

I

Chalk Flowers

This is you. You are thirty years old, single, and live in a one-bedroom apartment with beige-coloured walls, a television with a snowy screen, and curtains that diffuse light rather than block it. You lie awake in the sickeningly yellow morning light, staring up at the ceiling, trying to think of a reason to get out of bed. This is your life.

You walk into the grocery store and sing the song playing on the intercom quietly under your breath. The same songs play on an endless loop on a Tuesday afternoon and you feel sorry for the employees who have to listen to the same songs over and over again for eight hours a day. In the frozen food aisle, a tall, skinny kid offers you a sample of cheese on a toothpick. You take one and comment that it is sharp because you remember seeing the word sharp on a block of cheddar cheese once. You ask for another one. You say again that it is sharp, sharper than the last sample and you take another without asking. The kid does not stop you, so you take another, and then another, until your mouth is full of sharp cheese and your hand cradles a miniature woodpile of used toothpicks. Through your stuffed mouth you ask why the cheese samples are being handed

out in the frozen foods section and the kid looks through you at the frozen pizzas in the case behind you and doesn't say anything. You place the toothpicks on the blue tablecloth because there is no garbage can and you thank him for the cheese and tell him that you might buy some. When you get to the aisle with the blocks of cheese stacked like bricks, you look for the word sharp, but can't find it anywhere, so you move along, a little dismayed and ashamed for having lied.

At the express checkout, a young woman with her hair tied in a ponytail slightly off-centre starts to ring through your items. About halfway through your order she stops and you can see by the way her eyes dart back and forth, and the nearly imperceptible way her lips move, that she is counting how many items you have. It's over twelve. I'm sorry, she says, the minty freshness of her gum reaching you on the other side of the black conveyor belt that holds your thirteen items, you have too many items. You will have to put something back. Can you make an exception? you ask. Sorry, rules are rules. You pick up a jar of green olives and hand them to her, saying that you don't really care for olives anyway. She stands there, holding the jar, unsure of what to do with it, then she places it on the edge of the till, next to the register and the "this till is closed" sign, and you ask what will happen to the jar now. She ignores your question and brushes the items over the red blinking light under a piece of glass until it beeps and then she moves on to the next. You tell her she's ugly. She ignores you, and when she finishes scanning the items, she punches in a total and announces it to you with lit-

tle enthusiasm. She looks directly through you to the shelf of candy bars and celebrity magazines. You've said this to her before and she thinks that you say it because you are just as ugly on the inside. It doesn't change that she is ugly on the outside. You turn around, as though you are trying to figure out what she is looking at, and pick up a magazine with a photo of a woman with large fake lips and large fake breasts and place it on the conveyor belt and say, this too.

ON THE BUS there are no seats, so you sit down on the lap of a very large man whose body spills out onto a second seat. You can feel his breath on the back of your neck. It is hot and moist and smells of onions or sharp cheddar cheese. He tries to move you by bucking his stomach and you're tempted to say wee, but instead you brace yourself against the seat in front of you, your grocery bags knocking back and forth, the cans of tomato soup colliding with the jar of peanut butter and the carton of milk just sitting there. What's the matter with you? Get off me, the fat man says. You give him a half turn and say, oh, I'm sorry, is this seat taken? He pushes you off and you nearly fall over but catch yourself in time. Raising one of your plastic bags, you point to the half seat next to him and ask if that one is taken, too. He looks past you and out the window at the passing cars and colourful graffiti on the colourless walls of the buildings. The other passengers grip the bags resting on their laps a little tighter as you scan the rest of the bus looking for a seat. You can't hold onto anything because the white plastic han-

dles of the grocery bags are wrapped around your hands, turning your fingers bright red. You stand in the middle of the aisle, feet apart, leaning backward and forward with the motion of the bus, using your grocery bags for balance.

On the walk from the bus stop to your building you take care to step around every piece of garbage. You live in perpetual fear that you will bring home something on your shoe that you never intended to—a cigarette butt, a piece of gum, a used condom, a flyer advertising discount laser eye surgery. On the sidewalk outside of your building, two little girls are drawing flowers in brightly coloured chalk and you have to step around them. You pause and look down at the drawings, admiring their dedication to the craft. What is it? you ask. The little girl closest to you says, with the matter-of-factness of a child, that it is a flower. What kind of flower? She looks down at the sidewalk and thinks for a moment. Her hands are covered in blue and pink dust and you try to imagine what the city would look like if all the dirt was as colourful as the little girl's hands. You grow tired of waiting for an answer and say that it doesn't look like any flower that you have ever seen before. Both girls look up at you with blank faces and then continue to shade in the petals of this strange, alien flower, each one a different colour.

Outside your building, a man with thinning brown hair combed over a shining bald head waves to you and says hello. You cannot wave back because your arms are weighted down from carrying your grocery bags and you don't say hello back because you don't know who this man is. When he gets closer he apologizes and says that he thought you

were someone else. Who did you think I was? you ask. He tells you that it's not important and apologizes and then walks on. As you walk up the steps to your building you watch the man casually walking down the sidewalk, the back of his head balding even more than the top, and you wonder who he thought you were and why you can't be that person. Before entering the building, you lift up your feet one at a time and examine the bottoms of your shoes.

Later that night you invite a friend over that you don't particularly like. You drink a beer in your bedroom before he comes and hide the empty can under your bed with the dozen or so full ones. You drink another one, knowing that he will be late. When he arrives, you offer him a beer and tell him that there are some in the fridge. He tells you that there are none and you say that you must have forgotten to pick some up. You offer him green olives instead but he says that he doesn't like olives. You spend the evening playing Nintendo. When you beat him you rub it in his face and tell him that he is a loser. What you don't tell him is that you've been practicing all week just so you could beat him and call him a loser.

He asks if you want to go get a drink at a bar but you tell him that you're pretty tired, so he leaves on his own in search of alcohol and a woman with large breasts and red hair that he spent an uncomfortable amount of time describing to you earlier that evening. After you retrieve the beer from under your bed and put it back in the fridge, you drink several more and watch video clips online. You find a clip of a politician shooting himself on live TV and you wonder why you've never heard of this before. The video is fuzzy

and it is difficult to make anything out, but the existence of this clip unsettles you. For the rest of the night you wonder if the blood from the back of your head would create pretty floral patterns on the wall behind the couch and whether or not the building manager or police officer or fireman or neighbour would comment on how pretty the patterns look when they find you a week from now.

At work you place a paper clamp on the end of your finger and leave it there until your finger turns dark purple. You start to worry that your tie is too tight and that your face will turn the same colour and will frighten your co-workers. You turn to the woman in the opposite cubicle and tell her that in 1991 a politician shot himself on live TV and that there is a video of it just because you decide that people should be warned that something like that exists out there and they should prepare themselves for it just in case they happen to stumble upon it late in the night.

In a meeting you sit opposite the large windows so you can look out at the tops of the other buildings. What would happen if there was a fire and we were trapped in here, you wonder. You like to think that you would jump out the window with everyone else, but you're not so sure. Then you wonder how it would feel if you were ever sucked out of an airplane flying at thirty thousand feet in the air still strapped to your seat. If you are wearing enough clothes, you can hold them out and slow down your descent like cartoon characters do and if you are above water, you can point your feet down and slip beneath the surface like a pencil, push off from the bottom, and resurface unhurt. But then you

remember reading that the velocity is so great that your clothes will be torn from your body as you fall and you will become nothing but a naked body flying through the air, unable to breathe because the air is too thin to enter your lungs, and that hitting water at that speed is just like hitting concrete. Afterwards your supervisor asks if you have a firm grasp on the strategy laid out during the meeting. You tell him that it hit you like a body hitting concrete.

That evening you decide to go to a movie just because you don't know what else to do. You clap after every preview because you once saw an old man do this in a theatre when you were a kid and it made you sad. You fall asleep halfway through the movie, which surprises you because when it first started you were annoyed by how loud the sound was. You leave just before the movie ends, nearly running down the stairs with the thin strip of lights. You only trip once and walk back out into the bright lights of the lobby and you wonder why the old man in the theatre used to clap for the previews and left before the movie ended.

When you wake up the next morning you lay in bed for a long time, pulling at the skin on the top of your hand to see if you are dehydrated. The phone rings and you let it ring until the machine picks up. Your mother leaves a long message about how Marie had her baby and that mother and baby are doing just fine and that the baby looks like Marie. You think about your own children, the ones you will never meet, and you wonder what you would say to them now if given the chance. You get up and look for an old issue of *National Geographic*. When you find it, you flip

to the article about overpopulation and how the world's population will reach nine billion by the year 2040 and you think that Marie is part of the problem.

Two days later you run into your girlfriend in a park. It has been seventy-six days since you last saw her. She smiles when she sees you and is acting unusually friendly. You talk about work and she asks you how therapy is going. You lie and tell her that it is really helping, though going to therapy was only something you told her you would do to make her think that you were capable of becoming a better person. You are in the midst of complimenting her shoes when she tells you, rather abruptly, that she is engaged. You congratulate her with every last bit of sincerity you can scrape off the soles of your feet and she tells you not to worry, that you will find someone. You laugh on the inside before dying a little and agree out loud that there is someone out there for everyone. You clench your fists inside your pockets and try to keep your entire body from shaking. You know what's coming next, so you congratulate her again and then start walking in the opposite direction.

You cry loudly on the bus ride home making the other passengers uncomfortable. You renew your vows never to fall in love again and this makes you feel a little better but the other passengers even worse. You tell a woman sitting across from you that she is beautiful and she smiles awkwardly, looking to the other passengers for some kind of assistance. You ask her out on a date and her cheeks turn red and she tells you that she is seeing someone. You congratulate her and get off at the next stop.