anything.”

But Linda was quite suddenly beyond consolation. “I have. I have. My daughters don’t trust me. I’ve done a terrible job!”

Gwyenth began to piece together what Linda was referring to. Incredibly, this stint in the hospital had been enough to crack away at some of her sister’s impenetrable walls. “You did it all on your own, though, Linda. Don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“No!” Linda wailed so loudly that a nurse looked in through the window in the hallway to make sure everything was all right. Gwyenth turned and waved her away in as friendly a dismissal as she could muster in the moment. “I deserve to be hard on myself. I’ve been selfish and useless. And my daughters need better than that!”

Gwyenth considered this. Much as she loved her sister, she couldn’t help but see her numerous faults as a mother. Secretly, she believed it was probably a good thing that Linda was having this mini breakdown. She tried not to let that show and chose her words carefully. “Well, honey, it’s not too late to do better if you think you need to. People can change, you know. We’re a remarkably resilient and flexible species.”
Linda apparently had no more to say on the subject. She only nodded and then kept blubbering away on Gwenyth’s arm.

Dr. Ernie Fowler walked by the window briefly and couldn’t believe what he saw. His instincts about Gwenyth had apparently been right.

38.

It was at exactly 6:20 in the evening when, with little ceremony and fanfare, Katie handed the weak and shrunken baby Zachery back to his mother, Zoila. And for the visitors at the zoo, it was nothing short of a miracle. Manuel, the head zookeeper, raised his hands up in the air in anticipation while the interaction was taking place, and then placed his head in his hands, half laughing and half crying in jubilation and utter relief. When the deed was finally completed, Jesse, Susana, and the other zookeepers hugged each other and exchanged high-fives while the rest of the spectators followed suit and joined in the merriment and celebration. By merely witnessing it, everyone felt that they had somehow contributed to the event.38

And through it all, our unlikely heroine, Simone, remained very calm and abnormally centered. She looked Patrick right in the eye and smiled at him with quiet confidence. “I told you I could do it.”

Patrick was practically panting with excitement, and he found it almost excruciating not to wrap up his favourite student in a tight bear hug. Maybe because she sensed this, she laughed nervously and then actually reached out and touched Patrick on the arm—something she had never done before.

“You are absolutely amazing, Simone,” Patrick said.
Rebecca had arrived with the police a few minutes before the passing over of Zachery took place. As she arrived, she immediately spied Simone standing next to Patrick in the crowd, but something told her to stand back and wait before approaching. There was an energy in the crowd, a heightened sense of energy and purpose that Rebecca didn’t want to tamper with. She also noticed Boris filming, but again, what was happening with Simone suddenly seemed much more important.

Rebecca stood in awe for a moment once Katie gave the baby back. She couldn’t actually see her sister doing much from the angle she had chosen beside Boris, but she did notice the burning look of intensity on her sister’s face and in her eyes, which set her apart from anyone else in that crowd. And she also noticed how the gorillas seemed to respond to her: Zoila, who wouldn’t take her eyes off Simone, and Katie who, though she only glanced at her a few times, became increasingly agitated each time. And afterwards, Simone appeared so calm and relaxed that for a moment, Rebecca didn’t recognize her as her autistic sister.

During the onset of cheering, she rushed up to her, dramatically breaking through the crowd to do so, and without giving it a second thought, threw her arms around her sister and squeezed. It was only when she made contact that she realized what she was doing. But to her surprise, Simone flinched in surprise but didn’t move away.39

“Simone, my chickadee! You’re a hero! How did you do that?”

Simone laughed shyly, but her eyes betrayed her enormous pride. “I don’t know. I just talked to them.”
Rebecca and Patrick exchanged a tentative look at one another and after some initial awkwardness, a feeling of warmth and emotion passed between them. Rebecca turned back to her sister and felt overwhelmed with love and respect for her. “You really surprise me sometimes, Simone.”

Boris had followed Rebecca through the throng of people and caught the whole exchange with the sisters on film. Natalia, who had been standing next to the star of the documentary the whole time, found an opportune moment to slip off her wig and sunglasses and stuff them into her purse. At that moment, Rebecca noticed her right away, and she turned to her with horror.

“You! What are you doing here?”

“We wanted see what your sister is doing with these animals.” Ignoring Rebecca, she turned her gaze downward at Simone. “Did you do that, Simone? Did you make that gorilla give back her baby to her real mother?”

Simone nodded her head. “Yes,” she answered simply.

Natalia sought out her brother’s eyes who, it seemed, had completely vanished behind his camera lens.

“And how did you do that?”

“I talked to them. I understand them.”

This simple utterance evoked a mixed reaction from the crowd. There were some guffaws from the cynics along with some “ahs” that indicated there were believers in the crowd as well. Natalia nodded and studied Simone pensively. “I believe you. I watched you, and I believe you did exactly what you say.”
Simone didn’t say anything in reply to this—no one did as there didn’t seem to be anything to say. Rebecca felt herself open toward Natalia suddenly—something she didn’t think was possible as Simone continued to look at Natalia steadily with eyes that were green and clear. Natalia sensed a wealth of hidden knowledge tucked away behind them, a knowledge that wasn’t widely recognized as such in today’s world, but one that was valuable and precious nonetheless.

“My brother and I work for helping animals that are in trouble. Maybe you could work with us.”

She handed Simone a simple blue card with various animals drawn in a cartoonish fashion around its edges. Simone, who loved animals and who loved to draw, became temporarily mesmerized by the picture.

“My phone number and email address are there.” She turned to Rebecca and seemed to forget all about their previous grievances. “Maybe your older sister can help you get in touch with us if you decide.”

Rebecca was still not entirely sure of this woman, but as she took in Simone’s proud and open expression, she remembered about how much Simone wanted her independence.

She nodded at Natalia. “Yes, I can do that,” she agreed.

Natalia smiled and Boris stopped filming. They shook hands with Rebecca, Patrick, and also Simone and turned to leave, thinking they had the raw material for a very good documentary, but one that was certainly different from the one they’d first envisioned.
As to whether Simone was solely responsible for what happened at the zoo that day was never fully determined. There were some who believed in her wholeheartedly, who claimed that they felt her powerful energy and heard her mysterious mutterings. Others—generally those who denied the magic of everyday life and lived only in the practicality and surety of their jobs—thought the whole idea of communication with another species was preposterous, and this young strange woman could never be capable of anything at all useful let alone remarkable. Some of the more exceptionally cynical ones among this group walked away from the gorilla pen that evening assuming that gorilla babies must be snatched and subsequently returned to their mothers all the time and didn’t even consider themselves to be particularly fortunate to have witnessed the event. Others left the zoo that day thinking they had seen the face of God shining through the green eyes of that magical girl—that this incident had confirmed to them again that this world was still full of so many things they couldn’t understand. A newspaper reporter, who was present among the crowd, approached Simone, Rebecca, and Patrick after the Russian siblings had left.

“Yes, I take your photo for the Star?”

Rebecca was all set to decline on behalf of her sister, but to her surprise, Simone piped up before she had the chance.

“Sure, yeah, okay.”

The reporter took several photographs and proceeded to ask Simone some questions about what had happened and what she believed her role in the incident
had been. Simone answered with simple confidence, showing there was no doubt in her mind as to what she had done.

Up to this point, Manuel had been busy attending to his gorillas and to his staff, but he had been keeping an eye on Simone and waiting for a good opportunity to go over and speak to her. He thought this time had come as the reporter finished with her, but as he began to head over in her direction, the young enthusiastic reporter caught him on his sleeve and proposed asking him some questions as well. Manuel acquiesced, but didn’t let Simone slip away from his sight. Once the reporter was satisfied he had a story, Manuel approached Simone.

“I don’t know how you did what you did here today, but I want to thank you for it from the bottom of my heart.”

Simone beamed with pleasure and glanced over at Rebecca and Patrick for encouragement. “You’re welcome,” she said.

“And if you ever consider working with gorillas some day, you give me a call at the zoo. I’m Manuel Fernandez.” He extended his hand, but Simone just looked down at it. Rebecca nodded to her, thinking if she would ever shake someone else’s hand, now might be the time. Simone blushed and hesitated but then shook.

“Okay. Because I want to have a job with animals someday.”

“You obviously have a talent for it. What is your name?”

“Simone Malmquist,” she said. And she smiled from ear to ear.
Rebecca and Patrick held hands all the way to the hospital to visit Linda and Gwenyth. Rebecca had requested that he join them; he’d apologized so sweetly and sincerely at the zoo, and Rebecca was tired of keeping him at a distance. He had paid the price for what he had done, and now she welcomed him back into her life and her family with joy. She was frankly so grateful that both Patrick and her aunt Gwenyth were here to support her now, and with that extra support, Simone seemed to be flourishing into her own independence.

It was close to 8pm by the time they reached the hospital. Linda was sitting up in bed, and some pinkish colour had returned to her face. Gwenyth was sitting beside her, and the remains of a smile, or even a laugh, seemed to be lingering on both their faces as her daughters and Patrick entered the small room.

Linda’s face changed, however, when she laid eyes on her children. A cloud of doubt passed over it, and she hesitated and then looked guilty and momentarily even frightened. For a moment, no one said anything at all until Linda smiled and raised an arm to Simone.

“Come here, Simone!” she said calmly.

But Simone just stood there apparently unable to read her mother’s command. She suspected she was in trouble because when it came to her mother that was what her experiences of the past had taught her. But Linda seemed more relaxed than usual and although still commanding, much less threatening. Linda smiled at Simone and waved her hand with some impatience. “Come, come.”
Now Simone took a step toward her, stopped, and in a wandering glance, checked in with Rebecca, who was also vaguely suspicious of her mother in the moment and so didn’t think to egg on her sister, but rather stood rooted to the spot, watching this exchange with curiosity.

Gwenyth held out her hand for Simone to take if she felt so inclined, which she didn’t. “Come on, honey. It’s okay. Your mother was just very worried about you.”

Simone’s brow was knotted into a bow of confusion, which only made Linda feel more guilty about her behaviour. She kept her arm raised and leaned her body forward in a gesture of what she hoped looked like non-threatening welcome. But her body was tired from all it had been through, and she found the position hard to maintain. Finally, with a sigh and a laugh, she fell back on the pillow again. “Oh my God, come on child! What do you think I’m going to do? Bite you?”

Slowly, slowly, Simone approached her mother until Linda could raise up her hand again and touch her youngest daughter on the shoulder. Simone’s body stiffened in reaction, but Linda tried to ignore that. “So you ran away to the zoo, I hear. What on God’s green earth made you do that?”

“I wanted to save baby Zachery from Katie.”

Linda scanned the faces in the room—from Gwenyth to Rebecca to Patrick, looking for some hint or sign to help her understand what her daughter was talking about. Rebecca just smiled at her in response. “Right,” she said finally. “And what am I missing here?”
Rebecca laughed and filled her mother in on all the incredible events that had taken place since her collapse. Linda listened closely and restricted her comments to either clarifying questions or reserved exclamations. When Rebecca finished recounting the story, Patrick added that both Natalia and Boris and the zookeeper had extended what amounted to job offers to Simone. Linda continued to listen with full attention, but her face remained difficult to read.

Afterwards, there was a pregnant pause in which Linda allowed all the new information to sink in and presumably alter the fundamental ways in which she’d pigeon-holed her youngest daughter. Finally, she squinted her eyes at Simone, looking at her for a long moment.

“Well. You’ve always wanted to work at the zoo, Simone. And now it looks like you have a chance to do that.”

Simone smiled slowly at her mother and then turned to take in everyone else in the room. Suddenly, she felt bigger and more important than she ever had before.

41.

My mom wanted me to finish the school year before she’d let me get a full time job at the zoo. But that was okay by me because I could see Patrick every day and some days he’d even drive me home when he would visit Rebecca and me and our house. And we got a new bunny at the school and Anna asked me to be the special cage cleaner and bunny feeder, which I really like to do. And now I have to talk to an anger counselor two times in a week and his name is Simon and that’s also
okay because actually I like him okay and I don’t even feel so angry like I used to anyway.

And I try to go to the zoo to visit Zoila and Zachery and Manuel one time in a week or sometimes one time in two weeks. And Manuel sometimes lets me go inside the gorilla pen and feed them even which I also really like to do. And every night before I go to sleep I always talk to Paul and tell him about my day and the new animals I know now. And he never says it because he’s a cat and that’s how he is but I know he’s proud of me for going to the zoo that day with the five dollars he gave me. What’s really true is that I love him even more than before because he really thought I could do all that more than other people and he helped me find out new and good stuff about myself. And now I feel that it’s because of him that my mom is nicer to me now and she drinks less and is healthier, too. And sometimes it’s amazing to see that one person or one cat can change so much of all the things around them. And I think that’s an important thing to remember, too.
End Notes

1. (pg.22) The character of Paul is based on the cat I owned from 1992 until his death in 2009 at the age of seventeen. I began writing this novel when he was still alive, and now I only hope his memory will live on posthumously in this work. He used to lie completely under the covers such as is described here, I suspect when he was feeling anxious.

2. (pg.23) Simone is loosely based on my sister, Gretchen (who has Down's Syndrome), and I purposely kept some of this connection in the main character's name. Gretchen's middle name is Emily, and my grandmother's maiden name was Malmquist.

3. (pg.23) This event is based on a real incident that happened with Gretchen. A major feature of her condition of Down's is a slavish rigidity to routine. This event had such an impact on my parents (who were present with her at the time) that my father also wrote about it in a philosophy book he recently published.

4. (pg.24) Because I've made the character of Simone 21 years of age, she would still qualify for free tax-supported education in Ontario. Consequently, she might attend a school such as Lucy McCormick in Toronto where the student teacher ratio is 7 to 1.

5. (pg.29) Simone's obsession with animals is a typical trait of a person with autism, especially someone with her savant tendencies. Simone is able to calm her active mind by focusing on this subject, and in so doing, teach herself an extraordinary amount of information.

6. (pg.32) While it is true that the character of Rebecca is loosely based on myself, I can't claim to share this degree of responsibility for my sister with this character. My mother still does the lion's share of the work when it comes to Gretchen, and I have two other sisters who also frequently take care of her.

7. (pg.39) This incident of crushing the frog is based on my sister, Erica's, experience with a young girl with autism who had this disturbing and destructive habit. Erica met her when, as a teenager, she worked at a camp for people with special needs. Although Erica did not have any real qualifications for this job aside from having a sister with Down's
Syndrome, she was given an extraordinary amount of responsibility for the care of these special needs clients. This later struck her as highly irresponsible of the people who ran the camp, but it is unfortunately still typical of how many of these organizations are run.

8. (pg.45) People with autism typically have difficulty maintaining eye contact.

9. (pg.46) Donna Williams described doing this in her book “Nobody, Nowhere” and Temple Grandin elaborates on how people with autism sometimes experience a heightened sense of vision in “Animals in Translation.” There are times, she explains, that autists see so many individual details of an object that they actually fail to see the object as a whole. In extreme cases, this results in an experience akin to blindness.

10. (pg.46) It is common for many people with autism to relax around and respond to animals much more readily than to other people.

11. (pg.51) I borrowed this extraordinary image from one of Oliver Sack’s stories in “An Anthropologist on Mars” (pg. 211)

12. (pg.52) Again, the subtlety of humour is usually not something that is understood by people with autism. Temple Grandin describes how, like animals, she needed to see things at face value, and humour often hides or distorts the real meaning behind what is being communicated.

13. (pg.54) This is apparently an actual technique that was employed by the staff at the Calgary zoo before that gorilla’s baby was stolen.

14. (pg.57) The relationship Simone recounts here is based on one that Donna Williams wrote about in “Nobody, Nowhere”. I found it fascinating to hear about the fact that people with autism can occasionally develop deep and intimate connections with each other.

15. (pg.68) Sexual feelings of people with autism are perfectly normal, especially in adolescence. In “An Anthropologist on Mars”, Oliver Sacks describes a boy who would draw sexually explicit drawings of naked women but then at the same time, would not have the maturity to carry on a conversation with a woman if given the opportunity. Interestingly, he kept these
pictures very private, but in his other highly detailed pictures that had made him famous, he displayed no emotional attachment to. (pg. 236)

16. (pg.74) Obsessive counting is another symptom of autism.

17. (pg.91) Some institutions (such as Bloorview Kids Rehab in Toronto) use “shadowers” for special needs clients who require extra attention. This is a person whose job is to follow around one client and make sure he or she is calm or interacting well with others.

18. (pg.96) According to Lisa Helfend, author of Divorce and the Child with Special Needs published in the Huffington Post, 80% of marriages will end in divorce when a child with special needs is born. (2011)

19. (pg.101) Again, I chose to make the character of Paul able to communicate with Simone in this novel in order to illustrate how Simone is living in a different reality from other people. I hope also that the magical realism I explore here will help to tie in the novel’s ending.

20. (pg.113) I hope to illustrate in this awkward conversation between Paul and Simone that Simone still finds smooth and natural communication difficult, even with a cat. As a result, I have purposefully made her miss cues and misunderstand comments that would make this conversation flow more naturally.

21. (pg.113) This fact is similar to my sister, Gretchen. Gretchen is also capable of doing many things for herself without supervision but will not take any initiative to carry them out. This has even resulted in extreme situations such as her soiling herself instead of going to the bathroom on her own volition.

22. (pg.119) At this point in the novel, Zoila’s story begins to develop independently of the main characters. Although it seems very detached from the rest of the novel here, I needed to do this here in order for the ending to make sense. Zoila’s story functions as a foil for Simone’s. She is also isolated from her own kind and made to feel like an outsider. Further, she represents another mother in the novel who, unlike Linda, wants to nurture and care for her baby but who is unable to because of circumstances beyond her control. Simone is similar to the baby Zachery
who finds himself motherless. When Simone reunites him with Zoila then, she is likewise able to reunite with her own mother.

23. (pg.122) When a person has a child with special needs, it can understandably cause apprehension about trusting another person or organization to his or her care. This sector of the population is extremely vulnerable and is too frequently subject to abuse or mistreatment. When my sister, Erica, worked at the camp I mentioned in endnote # 7, she found the conditions left a lot to be desired. The staff was young, exploited, and untrained, and the camp conditions were unhygienic. In another example, when I was in my twenties, I found an after hours activity school for Gretchen that was run by a blind man in the east end of the city. Fortunately, my mother got a bad feeling from this man and decided not to pursue the program. As it turned out, he was convicted of sexually assaulting one of his clients a few months later. These examples go to show that while it is true that there are many high quality group homes for kids and adults with special needs, it is important to do a thorough check of them before settling on which one to choose.

24. (pg.138) In my research about how educational institutes tend to function for people with special needs, I learned that this belief in constant stimulation is prevalent. The reason I turn it into an endnote here is because of how sharply it contrasts from my own family situation. In my family, my mother retired several years ago at the time this was written, and Gretchen “retired” at the same time as well. In other words, one day after the Christmas holidays, she stopped attending her day program altogether and there was nothing (short of physical force or a conniving trick) that my parents could do about it. First and foremost, they didn’t want Gretchen to lose trust in them, so they opted to give in and let her stay at home. Now a special needs worker comes in a couple of days a week to work with her, but other than that, she lives an extremely anti-social and unstimulating existence.

25. (pg.145) There are approximately five umbrella organizations in Toronto that each handle about 85 separate group homes that employ about a thousand employees.

26. (pg.172) As I mentioned in the compendium that proceeded this novel, this story of Zoila and her stolen baby is based on an incident that happened at the Calgary zoo in August 2006. In this tragic story, a gorilla, Zuri, was the lowest-ranking gorilla in her band, and her baby was stolen by another gorilla, who happened to be her half sister. Zuri didn’t have the
confidence to grab it back, and her baby subsequently died because of lack of milk.

27. (pg.177) Although Gretchen never did anything quite as extreme as this, she once sat for over twenty-four hours in the middle of a strange dining room. My parents used to enroll her in summer camp and before she “retired”, she would actually agree to go. However, one summer my mother left her there, and she sat for over twenty-four hours (eventually in her own waste) before she agreed to join in the activities with the rest of the people at the camp. She finally stayed for two weeks and eventually earned “The Most Improved Camper” award.

28. (pg.179) It is of course extremely important for people who look after people with special needs to have a strong support network themselves.

29. (pg. 182) It is true that there are times when people with autism are able to genuinely empathize with other people. In “An Anthropologist on Mars”, Oliver Sacks writes about Stephen, who is an autistic boy with an incredible drawing ability. He had a strong instinctive response to his literary agent, Margaret, and one night after she had had a severe asthma attack, Stephen became distressed and refused to do the television show he was scheduled to record that night. It was the first indication they had had that showed he cared. (pg. 210)

30. (pg.184) I have found this first technique effective with Gretchen; the second, unfortunately, is too sophisticated for her, and she wouldn't understand it.

31. (pg.198) Again, it is significant to the character of Simone that she can only be reached through an animal and when she is called on to help an animal. Normally, autistics do not show pride in their savant achievements, but here, I felt it was appropriate to have Simone show some more typical human traits that help illustrate the first inklings of some belated personal development.

32. (pg.202) There are many new techniques to help people with autism function better in today's society. One of them, called “self-regulation,” is being developed by Dr. Stuart Shanker, Research Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at York University.
33. (pg.212) I wanted to include a character in this novel who was a stranger and who was not treating Simone with any sympathy. Like my sister, Gretchen, Simone lives quite a sheltered existence and so fortunately does not frequently encounter fear or hostility from strangers. When it does happen, however, it serves as an unpleasant and sober reminder that if left on their own, people like Gretchen and Simone are extremely vulnerable.

34. (pg.218) Although it is not fleshed out in this novel, a comparison could be drawn between how people with special needs are treated in society and the way Africa is seen in the global community.

35. (pg.225) This ambivalence towards strangers is prevalent in Gretchen as well and stems from a lack of knowledge about the world. Unfortunately, it also makes her much more vulnerable in society.

36. (pg.230) The ability to enclose themselves in their own worlds, can give people with autism an extraordinary ability to concentrate.

37. (pg.243) Another theme I’ve been interested in exploring in this novel is the relationship of siblings—particularly sisters—that we see both with Rebecca and Simone and also with Linda and Gwynth. I have always felt a strong close bond with my own sisters, and I often feel this bond was strengthened because Gretchen was a part of our family.

38. (pg.245) Of course the original story that happened at the Calgary zoo did not share this happy ending. Instead, that baby gorilla eventually starved from lack of milk.

39. (pg.246) Through my research, I became interested in hearing about these types of instances in which people with autism show fewer autistic tendencies (and indeed temporarily appear more “normal”) after they accomplish something they are proud of. One of these instances (that I saw in the film “Autism—the Musical” by Elaine Hall, and I also mentioned in the compendium) occurred when a boy with autism who was normally not verbal, was able to communicate with his mother by typing into a keyboard. After he typed “Mom, I’m going to put you on the spot. You need to be a better listener,” he was able to focus on his mother.
without moving and maintain eye contact—two things he was not able to do previously.

40. (pg.248) This is key to what I intended to pay homage to in this thesis: the acknowledgement of what people with special needs know that perhaps the rest of us have never known or have forgotten. Like Temple Grandin, I wanted to explore in the novel’s climax how Simone’s talent with animals could translate into something tangible and useful for the rest of the world. For her, it is the first step toward her independence from her mother and sister.

41. (pg.254) Simone’s achievement and subsequent pride have made her capable of expressing her love and gratitude to those around her. This is a major step away from the typical autistic behaviours she exhibited before, and shows her as a responsible person who is finally capable of entering adulthood as an independent being.
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This is some of the poetry that was originally written when developing the ideas for this thesis.

**HOME**

It’s in a slide picture that I see
the stark preciousness of you
cradled there in your uncle’s arms
fat as a lollypop
and smiling almost as any child
with less than 27 months on the ground.

It’s now that I see
the dragons of you have retreated
the frogs have stopped raining from heaven
and rivers have been washed
of their metallic taste of blood.

For you were the one
plucked from a golden room
and told to lead Vikings.
You were the one
whose footsteps rocked a tree
from its roots
and echoed in the ears of generations.
You were the one
tied to the great flow of the earth
whose face radiates in body understanding
that you are home
and anything is possible.

OF SISTER, OF DAUGHTER

We were alone
you and I
and a mountain cracked
exposed a hundred sapphire secrets
to the open air.

Your face lit like a firefly
searched mine with relief.
For you, I pretended not to notice
and continued brushing your teeth.

You spoke to me of dreams
but words never confined you.
I heard the fierceness of your song
And understood a drum
could never contain it.
I felt the gentle tug in your hovering
and answered it with stories.

Now the others are back
and the long legs of night
have descended upon us
but I hold your image still
of sister of daughter
tucking you between sheets
and covering you with all the
playful kisses and tickles
that a lover never has.

You're further than Pluto
my sister
A tiny ball of jagged ice fixed on an axis
and turning such a strange pattern through the night sky.

You're pale as an aspirin tablet
or chicken egg, or winter sky
and so far from where the sun's arm can hold you
that I barely see you there
the speck you make through the telescope lens.

But there, through miles and miles of endless night
through swirls of sky and cosmic holes
a cloud blinks, a smudge sharpens
takes a space from darkness
like a moon ring suspended by fishing wire
and dangling near the bottom of the sea.

I asked the North Star where to find you.
I asked Neptune's moons and Jupiter's eye.
I drove rings of galaxies
wove light past Orion
and found myself weightless, alone
with no more laws to pin me.

For us in whose blood flow the rivers of planets
whose bodies were curled in the same heavenly spheres
for us whose lives could have spun the same orbit
I ponder these mysteries for us
Possible daughters of the same sun.

Originally published in Illuminations 2008, editor Simon Lewis. The Rathasker Press, Charleston, South Carolina
SOMETIMES

Sometimes a tongue sits like
a forgotten anchor
on the floor of a dark sea.
Sometimes it grows heavy with sea moss
and strange from the haunting silence of the deep.

Sometimes a tongue bloats like a fish
that’s too weary, too sick
to stay with the school
but which seeps its
colour and form into the sand
and then goes unnoticed
by the sea life passing above.

And sometimes a tongue that’s covered
in algae or scales
will forget what force made it whole.
It will forget how to make towers kneel,
hope rain from the clouds
and pearls spill from the shimmering bodies of worms.
It will forget how it yearns like a cut
for magnitude and noise
that it knew long ago
it could only give to itself.

Because sometimes a cloaked figure
steals into a house at night
and teaches the comforts of a cage.
And sometimes it will pocket away
little pieces of vividness it finds
far too slowly for anyone to see.

Originally published in Riversedge 2008, editor Desirae Aguirre Trevino. The University of Texas-Pan American Press, Edinburg, Texas
THE HOLE

There’s a hole in the house
and sunlight won’t reach it.
Gone is the time you could cup
the space in two hands
for now it’s deep as an elevator shaft
and hollow as the neck of a bird.

I can’t recall
when the floor first cracked
whether the house lurched
or rumbled with the force.
I don’t remember
if I heard the lonesome cry
of the monster under the floorboards
after she appeared to my mother in a dream.

But I was there
when that hardwood split open
when chaos took shape in a cellar room
and young parents prayed aloud.
I was there in the moment
that destiny pulled away
her silvery hand
and for reasons too obtuse to decipher
changed a whole life that might have been.

Appendix II - Illustrations

The following are rough sketches that I did when I was thinking of illustrating the novel. Most accompany the early part of the book.