



PENGUIN
CANADA



**BETTER
LIVING
THROUGH
PLASTIC
EXPLOSIVES**

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ZSUZI GARTNER



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Understand that pity is not what we're looking for. We are men, we remind each other as often as we can, and we must bear that burden. Forgetting was what got us into trouble in the first place. It's a weak word, *trouble*. But that's what came to mind when someone finally bought the Wong-Campeaus place at the south end of the cul-de-sac. Stefan Brandeis took one look at the silver Camaro Z28 in the driveway and said, "Vroom, vroom. Here comes trouble." He was kidding, of course. Who could have believed that a barbarian was at the gates?

Their agent had priced the property before the market started to clench, but with their Ritual-infused twins at Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck, an International Baccalaureate school we knew doubled as a rehab centre, the Wong-Campeaus couldn't afford to come down. That kind of corked-up family stress inevitably manifests as fault lines. In other words, 2781 Chatham Close was, as Trevor Masahara succinctly put it, looking like crap. Marcus van der Houte had offered to fluff their place a generous discount, but the W-Cs declined. (*Fluff* is not a term Marcus himself would use. His business card reads *Art Direction for Real Estate*.)

"I should've done it gratis," Marcus later said, more than once, more times than might have been necessary, while draining the last of another shaker of his signature fig-infused vodka martinis. "A couple of orange PVC Rashid pieces out front"—one of us, possibly Karlheinz Jacobsen, observed that the designer's cordless Dirt Devil was an "isomorphic miracle"—"and the door in Shade-Grove Espresso with a Spa-Blue casing to make the brown really pop ..." All we could do was reassure him that he could hardly be held responsible for all that had happened. Or *caveat emptor*, as Patel Seth, our Latin scholar, put it.

"Damn his carnivorous soul to hell!" Kim Fischer had yelled from atop his carport towards the entrance, brandishing his fists like an Old Testament patriarch or modern-day mullah. It's perhaps not fair to speak of Kim, who with his unisex name and dubious tenor no doubt had more to contend with than the rest of us. His resilience was something to marvel at, though. We like to think he's running a rave food retreat somewhere in the West Kootenays, or way out east, the Gatineaus maybe, remarried to a woman who appreciates his way with a paring knife, who understands that taking a pumice stone to the rough skin of your heels does not necessarily make you any less of a man.

But this isn't about Kim. You could say this is about evolution. You could say we've developed a deep personal appreciation for Darwin, the man and the theorist—his dyspeptic stomach, his human frailties, his ability to cling to contradictory desires. We've weighed anchor aboard the *Beagle*, if only in our dreams, charted our own Galapagos of the soul and found it wanting.

He moved in on the Canada Day long weekend. As the children circled the cul-de-sac on their Razor and Big Wheels, like planes stacked in a holding pattern, he arrived with a U-Haul hitched to the Camaro and started unloading. No moving company, just him. He wore what's commonly referred to as a muscle shirt but what some would call a wife beater. Stefan Brandeis noted that he hadn't seen a grown man in cut-offs that tight since Expo '86. (We later had a spirited debate about whether his was

in fact a conventional mullet or ersatz hockey hair.) The first thing wheeled out of the U-Haul was hulking, jerry-built barbecue. He seemed friendly enough. He flashed what Trevor Masahara called “big, shit-eating grin” at those of us who’d gone over to welcome him with a pitcher of iced Matcha spiked with Kentucky Gentleman.

“Shake hands with the Q,” he said, patting the hood of the barbecue as if it were a loyal hound, the half moons of his prominent cuticles edged in grease. Karlheinz Jacobsen’s wife later commented that he smelled a bit ripe, and the other women made a show of fanning the air in front of their faces. Kim Fischer’s wife even enthusiastically snuffled Kim’s exfoliated pits like a truffle pig. At the time it seemed they were being a trifle judgmental, but one thing we’d always appreciated about our wives was that they spoke their minds.

It bears mentioning that he did something else that first day as we gathered around his “Q” trying to make small talk. Without missing a beat, he reached down to rearrange himself inside his cut-off. This is something we’ve never talked about, not even Stefan B. Some things are better left unannotated.

Afterwards, he sat down on his new front steps and drank beer straight from the can, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, exaggeratedly rotating his shoulders as if attempting to recalibrate himself. It had all been amusing at first, some kind of sideshow. Like having a Molson ad shot on your very own street. This was before the dog arrived, and the Dodge one-ton.

That day is easy to recall with a great deal of clarity for another reason. We’d always been spared the smell from the rendering plant across the Burrard Inlet. But on July 1, there occurred a shift in the wind that continued unabated throughout the summer. The congealed odour of pyrolyzed animal parts would enter the cul-de-sac and then just hang there, as if snagged on a hydro line. It came and went some days thankfully better than others. *Can you smell it?* we’d ask hopefully at the gelato shop two blocks away on Mountain Highway. *Didn’t you smell it on Albermarle Drive as well?* we quizzed our letter carrier, who took to pelting through her rounds on the cul-de-sac as if Cerberus were at her heels. It was difficult to believe we were the only ones in our North Vancouver enclave saddled with the almost gelatinous stink. There were days when even the leaves of the silver birches that edged the ravine behind our properties appeared to curl back from it. The cedars and the Sitka spruce, more stoic trees, stood their ground.

We have accepted our confluence of bad luck not as a “sign” of something, but rather for what apparently was: bizarre coincidence. People have driven themselves insane for millennia trying to figure out “what it all means.” Most often things just *are*.

“I know it’s only a smell,” Trevor Masahara said one particularly rank Tuesday evening, interrupting our book club’s parsing of Clarissa’s guilty rejection of the hydrangea in *The Hours*, “but sometimes it seems like, you know, an actual *thing*.”

His name? It’s easy to forget he actually had a name, a driver’s licence, most probably a SIN. For a while we called him The Truck Guy and later The Meat Guy. Karlheinz Jacobsen, who has a scientific bent, was the one who nicknamed him Lucy. You know, the so-called missing link? We thought this was terribly funny. “Lucy,” Stefan Brandeis would yell mock *sotto voce*, “you got some ‘splainin’ to do!” while the rest of us laughed. We literally yowled. It seems even then we had more in common with other animals than we could have imagined.

A couple of days after he’d moved in, as if it had been teleported there overnight, the Dodge Ram circa early ’80s, sat on blocks in the middle of his front lawn. Off-white (*tapioca*, Marcus van der Houte insisted), one broken headlight, and on the slightly dented back bumper a peeling orange neon sticker that read i’m going nuckin’ futs! And one of those chrome Jesus fish. (We never did witness

any signs of even covert religiosity, a disappointment to Karlheinz Jacobsen, who alone among us held to a notion of the divine.) The kids went giddy—~~instant ADHD~~—as if they'd never seen a truck before.

Marcus was the one who elected to go over to talk to him about it. Bear in mind that we didn't then nor subsequently, ever use the term "property values." We are not the kind of men who fixate on our lawns. In fact, those of us with southern exposures have switched to drought-resistant native grasses. And if there is grass that needs cutting, a communal Lee Valley push mower is used.

He was underneath the truck banging around, bare knees poking out, feet in decaying Adidas. Marcus tapped out the end-credit sequence to *Moulin Rouge* on the hood to get his attention (Marcus's ten-year-old son told him later, "You should've just yelled 'Yo!'") The slathering muzzle of what looked like an Alsatian/Cayman cross shot out of the front passenger window, and Marcus fell on his seersucker-clad ass, cartoon-style, white bucks up over his head. (For the record, at least one of us failed to suppress a guffaw.) The guy slid out from under the truck with a grunt while the dog continued its concerto.

He offered Marcus a greasy paw (our neighbour, not the dog) and heaved him up. After they "shook the shit for a while," as Trevor put it, our reconnaissance man gave a wave and walked away wiping his grass-stained butt.

"I lost my nerve," Marcus said later. We assured him we would have as well, while Patel Seth pried his fingers from his third black mojito and suggested it might be a good time to up his dose of citalopram.

Fear, we all know, is a useful adaptation. "Only the brave die young," Stefan Brandeis said rather soberly, and for once it seemed he might not have been joking.

The dog's name was Gido. He wasn't a bad dog really, despite being seriously misbred, his genes a murky concoction that no doubt involved at least one AWOL chromosome. Contrary to what his owner might have desired, he did seem all bark and no bite. His oversized head, with its long snout housing teeth in double rows like a shark's, balanced on a dachshund's body. He looked alarmingly like a life-sized bobble-head dashboard dog. How he ever managed to hold up that head for any length of time we'll never know.

We can now admit an isolationist stance would have been best for all concerned. But we did what any civilized tribe would have done under the circumstances and invited our new neighbour to a dinner party. The soiree was held at the Brandeis-Lahr place, as they have the most accommodating deck. It was one of those sultry, edge-of-the-rainforest evenings, but the lingering smell from the last shift at the rendering plant soon drove us inside. We were discussing what Trevor Masahara's wife maintained was an apocryphal story about the worth of a certain crowd-pleasing Egyptian Bastet cat statue at New York's Metropolitan Museum when our guest of honour arrived with a two-four under one arm, dressed in sweatpants of some ambiguous vintage and, to everyone's relief, a T-shirt with short sleeves. He clamped a beer between his molars before anyone could offer him a bottle opener and said something like, "How is everyone?" (Patel Seth recollects it as the more colloquial "Howz you hangin'?")

The cat statue, Kim Fischer continued, after a series of ill-executed high-fives and faux gut punches initiated by our new neighbour, turned out to be much too valuable an antiquity to be put on open display, so what museum-goers were gaping at was in fact a meticulously wrought replica. When they got out, no one was interested in viewing it anymore. Karlheinz Jacobsen recalled the story differently—that the actual statue was put on display, but after being authenticated by a third-party expert on the Ptolemaic period was found to be a fake.

“It’s all the same in the end, isn’t it?” said Patel. “People place great stock in authenticity.” He turned to our guest, who stood squinting his eyes and chewing his upper lip as if deeply considering the issue, and asked his opinion. “What I’ve been wondering,” he said, thrusting his beer in the direction of Trevor’s chest, “is how much mileage you get with that rice grinder out there.”

Kim’s wife, ever diplomatic, extended a skewer of honey-glazed late-season fiddleheads, cultivated in the dankly shaded side of their house. “Kim’s a committed locavore,” Trevor said, recovering himself admirably. “He’s been trying to convert us all.” The Truck Guy smirked and twirled a finger alongside his right ear: “Loco what?” We had no choice but to laugh along good-naturedly, even Kim. He was our guest, after all, the new guy on the block.

The evening proceeded towards what could in hindsight be clearly seen as a preordained traffic wreck. (“In the land of the blind, the one-eyed jack is king,” a hungover Stefan remarked the next morning. To which Trevor replied, “Come again?”) Our neighbour actually giggled at Marcus’s lamb popsicles in fenugreek sauce, and when Karlheinz unveiled a test-tube tray of plastic ampoules filled with wild-morel cream that we were meant to squirt into our mouths (the women loved it, that clever Karl!), he pretended to inject his *amuse bouche* into the raised veins traversing the waxy underside of his left arm, flexing in a manner that accentuated his already over-delineated bicep. Again we laughed. (Although Marcus stage-whispered to Patel, “It’s obvious that he’s never actually shot up.”)

Karlheinz was explaining his failed attempts at crossbreeding golden agoutis with voles in order to create sleeker guinea pigs when someone passed our new neighbour a plate of Trevor’s dulce salad. He demurred, muttering something about erectile dysfunction.

What felt like light years later, during which “Hot Rod” (as Stefan dubbed him that night) frequently interrupted the conversation with detailed descriptions of the modifications he’d made to his car—Noki adjustable shocks, Bruce Herb 1.31-inch anti-sway bar, two-inch lowered Simpson Michigan leaf springs[?], EJR carpet, Dyno-Mite insulation, restored dash pad, Ultra-Lite Automorphic gauges, Painfree Wire 16 circuit, ’68–’74 muscle-car kit, TPS polygraphite bushings [used throughout, *including body mounts*, WRT Z28 coil springs, Calvert Johnson “Cal-Rac” traction bars [a pause for lubrication here], Black ’73 interior, *added years ago!*, Sony Frost Mark stereo head unit, 5 × 160 watt amp. *And believe you me* a twelve-disc multi-play CD changer, two 6 × 9 Altitude rear speakers, and PH Quartz components in front—he returned bleary-eyed from yet another trip to the bathroom and shot dual pistol fingers at each of our wives. “Next weekend I’ll make you ladies some real food.”

With that he disappeared into the night, and in the elongated silence that followed we could hear the waters of Lynn Creek churning through the gorge below the water-pipe bridge as the snowpack from above melted in the July heat. Already it had claimed a young man, the season of playing chicken with the creek only just begun. We could almost *hear* the melt.

Sure, we knew men like him existed. But we’d never had a chance to observe one in such close proximity. Karlheinz confessed to thinking of him as a *specimen*, and we nodded in agreement.

We have often wondered what Darwin would have made of the summer-long struggle for existence on our cul-de-sac. If he’d lived here, would he have taken the role of observer or participant? By all accounts he was a bona fide gentleman, didn’t partake of arguments, even kept his own counsel when the *Beagle*’s mad Capt. FitzRoy expounded at length during dinner—as if daring the naturalist to differ—on the Book of Genesis. (Once, only once, did he weigh in, when the captain was explaining the trickle-down benefits of slavery, proving our hero did have a backbone.) Did he float above the chickpeas and rice in the captain’s mess, a benign smile shielding his face, lost in barnacle dreams? Did he clutch his stomach and plead seasickness and flee to his cramped quarters?

Something we can be certain C.D. didn’t consider: reaching across the table and throttling FitzRoy.

until the man's eyes bulged from their sockets.

We found his backyard well-kept, albeit oddly quaint. ("Holly Hobbie chic," Stefan called it.) Garden gnomes stood here and there ("Gnomically," Patel later said, as if reciting a Zen koan rather than a bad pun) amongst towering delphiniums and various mulleins. Lobelia and other generic annuals spilled from a small weathered wheelbarrow, and a blown-glass hummingbird feeder hung from the coral bark maple.

Surely the W-Cs couldn't have left these things? But it was even more inconceivable that they belonged to him. (It now seems laughable that we wasted so much time over the following weeks debating the question of whether he had bought all this in earnest or whether he had an understanding of its kitsch value. Karlheinz had posited the most plausible theory: "It could be they were his mother's and he maintains them through a sentimental streak." That we could understand, although Marcus couldn't help reminding us that sentiment is anathema to design.)

The "Q" stood in the centre of the yard like a Mayan shrine in the cloud forest of Cobán, feathered in smoke and snapping and spitting as fat hit the fire. Mosquito torches on bamboo poles flanked the barbecue. (Trevor's wife deemed this "thoughtful.") The patio table was laden with platters of rare meat, the variety defying categorization, but our host was all too willing to lead a tutorial. There were slabs of porterhouse steaks, rib-eyes, short ribs, spareribs, pork loin chops, lamb shoulder chops, and lamb leg steaks. He eschewed terms like "well-marbled" in favour of "nice and fatty" and smacked his palm down soundly on cuts he deemed particularly "bodacious." We hardly need point out that there wasn't a rub or a marinade in sight.

REO Speedwagon blasted from what looked like car speakers attached to the balustrade of his deck. He later came strolling through the sliding doors with a guitar, yodelling "Ring of Fire" as a prelude to dishing up his Voodoo Chili, a recipe he had evidently learned in a squat on the outskirts of Port-au-Prince. He promised us his chili would fire up visions of Erzulie Dantor, the Haitian goddess of sex. She would make love to us in our dreams. His way of putting it of course involved more colourful terminology, in a dialect Patel, our own Henry Higgins, recalls as "Thunder Bay, 1977."

We will admit to the record that he was an attentive host that evening, exuding a kind of ruffian charm in his own milieu. He even kept his talk of body mounts and adjustable shocks to a minimum. It also bears mentioning that this was the closest we ever came to being chummy. At one point he and Trevor engaged in a tête-à-tête about the ultimate burger. (Trevor swears by a knob of frozen blue cheese encased in the centre of 275 grams of hand-chopped Kobe sirloin.) "No shit," he kept saying, sounding genuinely impressed as Trevor pulled out his BlackBerry to do some quick temperature conversions (our host not having mastered the move from imperial to metric back in grade school). "No shit."

It turned out that among his many adventures he'd spent some time in the Australian outback. "Kangaroo," he told us, "is a beautiful protein." Patel's wife, who is an ear, nose, and throat specialist, said she found that poetic. (A less generous person might have said, "She wouldn't know poetry if you bit her on the ass," but Patel wasn't that kind of guy.)

Other things we learned that night: Chicken isn't meat. Medium-rare is for chumps. Boys who can burp the Lord's Prayer at age eight retain the ability, like a vestigial limb flaring to life, well into the thirties.

The night was alive with smoke and fire. Insects were held at bay. Blood pooled on his plate. Stefan's wife leaned forward and dragged a finger through it and then exaggeratedly sucked. At that time, we erroneously believed she was mocking *him*.

For a while after that, things were good. Almost too good. Kim's wife turned to him in bed the night

of the barbecue and said, “Fee-fi-fo-fum, I smell the blood of an Englishman.” He told us her overbitten lip had glinted in the bedside light like the teeth of something feral. We all knew what he meant. Even Marcus’s wife, who has a no-nonsense air about her and is an avid golfer, started running her fingers through her cropped hair in a manner some of us found disconcertingly attractive. (During those brief, heady days, more than one child walked in on a mid-afternoon scene in a rec room or kitchen that elicited hysterical giggles or cries of “Gross!”)

We found it impossible not to notice that by the third week of July the hair on our neighbour’s chest and shoulders looked thicker, more pelt-like than the springy bed of curls that had so freely dripped sweat the afternoon he moved in. Throughout the first half of the summer it seemed he was out there every day tinkering with the truck and later with the Ford Ranchero pickup that joined it on its own blocks on his front lawn. From time to time he’d wave to us with a monkey wrench or a soldering iron. “Now that he’s discovered fire,” Stefan quipped one morning while squeezing into Patil’s Mini Cooper with those of us who didn’t telecommute or weren’t on paternity leave, “maybe he’s trying to reinvent the wheel.”

His property became a magnet for the kids. They played in the trucks, roughhoused with Guido, abandoned their tennis racquets and unicycles and junior geologist kits in favour of slingshots and handmade blow-dart guns. (“This is how they kill in the Amazon!” Trevor’s five-year-old informed us, adding that all they now needed were poison arrow frogs to toast over a fire like marshmallows, the venom oozing to the surface like a toxic froth.) They showed waning interest in the computer animation camps, father-son mini-triathlons, and Urbane Kids Cook! classes we’d pre-enrolled them in months back. We feared they’d soon be running wild in Lynn Canyon, engaging in some kind of *Lord of the Flies* one-upmanship with rival cul-de-sac kids. They came around in the late afternoon, saying they’d already had a snack “at Guido’s,” their breath redolent with the after-effects of processed meats and root beer, their eyes narrower than the last time we had looked closely at them.

Were we neglectful fathers? Were we secretly relieved to find more time on our hands after work and on weekends than we’d ever thought possible post-fatherhood? There was something in the still, childless Kim’s eyes that made the rest of us feel guilty, but he never levelled any accusations. Kim was always the quiet one, the exemplar of those still waters they say run deep. Our wives assured us that unstructured time was what childhood summers used to be all about, but we couldn’t help suspecting that their uncharacteristic nostalgia hinted at a buried desire to revert further into an idealized past.

Chas, as we’ve taken to affectionately calling Darwin, was understandably discomfited by the natives of Tierra del Fuego. In lean times, he was told, they would devour their grandmothers while sparing their dogs. He was apparently misled by a young trickster, as later reports dismiss the notion that the Fuegians were cannibals.

But why even think of this now? There are still grandmothers in the world and there are still dogs, and there are places on earth where the former are abused and the latter venerated. And vice versa.

By early August the trucks stood neglected in his front yard and the Camaro seldom left the driveway. He now took his Harley Low-Rider everywhere—the deadening percussion of the altered muffler competing with the stench from the rendering plant for most-obnoxious-emission status. His favourite T-shirt—or at least the most frequently sported—read *Loud Pipes Save Lives*. Guido perched on the back, small ears flattened in the wind, happy as a gargoyle, roaring down Mountain Highway.

Plants better suited to the bogs of the Carolinas (“Or the late Cenozoic period,” Stefan noted) began to spread across his property. Waxy-leafed vines twisted around the trucks, even creeping out through the exhaust pipes, their ropy tendons like the neck muscles of dehydrated bodybuilders. Moss bearded

fenders and chrome grilles. Cobra plants and monkey cups and other flesh-eaters proliferated. Even dragonflies became ensnared, their death rattle unnerving. (“Like ice in a blender,” Marcus observed swirling the dregs of a kiwi-and-peppercorn daiquiri.) Giant hogweed (“*Heracleum mantegazzianum*,” Karlheinz informed us, “with sap so toxic the skin reddens and blisters after contact before erupting in severe inflammation prone to infection”) soon shot up well beyond the roofline. We finally had a non-negotiable reason to forbid the kids to play in his yard.

Trevor, who had gone into the backyard on the pretext of retrieving an errant Frisbee-golf disc, reported that it was almost swampy, as if the groundwater were rising. A crudely framed smokehouse hung with small carcasses was set up where gnomes had previously stood guard by the delphinium. And behind the smokehouse, what could only be described as a midden of bones.

What our summer had been reduced to: endless speculation. Spying on a neighbour. (Karlheinz, in fact, had begun to compile *field notes*—“evidence,” he called it.) Petitioning various city and provincial bureaucracies to do something about the at-times-unspeakable (and, we were told, *cross-jurisdictional*) odour infiltrating our cul-de-sac from the other side of the inlet. Our fitness regimen—let’s just say we were finding it more and more difficult to confront a full-length mirror most days. Our joie de vivre felt as if it were being sucked out of us one pore at a time by a super-strength vacuum cleaner.

And from his backyard the continual haze of smoke rising.

Whenever we complained, about the noise, the smoke, the smell, the sheer onslaught of it all, our wives absent-mindedly stroked our hair (or, in Marcus’s case, his aggressively shaved dome) as if petting cats, their thoughts, we assumed, on the demands their careers were making on their time. Our holiday plans were falling through, one after the other, collapsing due to inertia on our part and the fact that an unseasonable crunch time appeared to have hit the medical, legal, architectural, geological, and IT professions almost simultaneously. We’re still not in complete agreement about whether we were twenty-first-century men for not questioning our wives’ work commitments or whether we were dupes. (Trevor, ever self-flagellating, prefers the dupe theory. He is also the one who misses Kim the most.)

Our wives no longer arched close while we watched HBO late in the evenings, angling for a deep tissue massage or core realignment. It transpired that more than one of them had faked orgasms on multiple occasions. Patel told us his wife had called the tantric sex workshop we’d all taken in the early spring “a joke.” Marcus’s wife declared that cunnilingus was meant only for lesbians and cats.

Our neighbour had taken to pulling the “Q” out onto his driveway in the early evening, dispensing goodies as if he were a hot dog vendor at the corner of Hornby and Robson. We could forbid the children from playing over there, but we certainly couldn’t forbid our wives, who drifted over to sample his wares. Karlheinz actually witnessed him laying a piece of deeply charred something or other directly onto Kim’s wife’s extended tongue, as if proffering a communion host. Our wives would come home, often after the sun had set, talking about things like “honouring the whole beast” and marrow smudges at the corners of their mouths.

It cannot be said we didn’t pull out all the stops. We still maintain that “Operation Aphrodisiac” was executed flawlessly. Patel made his Lapsang souchong–smoked duck breast with pomegranate sauce. Kim made dolmades using grape leaves from his own garden. Then there was Karlheinz’s oyster foam–filled agnolotti, Trevor’s quail stuffed with raisins and quinoa, and Stefan’s saffron risotto with truffle oil and mascarpone. Marcus’s silky black cod with Pernod mole sauce (70 percent pure, fair-trade cocoa) filled the role of dessert.

Kim even booked himself a spa treatment. (We’re still curious as to whether he went through with the rumoured “crack wax.”) At the time, we accepted this as further evidence that he was the brave

and most evolved of us all.

[Our notes are sketchy at this point. Accounts vary too widely to be coherent.]

It was shortly after what Patel christened our Failed Feast of the Satyricon that our wives started dressing differently. (“Their slut phase,” Trevor would later call it, reminding us how mutable the thing we call the “personality” really is.) At first we thought it was the dry heat, something none of us were used to. The day Kim’s wife headed out to a pre-trial discovery dressed like Britney Spears’ little sister, her Nunzia briefcase incongruous alongside the terry cloth short shorts and baby-T, we could no longer deny that some kind of deleterious mutation was taking place. For once we were glad we had only sons and no daughters.

We thought at the time that this was all to do with meat. Could too much unmediated animal protein cause a chemical disturbance in the frontal granular cortex, we asked Karlheinz, who simply shrugged. He was as lost by then as the rest of us, science no longer the bulwark against disorder that he had believed it to be. (Karlheinz had, by then, started attending Mass again.)

“I just don’t see why meat has to be the main event!” Kim Fischer detonated one day, seeming apropos of nothing. We nodded fervently, as if at a Free Methodist revival meeting. Someone, most likely Stefan, added, “Amen, brother!”

No one was yet speaking in tongues.

Then Guido killed Karlheinz’s agoutis. That was the official story. The supposition, anyway. The hatches were open, the agoutis were gone. But, *nihil fomeus cannone*, Patel said, the best he could come up with in Latin for “no smoking gun.” Without sufficient evidence (“Or balls,” Trevor later said) we could not confront our neighbour. Not then.

We inspected the blood-smear on the grass, stomachs contracting. We could smell murder. All day long the boys yelped in the ravine edging the backside of the cul-de-sac, something distinctly tribal in their wailings. The women, strangely, weren’t disturbed by the carnage. They didn’t even come by to check out the blood on the grass, which by the evening was thick with flies.

They told our children, “When animals kill each other we don’t call it murder.” Our lovely, brilliant, Darwinian wives.

We determined that the trapped smell, that wilful pong, was a result of a geo-architectural force, like the buffeting wind tunnel downtown created by the arched, open corridor to the Vancouver Public Library’s northeast entrance. Trevor was all for cutting down the Sitka spruce grove that towered over the cedars and silver birches along the ravine. Although a couple of us wavered, we finally came down adamantly against. Those trees were not even our property. “But it’s our stink, right?” Trevor maintained.

What we feared: Trevor, with his refined sense of smell, would go off his nut in the night and take a chainsaw to the trees.

The black-bear signs had been up for weeks. The dry summer caused sporadic wildfires farther up the North Shore Mountains, and no doubt berries were sparse. Whereas other kids learned to dial 911 at an early age, ours had committed to memory 604-990-BEAR. Lucy, as we were calling him by then, scoffed at the signs and the directive: *Remove all bear attractants (food)*. “Guido could take them out,” he boasted. As if taking a bear out was what was required, as if our cul-de-sac were a kind of gladiatorial arena where a wandering cub and a Down’s-afflicted mongrel could grapple to the death.

while we laid our bets.

~~Helicopters juddered by overhead almost daily. A fugitive was suspected of hiding on Mount Seymour, although he was later found in a tool shed near Indian Arm. A woman tossed her child from the Capilano suspension bridge, but it miraculously survived. Two Japanese exchange students wandered off three-quarters of the way up the Grouse Grind arm in arm and disappeared into the trees.~~

We no longer communicated with our children except through a kind of sign language. They spoke in coded grunts and shrugs. Stefan's twins talked to each other in clicks and clacks of the tongue, like the bushmen of the Kalahari. They drew on the garage walls with the charred ends of sticks and charcoal briquettes as if drawing on the insides of caves—of the things they imagined, or the things that had yet to happen, it wasn't clear then. A small figure emerging from bushes on what looked like an enormous turtle. Men with sharp implements converging on a cowering beast. Tangles of foliage and fire. Rain.

Sightings of our neighbour became rare, his comings and goings much less of a show, perhaps achieved under the cover of darkness, the revving of the Harley less and less frequent, until the bike was permanently dry-docked. Guido had such a disappointed air about him that Karlheinz suggested taking him for a ride on Marcus's Vespa so he could at least feel the wind in his ears.

Stefan swore he had seen Lucy's arms swinging along, his knuckles skimming the ground, pelvis tipped backwards as he made his way through the dense overgrowth to his backyard after depositing his garbage container by the curb. (His front door obscured by a tangle of vines.) He was certainly moving more deliberately now whenever we did see him, and wasn't as quick with the rejoinders as he had been. It was only after he stopped the clowning completely that we realized how much we had enjoyed viewing him as a harmless throwback. Patel, who is intermittently nocturnal and lives adjacent to him, claimed he had seen Lucy on his haunches, eating raw meat straight from the carcass of some small creature. This only made Karlheinz scoff. "Neanderthals cooked meat on hot stones." We were touchy with each other by then.

Each of us had our own theories. Cro-Magnon! *Homo habilis!* *Homo erectus!* *Australopithecus robustus!* Our hypotheses flew back and forth like insults. We clung to these with a certainty that was all the more convincing for being feigned. Six blind men describing an elephant, when in fact the whole of a thing is so often not so much greater or lesser but completely different from the sum of its parts.

But why even trouble with taxonomies? They are shifty, after all, and, as we've learned, in the end it's all just words.

It was towards the third week of August that our wives started avoiding us altogether, disappearing into themselves as the sky fell. We tried following them, walking barefoot, careful on the tinder-dry pine needles underfoot, breathing through our mouths slowly and evenly. We knew this wasn't the way it was supposed to be, fire ants pouring from the peonies, keeping watch while our wives grunted among the vines. But they were always home by morning.

Right before the Labour Day weekend, one of the Japanese exchange students came up out of the ravine straddling the back of a giant tortoise. She looked dazed but otherwise unaffected, the tortoise heavy lidded and benign. (Stefan remarked that it looked a little like Sinatra in his later years.) It was Trevor who called 911. Only after the emergency vehicles and media people that converged on the cul-de-sac had gone did we realize that no one had thought to take a photograph. The ones in the newspapers and on SnapTweet, and the footage on the news and on YouTube, didn't come close to

capturing the other-worldliness of what we had witnessed. The aquarium issued a statement that a tortoise recently acquired for its upcoming Galapagos exhibit had indeed gone missing from its transport container. But we still wonder.

The boys had jostled for proximity to the tortoise, prodding it with sticks despite our entreaties. One of them (Marcus's son?) even poked at the girl. By that point a kind of despair permeated our *cave-de-sac*. Only our sons seemed oblivious to the smell and the frequent volcanic eruptions that pockmarked our driveways with small craters. We had prided ourselves on raising children with a high emotional IQ, but these little creatures had become alien to us, and we could only watch them from an increasing distance as if from the reverse end of a telescope.

Our wives squatted on their haunches in front of backyard fires they'd built in pits lined with basaltic rock, looking at us with those eyes, waiting for us to do something. Hunt? Gather? Or something else, something beyond our capabilities altogether?

We're aware that by today's standards the retiring Chas himself would have been considered a bit of a barbarian by some. He collected specimens by the thousands and thought nothing of casually slitting open the bellies of creatures to examine the contents of their stomachs. On the Galapagos he made sport, under the guise of research, of swinging a lizard by the tail and hurling it out over the water as far as he could. He caught the terrified creature as it crept back onto the volcanic shore and catapulted it again and again. This type of lizard could evidently swim but was afraid of water. What the naturalist deemed this contradiction: apparent stupidity.

On Labour Day, Kim's wife left. Patel, not generally a man to talk in clichés, later kept repeating *Thank God there were no children*, and not one of us even considered scoffing. She had gone not to Lucy's as we'd first suspected, but clear across the bridge to another life that was not to include Kim. This was all in her note. (It has to be said, now that Kim is no longer here, that we were taken aback by her schoolgirlish handwriting and her choice of stationery.) All of us were in agreement about whose fault this really was.

Late that night we were decidedly sombre as we gathered in Kim's kitchen, lit only by the ambient glow of LED pot lights. To get through the dense foliage, we would have to take the equivalent of machetes to the vines and the thick-ribbed hogweed stalks. Kim doled out fully forged and polycarbon-tipped chef's knives with military precision. How different those Sabatiers and Wüsthofs were from the stone tools we found scattered around our ancestor's backyard. We buried those as well. (Stefan has confessed to pocketing a Mousterian scraper as a souvenir, although we agree *souvenir* seems the wrong word. Patel suggests *memento mori*.)

Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do! How could he have explained? With that jaw grown so heavy was now only good for mastication? With that tongue that most of us were certain had nimbly traced figure eights on our wives' breasts and thighs, now thickened and barely contained in the bowl of his mouth? Trevor swears he pleaded. His eyes, buried under that shelf of brow, begged for understanding. Did he plead? Sometimes even the merest suggestion of what may have happened is enough to make you question your own recollections.

As for Gido, what could we do? That dog had an exceptional sense of smell. And halfwit or no, that dog was loyal. Even now we're not ashamed to admit that more than one of us wept. Karlheinz the longest and hardest.



The mail continues to arrive at 2781, the bills get paid, even the mortgage, thanks to Trevor's computer-hacking skills. Come tax time Stefan, a crackerjack accountant, will see to it that the former occupant doesn't fall into arrears. We'll make sure he sends his old mom, the only person we could determine, a Christmas card.

We razed the rampant growth on the property. The children have resumed playing in the trucks, and we've accepted that boys will be boys. The little Jesus fish on the Dodge Ram has sprouted rudimentary legs and a tail, clearly one of Stefan's jokes, although he denies it. It's so peaceful here on our cul-de-sac, at the edge of the ravine, that it's difficult to recall that only two months ago we were engaged in what Patel has described as a Manichean struggle.

The smell is something we've learned to live with, even Trevor. A kind of sufferance we must bear. Looking out our front windows we can see our wives, curbside, straddling their motorcycles, careful of their gently swelling bellies, revving their engines. The flash of late-October sun on chrome fenders, after all the rain we've had lately, could render a man blind.

No one cared about the facts anymore. The facts were suspect, mutable as memory, as insubstantial as the off-gassing of the new polymer carpets in the classroom, their molecular composition resistant to the most persistent of stains: mustard, cherry Kool-Aid, blood. (Alex's students had all shrugged when she asked if anyone else could smell the fumes that insinuated their way into her sinus cavities and then slumped there like a belligerent toddler, half-dressed and shrieking.)

As for news, baby, these kids wouldn't notice news if it kicked down their doors in the dull of the night and set their hair on fire.

What they had were opinions. And in their opinion Journalism 100 badly sucked. Where was the *equipment*? Where were the DVCPRO digital camcorders, the Avid XP editing suite, the chroma key for weather, the skyline backdrop? And why do research for news stories when you could blog or tweet what you already knew? That the two "newsroom" printers were dot matrix was cause for much hilarity. The archetypal steno pad and rollerball pen, iconic to Alex, might as well have been the mandible fragments of an iguanodon.

Who were they, these wounded children of the new diaspora with their burnt offerings of exploding car radiators and near rapes in strip-mall ATM lobbies as excuses? Who was forcing them to be here? One sallow boy with gaping nostrils had shown up last month, assignment incomplete as usual, his right hand swathed in gauze like a badly applied diaper. He held it up as if taking a citizenship oath, claiming second-degree burns. Three days later, Alex caught that same hand, unscathed save for its tattooed knuckles, giving her the finger as she wrote, yet again, on the whiteboard: *Who, What, When, and Why?*

What she should have written: *Why bother?*

She tried to channel empathy—these were kids whose older brothers were being gunned down gangland-style in the driveways of their parents' suburban strongholds, whose older sisters were engaged to men they'd never met from countries they'd never been to. She saw them gathered around the entrance to the Terry Fox SkyTrain station like rejects from a casting call for a movie set in South Central L.A. The girls were almost beautiful when viewed from a distance and not under simmering compact fluorescents, their hair a startling platinum or copper-green against caramel skin; the one pallid girl's hair a fretful black. Waiting there for whatever it was they felt the world owed them.

Corinna D. had yet to finish an assignment. She stood planted regally in front of Alex, empty handed, her eggshell eyelids at half-mast. Statuesque, petulant, she spoke with a liquid West Indian accent although born in Ladner, and wrote English as if it were a second, or even third, language. Most of them wrote it this way, but Corinna with particular finesse. ("In my own onion this Teecher have no Peoples skills," she would write on her class evaluation. And the Teecher would attempt a snort of laughter while reading this alone on her front stoop as she watched the dispossessed drifting through the aborted heritage renovation across the street.)

Corinna tugged out her earbuds. "So, I was clubbing with my cousins." Every anecdote Corinna's began with her cousins—whether blood relations or a code word for something else, Alex had never figured out. Corinna's story involved a drive along No. 5 Road, hitting something, Cousin Kevin arguing with Cousin Tristan about whether to stop or not. What looked like blood-smeared blond hairs on one of the tires. Cousin Kendra screaming that she just wants to get the fuck home ("That girl has the mouth in the family"). A lumpy green garbage bag in the middle of the road. Most arguing along with the requisite *Fuck yous* between Kevin and Tristan about who was going to look

the bag.

“And I’m all, I’m checking out the bag already.” Corinna sighed heavily and actually looked right at Alex—a first—as if to say, *Men*. She pulled a strand of gum from her mouth, rolled it into a little green ball. “You do *not* wanna know.”

The garbage bags with their grisly contents had started appearing in the fall and had by now become the stuff of urban legend around Vancouver. Everyone claimed to know someone who knew someone who knew someone who had stumbled across one, always at night, always somewhere near water, but the authorities were keeping it quiet. No one had even been reported missing.

Alex waved her hand towards the classroom door with what she thought was a coolly comical flourish and said, “Creative Writing, Room 209, Block D.” No one laughed except for the enormous congenial boy at the back of the room whose real name, as far as Alex could discern from class records, was Xmas Singh. She called him X and he pulled in solid Bs and feigned amusement at her jokes. You took what you could get.

Here in Room 017, Block C, in the bowels of one of those community colleges proliferating bunny-like on the outskirts of the metropolis, cheek-to-rump with industrial pig farms, ginseng plantations and warehouse outlets, sarcasm might as well have been an advanced form of skin disease. She used to be so good with words. Now, more often than not, Alex found herself at a loss. There was a time when she had been fluent in more than one language. Alex and Rufus used to speak IKEA with each other, a language redolent with umlauts and nursery-rhyme rhythms. *Drömma. Blinka. Sultan Blunda!* It was the lingonberry of another tongue—tart, sexy even, in a birch-veneer kind of way. Their private language was *franca*.

While the rest of the class fiddled with their iPods and iPhones, Corinna D. drifted towards her workstation as if walking the red carpet, plopped down, and swivelled her chair around, thumbs already busy texting one of her cousins.

It was the year provincial health insurance had started covering Botox injections and teeth-whitening technology for the disenfranchised. Thirty-three-year-old female heroin addicts who had appeared sixty now looked like ageless *Fireball XL5* puppet people. They jittered around expressionless, eyes wide, their remaining teeth gleaming like Chiclets between pillowy Jolie Lips™.

Buildings were crumbling; major developments sat abandoned, skeletal. Steel girders pointed skyward with nothing cloaking them, but the people who squatted amongst them looked defiantly better. This was the new harm reduction. The Atlanta-based *Journal for the Society of Aesthetic Medicine* published a study confirming that positive self-image was the first step towards recovery and self-reliance.

It wasn’t only the prematurely aged homeless who were looking younger. A candidate for mayor was shown on the news playing beach volleyball. Her face was drum-tight, and saucy pigtails sprouted from the sides of her head, but her cellulite-buckled butt cheeks, split by a thong, looked like navel oranges in a sling.

She had a good serve, though, the anchor and the weatherman agreed, *a damn fine serve*.

Alex, who used to report on insurgents in Chad and Sudan, was perched at her breakfast bar, two weeks’ worth of newspapers and flyers towering at her elbows, spying on a student after hours. She was surprised to find the name of the lawyer Corinna D. had said Cousin Kevin had called—even before he called the police about the body—right there in the phone book, between Wells Fargo Financial and Wells, Jocelyn, aromatherapy. Her chest felt unaccountably bound as she pressed the numbers, as if she were lying abandoned in a play dungeon in second-hand fetish gear. She who had interviewed a leader of the Janjaweed in Darfur and not broken a sweat. She had felt not so much fe

then, but anger. And bewilderment.

~~“I know the party in question,” the lawyer informed Alex, but wouldn’t—couldn’t—disclose anything more.~~

She told him: “You have to understand; I’m just doing my job.”

It sounded feeble, even to her. What was she now, some low-level SS officer?

The stink from the classroom carpet was still lodged in her nostrils. That, and the smell something altogether worse, thumbprinted in memory from a distance of some years and many miles

Alex and Rufus were combing through the takeout pad thai for the remaining shrimp bits when she told him she wanted to quit the college. It didn’t pay that well, anyway. The commute, from Broadway station to Terry Fox, was like spending time in medium security. The industrial carpets were rendering her cataleptic. And there was a moral malaise spreading fungus-like among the students that she feared might be contagious.

“Fungal strife.” Rufus laughed. “The jock itch of the soul.”

“It’s not even that they’re hard.” She wanted him to take this seriously. “Hard is at least some kind of position. It’s more like they’re—squishy.” She didn’t mention the body in the garbage bag and he didn’t call to the lawyer.

Rufus pointed his chopsticks at her. “Lex, do you think maybe you’ve forgotten what it’s like to be a kid?” She was thirty-six; he was six years older but was intent on pretending he hadn’t yet turned forty. He’d recently taken to scooting to work on a collapsible Razor that he could sling across his back in its own little carrying case. He wore a Tyrolean felt hat that had belonged to his Austrian grandfather, but it might as well have been a little striped beanie with a plastic propeller on top. Served her right, she thought, for marrying a man named for a beloved family pet.

They had been together for seven years, and had been living in the duplex on Venables for five years now, married. Rufus’s dry wit used to be like kindling stacked around her heart. It was in the giddy days of moving in together that IKEA talk had been born. As he flopped onto the new mattress, Rufus had beckoned, “Join me in *Sultan Blunda*, a cloud forest of cheap vodka, Astrid Lindgren character, and common sense.” Now when Alex lay down on the bed, sometimes in the middle of the day, it no longer felt like *Sultan Blunda*; it felt like a mattress that had gone flat and lumpy. A sad blunder.

When had they stopped talking IKEA? When she inherited that Ethan Allen-style credenza from her mother last summer, her first *real* piece of furniture, while Rufus had slapped together shelves made of plastic milk crates and two-by-fours in the basement to hold his growing new/old collection of vinyl from stores like Zulu and Red Cat? Places where middle-aged men in black concert T-shirts shot the shit with concave-chested kids who had rogue chin hairs and opinions about everything from whether Muse frontman Matt Bellamy was really the late Jeff Buckley with plastic surgery to the latest conspiracy theory about the government monitoring all Internet use in collusion with an online ad conglomerate. Or was it before that, when she came back from Africa for the last time and tried to convince herself that those who could no longer *do* could teach?

Rufus was looking at her too intently, his chopsticks noodling in the air as if painting a devil on Vandyke on her face.

“What?” she said, flicking at the corners of her mouth with her fingers, thinking maybe a beard sprout slick with peanut oil was hanging there maggot-like. “What?”

“Do you ever get the feeling we’re too white?”

His new code word for too old. Did he mean *she* was too white?

“*Smila Blomma*,” Alex said, aiming for playfulness, hoping for some esprit de corps. “*Fir Slabang*.”

The words floated in the air like cat dander for what seemed like several very long dead seconds

Rufus finally smiled indulgently. “SKÄRPT!”

~~Skärpt like a knife. Skärpt like a machete.~~

Was Rufus being deliberately mean or—worse—had he forgotten?

It was the year of the endless civic election. Campaign signage was everywhere, but this was indicative less of the spirit of democracy than of a sense of desperation. A new municipal bylaw allowed citizens to accept payment to display signs and billboards. You could tell when someone was really hard up when ads for Farsighted People and the Fiscally Responsible Folks and Greener than You, plus various independents, all jostled for space on the same patchy scrap of front lawn. The lawns of the kind of people who donated sperm to fertility clinics at \$50 a pop and dreamt of selling a kidney on eBay. It was hard to pass judgment; these weren't easy times.

Sustainability Is for Suckers, an FRF slogan read. The Tim Hortons on Kingsway had it printed on their coffee-cup sleeves. The Kamper Kids wore the discards as armbands. After all, everyone had a right to an opinion.

Alex told her students to write up Corinna's incident on No. 5 Road in inverted-pyramid style for the following week.

She said: You can interview Corinna—she's a *primary source*. She's a *witness*.

She said: Remember to write it with the most important information near the top so that an editor can cut from the bottom up.

She said: Bottoms up, get it?

Xmas Singh said: Hahaha.

She said (to herself): Bonus points for using actual facts.

Not so long ago Rufus used to talk to Alex, really talk, about just about everything, as he sat on the toilet, bathroom door ajar so they could hear each other, peeing for what seemed to her an inordinate long time. A feeble trickle like early-spring melt off a mountain stream. She'd urged him to get his aging prostate checked, fearing the small chestnut gland would start ballooning with tumours bagpipelike throughout his groin.

Mostly Rufus had talked about his designs. He'd launched a small company with a friend a decade ago that specialized in sustainable designs rooted in the natural world. “Bionical creative engineering,” Rufus called it. He'd won a Suzuki Foundation Award for developing a non-toxic fabric finish inspired by water-repellent lotus leaves. More recently he'd been obsessively studying the mako shark and its *hydrodynamic proportions*, its enviable *zero-friction drag*. A superhero shark. Nature's Genius—Human/e Technology (the name had been Alex's idea) was in negotiations with a Miami-based underwater-exploration outfit to underwrite the clean technology Rufus was developing.

Alex lowered the newspaper after rereading the same sentence about the doomed Inga Falls hydroelectric project on the Congo River at least five times. (Kimberly Lum never could write a lead.) “So what does Ernesto Jr. say about your latest mako calculations?” The millionaire Cuban American had started lowballing Rufus on materials almost from the word go.

Rufus, hunched over his laptop at the coffee table, the can of Red Bull at his elbow replacing his usual green tea, glanced at her briefly and shrugged. “It's complicated.” He turned back to *World of Warcraft: Final Blood*. This guy who hadn't even heard of *Tetris* when she met him had somehow, while she wasn't looking, morphed into a gamer. He belonged to a dejected, renegade race of *draeneids*, the Broken. Alex leaned over his shoulders and tried to make sense of the mayhem on his monitor. “So, your guys, are they good guys or bad guys?”

Rufus just rolled his eyes. "It doesn't work like that."

~~Was it a trick of the light, or was that peach fuzz on his cheeks?~~

Alex missed her bionical man, as she used to call him, poking a finger into his softening gut. She missed their toilet conversations, the intimacy and vulnerability of a peeing man seated and talking earnestly about his aspirations.

Now, he often stood, aiming from the bathroom doorway in a jet stream. Singing off-key as he whizzed. He seemed happy.

Two of these things were facts. One was just her opinion.

NIGHT ON TOWN TRASHED

By Xmas Singh

Corinna D. and her cousins were just trying to have a good time.

They gone to see dj Jaspa at Viva.

"It was happening," Miss D. said. She was wearing her new lickwid tights.

But some jerk left a pile of garbage in the middle of the road that allegedly turned out to be a dead body.

[^]*allegedly*

"Cousin Kevin was pissed," said Miss D. "He just washed that car."

The vehicle was a 2011 Mahindra Scorpio, "a kind of sick green," according to a source.

None of the passengers was injured during the incident.

Richmond police were totally rude when asked for an interview.

Alex's other students gave no indication that they thought Corinna's story was news.

Her neighbourhood was changing so rapidly that if Alex stood without moving on the corner of East 1st and Commercial Drive, she would find herself at the still centre of a kaleidoscopic time-lapse movie. This is what her neighbourhood had become, a tone poem set to a Philip Glass soundtrack punctuated with sirens, and drumbeats, and guttural shouts as the local unmedicated or overmedicated argued with themselves and each other while they ranged back and forth across the Drive, dodging cars, bikes, and elderly Italian and Portuguese Canadian jaywalkers.

After a period of intense gentrification, a mini baby boom, and the opening of three overpriced florists and a string of restaurants with daily fresh sheets listing boutique beers, there was a sense emptying out. Her friends who feared the Kamper Kids, the garbage-bag rumours, and commercial rezoning that allowed a methadone-dispensing pharmacy to open within two blocks of the community centre/pool/rink/library fled to the suburbs where they had sworn they'd never go. "I'd rather have an infected needle jabbed deep into my right eye," Alex's neighbour Sasha had told her fiercely on more than one occasion. Now Sasha, her pierced labia, wife Marcia, and four-year-old, Destiny, lived in a semi-gated townhouse complex in Port Coquitlam.

Others were going on spiritual pilgrimages to Varanasi or Amankora or joining the circus. In fact all around the city children were abandoned to aging relatives or the newly minted private kennels by their thrill-seeking parents. The older children banded together, moving nomad-like from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, performing odd pantomimes for spare change. *How can we have children? We are children!* the parents laughed as they formed their human pyramids or checked the supply of water-purification tablets needed to survive their third-world spirit quests.

Mainly, though, there was a lot of talk about moving off-grid. The grid, that matrix of power and telecommunications, heat and light on command, was something Alex could understand. She had a healthy respect for the grid. Like IKEA, like steel-cut Scottish oats and cargo pants, the grid represented common sense. She would cling to the grid with bloody, tattered fingers if anyone attempted to dislodge her. Alex overheard a couple in JJ Bean loudly debating the pros and cons of a \$25,000 residential wind turbine or a bicycle-powered generator. The woman seemed particularly concerned about not losing access to Netflix. “If you want to get off the grid,” Alex found herself saying, as if offering advice on the daily blend, “try sub-Saharan Africa.” The woman called her an earth-raping, racist, Trotskyite bitch. The guy just winked and tongued the foam on his coffee.

Steel girders formed the roof of the heritage building across the street—an abandoned Free Methodist church turned award-winning performance space—replacing the rotting wood beams of the original. Piece by piece, what was meant to be a renovation had been slowly turning into a replica, like those museum reproductions of Bastet cat goddesses and busts of Pericles you could use for bookends. Now it stood neglected, the skeleton of some great beast washed ashore on a remote island and bleached to a pewter gleam by the sun.

And there was Alex with her free-floating sense of hollowness in her own rib cage. Her period hadn't shown up for over six weeks, and her first thought was stress, then malignant carpet fibres. A single polymer thread clinging to her uterus, gathering her blood and tissue to it, a teething fibroid leech. She waited another week before even contemplating the alternative.

A child? It seemed she already had a child. A playmate for Rufus? There was an idea! Alex found she wasn't as horrified at the thought as she thought she'd be. It could be *Duktig!*

But the stick stayed white. No thin blue line.

Rufus asked: Do you ever wonder if we're too straight? Too fluoridated? Too hydrated?

From: <adinesen@globeandmail.ca>
To: <rufus@bioman.ca>
Sent: February 10, 2008
Subject: ??

Hey Roof? You know the Janjaweed? They call them demons on horseback. There's a guy here, ostensibly with Human Rights Watch, but he has some kind of “deep intelligence” (read: he has something they want). The word is that the Sudanese gov't is backing this raging Arab militia. It's genocide plain and simple. So I get this interview with a demon “general”—this alleged war criminal who arrives at the rendezvous somewhere near his garrison on a camel. And the thing he wants to talk about is dental hygiene. He got his teeth fixed by a recruit who was a dentist in Dubai. Now he religiously uses whitening strips. “Like Hollywood,” he tells me. He's supposed to hate the infidels, right? So I stand there dumb as a moth in my chador (de rigueur due to his Muslim sensitivities) while he asks about my dental plan and whether I prefer Crest or Colgate.

This is so hysterically not what I expected that my questions, all the anger that I've been stoking since I got here, go AWOL. And all this time he's leaning in close, flashing these teeth like he's a game-show host, and then he asks to see mine.

It's just him, his camel, and me—and a circle of his men on their horses eyeing us from a distance. My “translator” has wandered off to take a piss. I lift my shroud flap up over my eyes and he makes this sound in his throat, almost like poor old Knob-Goblin purr used to sound when we snurfled her belly, and puts his finger, which smells like smoke and blood and goat, right into my mouth. He runs it back and forth and back and forth, from molar to molar, while muttering something I take to be, “Nice, nice.” I think, I do actually think this, I could bite his finger right off right now, bite down as hard as I can, trapping his filthy child-raping finger and then spitting it out at his feet.

He just keeps running his finger back and forth and so help me god I start to get hot and almost come right there standing in the dry wind stink of him.

What does this make me?? And this whole time I'm in my chador like some black ghost. How can I even tell you this? How can I not?

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