

Head Down

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword*

The Ballad of Reading Gaol, Oscar Wilde

First day, Morning

Listening to his iPod, Joseph leaned against a stall in the conference centre's cafeteria during a five-day business trip in Calgary, watching Bob, his best friend, converse with a young woman. Of medium height, her hair was auburn-blond and she was wearing black capris and an orange shirt with the sleeves rolled up just past her elbows. As far as Joseph could tell, she looked completely at ease, attentively turning her head towards Bob whenever either of them spoke, smiling occasionally as Bob pointed out who the various patrons were at the exceedingly casual Information Technology conference.

The back of her hand curled and rested on her hips, her elbow slightly jutting out, while her knee leaned slightly in. Joseph couldn't help but notice how the light from the tall, iced panels, shone on her bronzed skin, gilding the thinnest layer of fuzz which, when mixed with the contoured tips of her tanned elbow, gave Joseph the impression of a peach, felled ripe from a tree.

After several songs came and went on his iPod, the woman and Bob continued chatting animatedly, completing a fist tap when she made Bob laugh uncontrollably. Joseph fiddled with the volume and turned around to read the IT conference's schedule posted on the board behind him, hoping he and Bob would be able to make the first seminar before it ended.

“So, what are you listening to, Joseph?” a female voice asked unexpectedly.

Joseph jumped and turned away from the schedule. To his surprise, a slender, tanned hand, the nails glossed in a thin white polish, rested gently on his shoulder.

“Wow, you’re beautiful!” he said, his mouth falling open. Immediately, his heart raced.

I can’t believe I said that.

She smiled. The tip of her tongue snuck out between her top and bottom teeth.

“Is that where we’ll start? How do you respond to that?” she said.

“The same way you respond to it every day, I imagine.”

“Bob said you’re harmless. I’m starting to wonder.”

Joseph was surprised by how easily and playfully he was able to talk to her.

“Ciao bella,” she said to a woman passing by. “I’ll see you at the 2:15”

“You’re Italian?” he said. “Molto bene!”

“You speak Italian?”

“Si. Si. Buon giorno, Principessa,” he said. “Sono Inglese di Gerrard’s Cross!”

On cue, with her heartfelt laugh, her tongue stuck out, like a cuckoo from a clock. Being a self-proclaimed movie/television buff, Joseph confessed that his Italian was limited to *Life is Beautiful* and *Monty Python*.

“Okay my Englishman from Gerrard’s Cross. But, Shannon will do,” she said, her tongue barely able to stay in its accustomed realm now.

“Principessa,” he said, bowing.

They talked for thirty minutes. Joseph discovered that Shannon was twenty-nine, had a boyfriend, and was an only child. Oddly they both shared the same astrological sign, Sagittarius. She had attended Western in London, Ontario, the same university that his wife, Virginia,

attended. Although Joseph went to school in Toronto, Virginia insisted that they be together during this important stage of their lives, especially *Frosh Week* in London. Joseph and Shannon shared stories about *Sydenham* and *Frosh* shenanigans that only a *Mustang* (and guest) would have known. And, like a spell, Shannon's smile, the tongue still poking through, bewitched Joseph for the remainder of the day.

At one point during their conversation, the phone on Joseph's belt clip rang. Startled, his eyes grew wide as if he didn't recognize the sound. He excused himself, although he never actually answered his phone. Instead, he fumbled around with the impossibility of answering it whilst continuing to talk to a now uncomfortable Shannon. Shannon mouthed "I'll see you later" and walked away, glancing back once. Joseph read the display on his phone:

Missed Call

HOME

Joseph watched Shannon walk across the hall. He was filled with a familiar dread for he knew that when he next spoke to Virginia she would let him have it for not calling her when he'd landed, and now he hadn't answered when she'd called.

Joseph was thirty-six and married to his high school sweetheart, Virginia. They had two sons — three-year-old Elijah and newborn, Kaysen. Between dating and marriage, he'd been with Virginia for more than half of his entire life, effectively marrying the only woman who'd ever given him a blowjob— perhaps a reflection of his overbearing sense of duty.

Virginia was a tall, stubborn, fair-haired woman whom Joseph feared. She was indifferent to his taste in movies and television, especially 'sci-fi'. However, she was devoted to her children and to her husband - the reason why Joseph loved her. Virginia and Joseph had been

dating for a year when his mother died. But Virginia, who was very much like his mother, was there for him. But despite her devotion for Joseph, she rarely called him by a pet name. It was always simply Joseph which, secretly, unsettled him. He considered her intelligent, sexy, and boring, often thinking of her with an ambivalence most prevalent among seasoned couples who likely took each other for granted. And perhaps always had.

First night

That evening after the conference program, Joseph returned to his hotel room, luggage still in tow, looking forward to some quiet time. He would have preferred to have arrived the night before, but with two children at home, one of whom was a baby, he tried to minimize the effect his absence would have on Virginia.

As Joseph walked down the hotel hallway, he scrolled through the emails and messages on his phone. He inserted his key card in the door as Bob walked by.

“J-man, you’re just checking in now? Once you get settled, let’s grab a bite. We’re at the end,” Bob said, pointing down the hallway. “Don’t worry. We can still catch up.”

“Oh, okay,” Joseph said. “You brought the Mrs. and the little one?”

“Yeah, we’re going to stay a couple of extra days and turn it into a vacation,” Bob explained. “By the way, Shannon was looking for you.”

“Buddy, I have to tell you, I love your friend, she’s *amazing*. How come this is the first time I’m meeting her?”

“She’s Mary’s friend...maybe if you came out once in awhile...” Bob jabbed. “But I’m glad to see you two are getting along so well. Actually, Nick thought Shannon was your

wife.” Bob looked curiously at his friend, and then teased, “You’re not getting any ideas are you?”

Joseph feigned an indignant face. “I’m simply enjoying her company.”

“That’s funny,” Bob said. “She said the same thing about you.”

After running into Bob, Joseph settled into his hotel room. When he was about to call home, somebody knocked on the door. He answered it.

“Buon giorno, Principessa!” Joseph said, shoving the phone into his pocket.

Oh God, the tongue, he thought.

“Englishman, mind if I borrow your laptop?” Shannon asked. “I just want to check my gmail.”

“Sure! Come on in,” he said. “I’ll pack it up.”

Joseph’s luggage lay open on the bed, organized and measured, with his shirts and pants hung from the unzipped portable mini-closet. Only the computer had been hurriedly opened and setup, with the laptop bag leaning against the side of the faux mahogany desk, the Internet cable already plugged in.

“No. I can just use it here,” she said. “If you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” he said, hesitantly.

Sitting on his bed, Joseph restarted his iPod. He studied Shannon, noticing the blue haze of the monitor that outlined her hair. She turned and smiled.

Joseph closed his eyes, reflecting on the fact that there seemed to be something so familiar, so peaceful about this woman. Throughout the first day at the conference both Shannon and Joseph had patted the empty chair beside them during the seminars when the other had

walked into the room. They talked as if they were lifelong friends, already finishing each other's sentences. Without a word, Shannon left the desk and sat on the creaking bed beside him.

“Seriously, what are you listening to?” she asked. She grabbed her hair and temporarily held it in a bun. As she did so, her shirt lifted slightly, revealing the peach soft span of her tummy. “You're in your own little world.”

Joseph smiled and studied her long strands of orangish hair that fell, curling to her shoulders as if they were crisp, shredded carrots. He mused about how her silver earrings dangled and how they drew attention to the slope of her slightly tanned neck.

He offered the ear buds to Shannon and she sat on the edge of the bed and listened.

“Move over,” she said, extending one ear bud, nestling close to Joseph, the ear bud wire no longer taut. Like teenagers, they lay side by side, content in sharing a song. Joseph was aware that he had yet to answer her question, while Shannon's warming breath and the vanilla scent of her hair seemingly pawed, unbuttoned the top of his shirt, curled and rested against his collarbone and chest. He could feel the phantom weight rising and falling with his breath. So, it was there that Joseph, Shannon's elder by seven years, a man more in the middle passage of his life than his adolescence, felt Shannon fall within the Alto of his years.

“Shannon, you sure we don't know each other?” he asked, as someone knocked at the door.

Third day. Lunch

Having spent the better part of the last hour still trying to make up with Virginia for not having called her the first day he'd arrived in Calgary, Joseph was late for lunch at Ozy's. He hadn't seen Shannon that entire morning and he was disappointed that the seat beside her was

occupied. Surveying the table where Bob, Bob's wife Mary, Nick, and Shannon sat, Joseph studied Bob, wondering if his friend detected his disappointment.

The polyphony of clinking glasses and wine bottles rang through the patio; remnants of red wine reflected against the light brown maple table top. A gentle breeze murmured through the branches, carrying a note from afar that joined the carefree song that adults, temporarily free from the responsibilities of their normal lives, sing from time to time.

"Buon giorno," Joseph said bowing to everyone, mouthing *Principessa* to a reserved Shannon.

"I see you got into the ambrosia," Joseph said, nodding at the row of empty bottles. "So, what did I miss?"

Bob's eyes met Joseph's with skepticism.

"Well, Bob's describing the greatest achievement in the history of cinematography," Mary said.

"Cinematography. Isn't that a little much for *Ghostbusters*?" Joseph said digging at his friend.

"Oh yes, laugh everyone," Bob said. "You know me well, old foe. Sit. Take a load off." Bob's skepticism, brought on by Joseph's arrival, had departed.

"Yeah, take your hat off," Nick said.

"You don't want to see that," said Joseph. "My hair is curly. It'll be all over the place."

"I love curly hair," Shannon said, sheepishly.

Suddenly the group grew quiet and looked at him curiously; their brows collectively furrowed. He felt as if everyone was awaiting his response— especially Bob.

Joseph laughed a shade too loudly. “See, that’s what I’m talking about, Bob. Would it kill you to talk about my hair? Take me to a show once in awhile, compliment my toenails? But no, with you it’s sex. Sex. Sex. You’d think I was living with Freud. At first it was enough, sure, the steamy nights, the insulin, the Ovaltine, but now I need more.”

“You’re a freak,” Bob snorted as the others laughed.

“That’s it. You’re dropping ten spots on the charts this week. And Shannon is debuting at number one,” Joseph said.

“Who?” Bob questioned.

“The lady,” Joseph said.

“Lady Gaga?”

“Well, equally parts lady and gaga,” Joseph said.

Joseph flung his arm around Bob, like it was old times; like they were still in university. “So what were you guys talking about before my boy here started with *Ghostbusters*?”

“*Aliens*,” Shannon said.

“Like ‘X-files’?” Joseph said.

“The movie,” Mary said.

Growing serious, Joseph leaned forward, crossing his arms over his chest. Bob cleared his empty plate to the side. He leaned his elbow on the table, smiling up with his wide grin, awaiting Joseph’s unbridled and unabashed happiness. .

“Are you kidding? It’s a classic,” Joseph said, now quoting the film. “If we go, we go to kill it. Not to bring it back.”

“What are we supposed to use...harsh language?” Shannon quoted.

“You! I never would have thought. Now I’m totally in love with you,” Joseph said, barely able to control his enthusiasm.

“You weren’t before?” Shannon teased, her tongue peeking out from between her top and bottom teeth, a cuckoo curtsy.

That she had not only watched that movie but could quote from it was like discovering a new land. He was accustomed to Virginia’s tired, “You’re not watching that stupid movie again, are you?”

Seamlessly, Joseph and Shannon resumed their conversation as if they were playing a game. Unable to join in, their friends listened to the banter as obscure lines from *Aliens* were volleyed back and forth, ostensibly a game that could only be shared between the two of them.

“This little girl survived without training,” Shannon served.

“Maybe we should put her in charge,” Joseph returned.

“They cut the lights.”

“They’re animals.”

“We can’t afford to let even one in.”

With his heart racing, Joseph stopped quoting from the film “No we can’t. Not even one.”

“I like when Hicks shows her the gun,” Shannon said.

“When she’s in her underwear?” Nick recognized.

“Wasn’t she always in her underwear?” Bob interjected.

“She could’ve worn a little silk number,” Nick said, joking.

“Yeah, like in *Ghostbusters*,” Bob said.

“You and your *Ghostbusters*! You probably would’ve liked to see Slimer in his underwear!” Joseph exclaimed.

“He didn’t even have pants,” Bob said.

“I didn’t say you wanted to see his junk,” Joseph said. “Just his choice in underpants.”

“Hey, leave Slimmer out of this,” Bob said. “You can’t challenge the anatomical correctness of a ghost.”

“I’m surprised you don’t wanna see mine,” Joseph quipped.

“Anatomical correctness?” Bob repeated, reaching for Joseph’s crotch.

“No underpants! Underpants! God, you’d be in seventh heaven if Victoria’s Secret came out with the definitive *Ghostbusters* collection. What, no foreplay?” Joseph asked, as Bob tried to pull Joseph’s pants down.

“As Hicks from *Aliens* said, I don’t think you want to mess with *that*,” Joseph quoted proudly.

“You started this,” Shannon chimed in. “Show me everything. I can handle myself.”

“Oh, God. I’m gonna miss you,” Joseph said.

“You two certainly have the same quirky sense of humour,” Bob said.

While the others became occupied teasing Bob for trying to get into Joseph’s pants, Joseph leaned across the table, and asked Shannon, “So what’s your favourite scene?”

“Oh, there are a few. I like the scene with the android and the knife,” Shannon said.

He stood and grabbed a chair from an adjacent table, squeezing in beside Shannon. His eyes strayed to the space behind Shannon’s chair, where, above her jeans, at the small of her arched back, he noticed the rose lace-trim of her underwear.

The others paused from teasing Bob and watched Joseph take Shannon’s hand, slowly marking where the tip of a grooved butter knife would fall between their stacked hands. The others laughed at Joseph and Shannon’s horseplay.

“A butter knife?” Shannon said. “Are you going to miss?”

“I’ve never missed before.”

“There’s always a first.”

“There *is* always a first.”

“Won’t you feel bad?”

“What do you mean?”

“If you hurt me.”

“Wouldn’t it be my hand?”

“It might still hurt.”

“It might hurt *especially*.”

Joseph forgot about the others. He rested his hand on top of Shannon’s daring never to let go, the two of them floating away, only to be reeled back where, under his breath, he cursed both the waiter who brought Shannon’s plate, forcing him to let go of her hand, and himself, as his eyes met Bob’s, whose gaze seemed to say “What the F-?”

Day four. Late afternoon

The following day, on the way to having dinner with Bob, Mary, and Shannon, Joseph debated about calling Virginia. He’d only spoken to his wife twice since the conference started, and with the time difference, he weighed the consequences of calling home during the kids’ bedtime. He considered the idea of calling later, but the danger would be that he might wake the kids. *I better call before she does.* He dialed the number but when he ran into Shannon in the hotel lobby, he flipped his phone shut.

“May I have this walk?” Joseph asked, bravely extending his arm after they’d stepped through the hotel’s revolving door.

She paused, pursed her lips and briefly pondered his offer before extending her arm. “Of course,” she said, smiling.

“I have to tell you something,” Joseph said.

“What’s that?”

“How much I’ve enjoyed your company. I was telling Bob how much I like you.”

“You’ve been my favourite,” she said. “I’m really going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you too.”

They strolled down the street arm in arm, as if it were the most natural thing. Shannon’s cell phone rang and Joseph tried to pull away so she could take the call, but she pulled him back in, preferring not to answer it. Joseph’s heart swelled. Once they reached the corridor in the restaurant and approached their friends, she let go of his arm, which at first seemed sudden, jarring Joseph from a dream. But he realized, *Right, what would they think?* As he walked towards his friends seated at the table, his phone on his belt clip vibrated.

After the call, Joseph sat quietly with his elbows propped on the tabletop, his fingers clasped together, almost covering his mouth and nose. His subsequent five minutes consisted of staring at the wood grain, and then clearing his throat to place his order, after which he excused himself to visit the restroom.

He held his hands under the tap and, as an afterthought, removed his wedding ring from his wet hand, placing it in a small puddle on the countertop. He splashed his face and stopped when he noticed, in the mirror, the bathroom door opening.

“Hey,” Bob said cautiously.

Joseph perked up. “Hey, buddy.”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Sure,” Joseph said, matter-of-factly

Bob nodded and then proceeded to check under the bathroom stalls.

“What’s the matter?” Joseph asked.

“Nothing. Nothing. Shannon said you were fine walking here,” Bob said uncomfortably.

“I just wanted to make sure we were alone.”

“Well, you should wait until I have a few drinks. I’m not that easy!”

Bob smiled pitifully. “Listen. I...ah...know things have been tough for you at home.

But...ah...you are acting like a lovesick puppy.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

Bob stared blankly at Joseph.

“No. Seriously. What’s going on?” Joseph persisted.

“J-man,” Bob exhaled. “Seriously, what else is there to think? The very first night, I come by your room to see if you want a bite, and you’re acting like you just zipped up. I know you said you two were just chillin’ out, listening to music, but seriously. Today, at lunch we’re joking around and I turn around and you’re holding hands with her.”

Bob paused then continued. “You know, you’re the last person I thought...”

Bob stopped again then said, “We’ve been through a lot, J-man...God knows...if you want to go for it, then go for it. I just know the way you are...you wouldn’t be able to live with yourself. You’re not *that* guy.”

Joseph clenched his hand and placed his fist against his mouth as if he were warming it up. “I don’t want to sleep with her, Bob,” Joseph said. “It’s just...I can’t stop thinking about her...”

“I know you like her, J-man. But what are we talking about, anyway? You gonna leave ‘Gin and the kids?”

“When I’m around her, I feel...at peace.”

Joseph paused, as if he wanted to swirl the words around and breathe in the aroma, before drinking them in fully. “It feels so natural.”

“Sure it feels natural! No kids. No responsibilities. And you get to be yourself. Of course you’d get along. For God’s sake, you’ve only known her for four days!”

“You knew Mary was the *one* after one day.”

Bob squinted and bit his thumb. He ran his tongue across his lips, realizing that Joseph’s home life may have been worse than he’d first imagined.

“Say you were together... don’t you think that one day she’d give you a hard time too?” Bob asked, almost whispering. “Don’t get me wrong. She’s a great girl. But it’s inevitable. Maybe it would be better with Shannon, but only because you had been with Virginia and you understood *things* better. I think we’re destined to one day despise those quirks we once fell in love with. It’s inevitable. ” He paused before continuing. “You know I want you to be happy.” He handed Joseph’s wedding ring back to him “You have to find another way to be happy.”

Solemnly, Joseph returned to his seat, situated across the table from Shannon. He tightened his lips and pressed them against his teeth.

As Bob sat down, he said, “Are you going to be okay to eat, Joseph? I didn’t think you were going to make it. If you need to head back and lay down, I can bring your food back for you later.”

Joseph measured his response. “I’m feeling better. Besides, I’d miss you guys too much.”

Bob briefly glanced at Shannon and nodded at Joseph in the serious way people acknowledge each other at funerals. Shannon’s eyes darted back and forth between Bob and Joseph, inspecting them both. When Joseph and Shannon’s eyes met fleetingly, Joseph paused, staring pitifully.

After the group had finished eating, Joseph’s companions forgave their quiet, sombre friend. Joseph’s mind swirled with ambivalence, dwelling on the impending end of his time with Shannon.

“I don’t think I need this,” Shannon said, returning the dessert menu to the waitress.

“I’ll share the fondue with you,” Joseph offered. “If you’d like.”

“That would be nice. I don’t think I could do it by myself.”

“You two are such a cute couple,” the waitress said to Joseph and Shannon.

A shroud of awkwardness covered the table. Bob kept his head down, while Mary watched Joseph, wondering if there was more to his playfulness with Shannon. Blushing, Shannon looked down, while Joseph simply reflected on the waitress’s words. Though no one had corrected her, her comment was simultaneously false and undeniably true.

Sharing dessert with barely a word between them, Joseph and Shannon dunked strawberries into the same chocolate bowl. Joseph gazed at Shannon, taken in by her beauty, as if she were a mesmerizing ocean and he a confused man caught on a precipice, watching a part of

him that longed to leap over the side, willing to smash any sense of control into shards against the jagged shore below. It was an emotion that Joseph barely recognized.

That evening, Joseph paced the hotel hallways and foyer, finally escaping to a wooden bench in the hotel's garden. He failed to understand how, in such a short period of time, he could come to feel this way about a woman he barely knew.

He sat motionless on the bench, watching the evening settle among the swaying trees as if they were listening to contrary arguments— until Shannon's voice jarred him.

“You're not avoiding me, are you *Englishman*?”

Joseph looked at her and smiled, but said nothing. The next day was the last day of the conference.

Shannon sat beside him on the bench. “What are you looking at?” she asked.

He nodded toward the red and green maple trees that were being lifted and weighted down by the wind.

“In the light, the swaying foliage looks like bunches of grapes,” he said. “I'd like to be a tree. Although it seems like you're never alone— the birds and squirrels perch on your shoulders, children swing from your arms and dangle from your limbs —eventually they'll all leave you. But you kind of live forever in the end. It's just you and the sun; just the two of you. And even though a tree and the sun can never truly be together, I imagine if you were a tree, you'd long to reach up and touch the sun, still feeling, deep in your trunk, her warmth as she seeps through your leaves. It must feel like heaven.”

She rested her head on his shoulder. A stray lock of her hair tickled his neck. He turned slightly to lean his head comfortably on hers and caught a glimpse of the skin beneath her shirt.

Before he went to the airport on the day he'd left for the conference, Joseph had stood in the doorway of the bedroom he shared with Virginia while she sat on the bed engrossed in the newspaper.

"We're not going to see each other for a week...just wondering if..." Joseph said, hinting.

"Did you read this?" Virginia asked.

Joseph exhaled deeply. "I can't see it from here".

"The article about pardoning services."

"No."

"It's crazy. Anyone can get pardoned. It doesn't matter what they do," she said. "Where are you going?"

"To the bathroom."

"I said I'd rub it."

"No, you didn't."

"Yes I did. You never listen."

Joseph thought, *In a manner of speaking, perhaps she did. She never said that she wouldn't. Perhaps we communicate by omission.*

"Don't worry about it. It's not a big deal. I'm going to take a shower," he said.

He bent over in the shower, allowing the hot water to run down his back and drip down his chin. He heard the bathroom door opening and quickly turned his back to the shower curtain, rinsing the lotion off his penis. Growing excited at the very real prospect that Virginia was going to surprise him, he anticipated the sound of the plastic curtain skirting across the rod and a head peeking in. Joseph maintained the facade of surprise. Glancing over his shoulder, he watched the

outline through the shower curtain, listening for Virginia to make her move. *What is she doing? A peek... just pull back the curtain. A peek. Would that be so bad?* The toilet flushed, sending a cold wave of water across his body. He yelped.

“Sorry,” Virginia said.

“For what?” Joseph demanded.

“Habit. I forgot you were there.”

Returning to Shannon in the garden, Joseph pointed to a tall tree. “I bet that you were a climber when you were little,” he said.

Shannon smiled, the tip of her tongue poking out, again.

“Now, I really wish I were a tree,” he said.

“Do you believe in heaven?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “What if you’re happy on Earth? What happens in heaven? Do you have to go? Besides, how would you know? I could be in heaven now.”

“Are you happy?”

“Maybe happy is a question of degrees. There’s cold and there’s bearable. There’s warm and then there’s Bermuda.”

“Are you ever serious?”

“Careful what you ask for...make me a promise. Promise me that you’ll have tea with me in heaven,” Joseph said.

“You’re so strange. I thought you didn’t believe in heaven.”

“I don’t, but I’d believe it if you said it.”

“Then I’ll say it.”

“Then I’d believe it.”

“You say it first.”

“I’d believe it whether you said it or not.”

“Then why do you want me to say it?”

“What’s the difference? I believe it when you smile. See! I believe! Oh Lord, I believe!”

“Stop it! People are looking! I’m not saying it now, so there.”

“I’ll sip from that cup just the same,” he said, swallowing. It was almost as if a hypnotist’s snapping fingers had brought him back to consciousness. He dwelled on the limitless cup that Shannon’s smile seemed to offer, a cup that memory would likely dip into, from time to time.

“Fine,” she said. “Before I agree, what’s tea like in heaven?”

“Same as here, I imagine,” he said, nearly brooding. “The clatter and din of spoons rise into a thick haze, choking out distant conversations. Distilling dissonance itself inside me, where a clear liquid, the truest part of me, overflows and I pour myself a dream.”

She lifted her head from his shoulder and turned to face him. “Are you like this with all the girls?”

“You mean charming, witty, debonair?” he smirked.

She smacked him. “Seriously!”

He stared straight into her eyes and stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. “No. Just the ones I’m in love with.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know how your wife puts up with you.”

“It’s unbearable.”

Last Night

Bob had reserved the back room for twenty people at Ozy's, the restaurant that had become the group's home-away-from-home for the past week at the conference. Joseph had already showered and dressed, ready for this last night with Shannon. Waiting for the LCD on the clock to signal seven o'clock, he sat at the foot of the bed plucking lint from his favourite blazer. He pinched, removed, and inspected each piece in the way that two monkeys groom each other. Finally, he removed his jacket and spread it over the bed. He removed the lint roller from the suitcase's side pocket and rolled the tape over the front of his blazer gliding it around the metal buttons and over the back of the jacket, collecting tiny red threads and long strands of Virginia's hair. He peeled off the layer of tape, carefully pulling an elongated strand from the tape's tongue. He watched the strand dangle weightlessly from his fingertips until seven o'clock arrived.

At Ozy's, Joseph reticently joined in on the grating, meaningless chit-chat that passed for table conversation, growing more agitated by the minute. Joseph was no fool. Even if he were to remain friends with Shannon, it would be impossible for their relationship to continue like this.

Finally, Bob and Mary strolled in with their daughter Samantha, followed by the *Principessa*. Joseph swallowed hard, but the acid crept up, floating like sadness in the heart of his throat.

"I have to say, Ladies, that you all look so beautiful," Joseph said. *Especially you, sweetie*, he thought.

Joseph watched Shannon's eyes light up, shining like a beacon in a dark, boundless sea.

"If they ever cloned you, women would line up," Mary said.

“You’re too kind,” Joseph said.

“No, it’s true,” Shannon said.

At Ozy’s, a crescendo of happiness rippled throughout the room; people laughed, porcelain plates clicked and clanged, wine sloshed as it was poured. But Joseph sat quietly, preventing even a single drop of joy from slipping past his tightly clasped fingers. He was afraid to look down at his coat, afraid he’d see Virginia’s hair still clinging to his clothes. He wondered whether he could just let go.

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck...

Bob’s daughter Samantha began to cry, pulling Joseph out of his funk.

“I know sweetie, I know,” Mary said, soothing her. “Say night-night.”

As Bob attended to Samantha, Joseph stood up and helped Mary put on her coat. Mary murmured her thanks and smiled sympathetically at Joseph.

Joseph watched them leave. Now, only Shannon remained, seated on his side of the table.

“Come sit next to me,” Shannon said, tapping the space beside her on the high-backed bench.

“Hi, Sweetie,” Joseph said naturally, sliding in beside her.

“What time do you have to leave for the airport?” she asked.

“Four a.m.”

“A few of us are going out tonight. Come out with us.”

“Where are you going?”

“To a club...it’ll be fun,” she said. “Come.”

“Will I have to leave your side?” he asked. *Oh God, that smile.*

“Will you come?”

I don't know. I am in love with you. And I know there is no hope here.

“Come.”

I don't know why I let it come to this.

“Joseph...coooome,” she repeated.

“Okay,” he said, finally.

At the club, Shannon remained at Joseph's side. Most of the night, they stood facing each other, holding hands, as if they shared an unseen song. The only time this spell was broken was when Joseph lead her to the dance floor or when Shannon went to the bathroom.

At three a.m., Joseph said, “I better get going.”

Outside at the club, the rain yellowed the street lights, further muting their goodbye. Joseph's face was taut as he stood motionless, not knowing where to start. Still, he had to touch her, one last time.

He moved his face closer to hers. Shannon greeted his gesture with her cheek. He drew closer, resting his forehead against the side of her face. He felt her breath brush across his chin and throat, like hands across a harp. Joseph's chest tightened. Something clawed at his heart.

Joseph felt his world fall away.

He placed his left hand against her cheek. His palm curved along it, falling perfectly into place. His lips skimmed across her left cheek, landing beside her lips. He closed his eyes. *Could I?*

As his lips pressed against her face, Joseph savoured her soft, supple, moist skin. The scent of vanilla filled his lungs. His lips— almost grasping, clinging — seemed unwilling to let go as he pulled away from her cheek.

“Do you *want* me to go back with you?” Shannon asked.

His lips tightened. He swallowed. He knew it mattered little what he chose – there was only the inescapable truth. He was never going to see her again and the thought of that filled him with sadness. He touched the back of her neck as they stood facing each other.

When I am with you, the world falls away. I can dream of no greater happiness than melting into your shapely ocean, where we dissolve into faceless, massless beings. Neither facing nor turning from each other. Simply evaporating eternally with you. Disappearing never to be found again. The peace I feel rains down, dazzling upon the rippling skin of humans below. I want you.

Joseph kissed her forehead and brushed her hair away from her face. Knowing that she lived in Toronto, lived so close, he wondered if duty alone would be enough to resist her. “No, you have a good time. I’ll see you back in Toronto.” His voice was hollow.

“I’m so glad we had *that* talk,” she said.

“You know what I’m going to miss most?” he asked, smiling. “How you stand, the back of your hand curled on your hips, your elbow out, your knee tilted slightly. You look like a tea pot.”

“Gee, thanks.”

Joseph held her hand against his chest, caressing from her fingertips to her wrist. She pulled away, letting go after it was obvious to both of them that it was time.

A week after he'd returned home from Calgary, Joseph turned off the bathtub tap and helped his son Elijah step into the warm water. Elijah splashed, causing waves to rush to the rim of the tub. His little feet drummed the tub floor like a sea monster caged at the bottom of the ocean. "Elijah over board!" he said, letting himself sink into the water. Joseph watched the roiled water fill his son's boats, causing them to sink and clunk. Joseph's attention drifted from Elijah to Shannon. Plastic boats creaked aimlessly against the tub wall; the silvery drops of water grew fat from the tap's mouth and fell one after the other onto the still surface.

Interrupted by the bubbling, Joseph awoke from his trance. Elijah lay submerged under the water. Although his fingers twitched, his body remained very still. His little, wide open brown eyes were glazed. His face had that same numb look he had when he got needles that seemed to say *don't you love me?*

In a panic, Joseph pulled his gasping, crying son from the water. "You're okay. You're okay," Joseph said, reassuring his child. "Daddy would never hurt you."

After crying for his Mother five times, Elijah extended his arms to Virginia when she entered the bathroom. She looked at Joseph in disappointment.

"You need to be more careful with him," she said.

"He just slipped under the water," Joseph defended. "It's okay. He's okay," Joseph said, simultaneously reassuring both Elijah and Virginia.

Joseph positioned Elijah, so Elijah's back faced Virginia and Elijah was only looking directly into his eyes. "He's fine!" Joseph said angrily. Even after she had left, Elijah continued to plead for his mother, wrenching his back to look behind him. It wasn't until Joseph pretended

to fall into the bathtub, splashing around in exaggerated movements, that Elijah stopped calling for Virginia, and climbed into bathtub laughing alongside his father.

After five minutes of playing in the bath, Joseph removed Elijah from the water, wrapping him tightly in a towel. Within minutes of Joseph hanging up his dripping jeans, t-shirts, underwear and socks from the faucet head and the various racks, Joseph spread baby lotion on a ticklish Elijah, who returned to his usual, jovial self. *Daddy would never hurt you.*

He carried his son out of the bathroom, pausing just outside the door. Virginia's shirt lay beside the laundry hamper, something he'd seen so many times before. He marveled at how Virginia could make her way that far, yet couldn't quite master getting her clothes past the rim. He lifted the shirt with his toes, passing it to his free fingers before tossing it in. "No basketball scholarship for Mommy, eh, Buddy?" Joseph said. He expected to feel frustrated, but credited his change of heart solely to the steam and the sweet, powdery scent of his son.

During the next several weeks Joseph seemed to encounter Shannon everywhere. In the grocery store, two girls in line behind him teased each other, one asking her friend, "So, what do you think of Shannon?"

Startled by their words, he turned and stared blankly at them.

One night, Joseph was folding laundry in the bedroom as Virginia was watching *Beverly Hills 90210* on the retro channel. She pointed to the screen, asking, "What's that girl's name again? It's Shannon, right? Whatever happened to her?"

Joseph stopped breathing, his mouth slightly open as he blankly stared at Virginia.

"Shannon? Shannon Dougherty?"

It had been almost two months since Calgary. He failed to understand how, in a matter of days, he had come to feel as strongly for Shannon as he had ever felt for anyone. The afterglow of their meeting had completely penetrated every facet of his life and he knew, eventually, his feelings for her would ruin him. It was wrong, but he had to see it realized in words. Not in jest, but straight from his heart. He didn't think that he would send the email, but as he clicked on the send button and watched it disappear, he knew it was the first time in his life that he'd claimed his heart so completely.

Five days later. 10:47pm

Although her bathrobe's belt was fastened tightly, Shannon's right hand still clenched her bathrobe firmly just below the collars, covering her collarbone and cleavage, as she walked her boyfriend to the door. Silently, he stood outside the townhome's door for five seconds before either of them said anything.

"Really! It's okay. I haven't been sleeping well, anyway" Shannon said. Her left hand touched his shoulder very briefly. "And we both have to get up early. You're welcome to stay if you want. But you don't *need* to."

As if he were in a straight jacket, his arms remained crossed as he leaned in and quickly kissed her goodnight on the lips. Between the peck and the bobbing back and forth of his upper torso, Shannon had the impression that she was kissed by a drinking bird toy. But the awkwardness couldn't hide her realization that his kiss more closely resembled gratitude than love.

"You're shirt's on backwards," she half smiled.

As he turned and walked away, without him noticing, Shannon removed a strand of her hair that was stuck on his shirt. Still clenching her bathrobe, she stood in the doorway and leaned against the doorframe - watching him drive away. She looked briefly at the strand of hair before rolling it into a ball between her thumb and index finger. And then she threw it into the bushes just outside her front door.

Having already stared out her bedroom window for forty five minutes after her call to her best friend, she placed the phone on the window sill, knowing there was nothing left to discuss with her. She had already spoken to her intensely since her boyfriend had left. It was the same discussion for four days straight.

Shannon turned her gaze from the window and looked at the open laptop on her bed. No light emanated from its screen. On the side of the laptop, she could see the battery light pulsating peacefully, having gone into energy conservation mode.

Shannon looked out the window. She studied the developing neighbourhood. Most houses were still only frames. Bricks stacked on skids were scattered around the muddy, crawler-track-encrusted road. A dump truck, a bull dozer and two back hoes were parked nearby. She envisioned what the neighbourhood would like when the work was completed.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, and placed the laptop on her bare thighs. Although inactive, the laptop, unable to vent the heat as it had sunk into the bed, accumulated a unnatural warmth on her exposed skin. Quickly, she fed her robe through the space between her thigh and the laptop. On startup, the computer's hard drive whirred against her inner thigh. She reread Joseph's entire email, all 719 words, pausing occasionally at certain passages until she reached the very end - a lowly question mark.

1:37 am

She tapped two keys.

Shannon did what any loving person would have done. Bravely, she unsheathed the sword and, like striking a single weeping note with one fell swoop, raging, she killed the thing that she loved with silence.