

ORI

Sometimes I'm a girl and sometimes I'm a boy. Today's a girl-day, so it's Orianthi. Red skinny jeans, my brother's old Blundstone boots, a black tee, no logo, purple hair chalk. Back story on the boots—I was wearing them the day Carter took off, three months after our seventeenth birthday. Otherwise they'd be gone too. They're awesome, all worn out and scuffed up and vintage-like. Orianthi. It's a cool name, right? Rockin' guitarist and all.

Carter ran away, and I followed. We're tethered, but I guess he forgot. I miss his quirky hyena laugh, his tenderness, his viciousness. Raspberry pie at midnight, single fork. *Ori*, whispered, sing-song, reverent. All that science shit he used to teach me: trilobites, coprolites, dendrites. Ukulele punk—humble, badass. Whatever. Short story, he's gone.

I'm kind of wondering how I ended up here, Room 11, Nap-Away Motel. Bed shaped like a hammock, stink of cigarette smoke and mouse piss, stain on the carpet that looks like blood, cracked mirror in the bathroom. Bleak. Dubious beginning for a lost-twin quest.

I waited for Carter to come back, for thirteen days. At first I was disbelieving. I sent him jokey texts with stupid emojis that I knew he would hate and waited for him to respond. Then I got really pissed. Stopped texting him. But I kept looking for him at all the places we hung out. Around the sixth day I spiralled down into a blacker place. Soundtrack "Cosmic Love," Florence + the Machine, all that darkness when the stars go out. On the seventh day I found his cell phone. Smashed open, all its intricate circuitry exposed. The screen was shattered into a million little pieces of cracked ice. I cradled it for a moment in my cupped palms. Like it was a dead baby rabbit. Then I hurled it at Carter's bed.

A couple of months before he took off, he started acting weird. Cagey and nasty. Some kind of secret pulsed through his veins. No riffs on his uke. He muttered and scribbled in his notebook. I'd looked inside it before—brain-eating amoebas, blue straggler stars, crap I didn't understand—but when I snuck into his room to peek inside the notebook again, I saw cramped dark words multiplying and spilling over the pages, sketches of disemboweled dogs, of monstrous creatures with jagged fangs. *They say terrible things will happen if I reveal anything, he had written. I've made a discovery though, about dendritic spines, about the connectivity of the interneurons. I thought it might help, but they say I can't tell, not ever. Not even to Ori. They tell me things about Ori that I don't want to believe, horrible things about what—*

Carter caught me. His eyes were grey and wild, filled with snarling wolves. He ripped the notebook from my hands.

"The proof is in here. About everything! Now they'll have to come and take me," he hissed vehemently.

"Who?" I asked.

His lips curled back to form the words. "You're not who you say you are. They said you would do this, that you would interfere!" My guts slithered and constricted into a tight coil. He dropped the notebook and turned his head sharply to the right. "Shut up. SHUT UP! GO AWAY!" I skittered out of his room. In the morning, he was gone.

Here's the thing. Carter and I look out for each other, because no one else ever has, not really. We spent most of our childhood bouncing around between our mom, our grandma, and foster care, which mostly sucked, except for Foster Home Three. Big funky farmhouse on the edge of Oshawa, lots of fruit smoothies, two wiry grey dogs, and a foster mom who was into drumming-circles and yoga. Stella. She bought Carter his first ukulele. I miss the dogs the most. Nancy and Grover. They both had those weird blue eyes that could pin you against a wall. She got sick though—Stella, I mean, not Nancy—so we moved on to Foster Home Four. Then back to our mom's for a couple of years before things fell apart again.

Foster Home Five was nothing like Three. No dogs, no smoothies, no yoga. Bunch of little kids with snotty noses, running around with dirty

bare feet, wet diapers hanging down. Fish sticks and overcooked pasta with watery tomato sauce. Lots of beer-drinking and bad reality TV. Kathy was nonchalant about Carter's disappearance. Mr. Jepps didn't even notice Carter was gone.

So the vigil of waiting for Carter's return was mine alone. On the thirteenth day his postcard arrived. A touristy one, with a glossy Canadian beaver on the front, Toronto, written in large cursive script across the bottom. The back was crowded with the same dark cramped words from his notebook. My name, again and again. *Ori, Ori, Ori*, like he was calling out to me. *I'm at the edge of the universe, THE FUCKIN' EDGE, looking over. There's a pencil in my heart, right here, right here, and it hurts, you can't imagine how much it hurts me, but they can't take it out, they can't get to it, but every time I breathe I can feel it impaling me, the slivers of wood piercing, fiercely, fiery, fury, flurry, there's a flurry of words slipping out of my brain. Someone has tampered with it.* There were a few more sentences that I couldn't decipher, and then: *I can only eat tacos now. Ori!* I could hear his voice, pleading like he was being held hostage. There was a sketch, small and detailed, of some kind of pointy-nosed rodent. Like an earless mouse. But with rows of sharp teeth. And circling the outer edge, like a frame: *On earth we strive for earthly things and suffer sorrows daily. In heaven choirs of angels sing, while we play ukulele.*

I carried the postcard around in my back pocket for five days. Folding and unfolding that beaver's pelt into four. Re-reading all the craziness, until it was embedded into my mind. The beaver was magical; I thought it was an amulet that would bring Carter back. Until I realized that it wasn't bringing him back, it was calling me to him. A magnet, tugging at my marrow, pulling me to my twin.

Pulled on Carter's Blundstones, threw my clothes and my notebook into a bag, scrounged around for cash. I had a couple hundred stashed away. My life's savings. Carter had a Mason jar filled with change that I emptied out. Stole a couple of twenties from Mr. Jepps' beer fund. Hitched a ride with a neighbour to the city. Told him I was meeting Carter, like it was all planned. Big fat truck, driving fast along the 401, going west. On the drive he told me neighbourly stories. The bowling alley fire. Mr. Marshall's dog. (Twenty stitches. And that cone of shame.)

Graffiti on the war monument in the park. Eventually he turned on the radio. Soundtrack, his, not mine: “Sunglasses at Night,” Corey Hart.

Here’s the problem. I don’t really know Toronto. So when Mr. Neighbour leaves the highway because there’s construction, tells me we’re in the city, I get all excited. Eager. Like Lana Briggs in math class, hand sky high, little tremor in the fingertips, lovin’ her algebra. I’m not thinking right, just thinking Carter. He asks where I’m meeting up with my brother but I don’t have an answer. I jump out at a random corner. Mr. Neighbour tells me to wait, that we’re only in Scarborough, but I just wave bye. My first mistake.

Box of KFC gone, darkness falling. That’s when I spot Nap-Away. Big old oak tree watching over it, ancient gnarled branches shadowed in green. The motel reminds me of something from a fairy tale. Something beautiful and loyal disguised in wretchedness. The old hag who beckons with a gnarled finger. Jesus the beggar. I’m guessing runaway teens don’t rent motel rooms, but I slink into the office anyway. Nothing to lose. Skinny Santa guy at the desk talks to me through a hole in a thick wall of glass.

“How much for a room?” I ask. Trying to seem nonchalant. Like I don’t really give a shit.

“Seventy for the night,” he says. He coughs violently and horks into the garbage can at his feet. I pull out four twenties. He stares at me.

“You gotta have ID.”

“No problem,” I say. I push the money through the slot in the glass. He picks it up, counts it.

“You old enough?”

“Sure,” I say.

“No visitors in the room allowed.” He leans forward, shows his crooked yellow teeth. A Grinchy kind of smile. “Not between eleven and five.” He gives me a form to fill out. I enter my grandma’s address, even though she’s been dead for two years. Show him my health card. It’s fake, turns me into a nineteen-year-old. A seventeenth birthday present from Carter. He squints at it, copies down the number. Gives me a key to Room 111. As I leave I see a woman in stilettos staggering towards the motel office. When she passes by me I see that the back of her short skirt is hitched up, revealing the smooth curves of her butt cheeks.