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MOTHER

Jowita Bydlowska

It is the time between the end of the night and the beginning of the morning, not an actual hour, just that feeling of one thing spilling into the next. The radio is on and they're playing the new song by Cardi B, the one everyone over forty has strong feelings about. I wonder what the Uber driver is thinking. I assume that English is not his first language, which is why he doesn't turn off the song. Otherwise he would find this awkward, driving a strange woman to the airport for money while another woman sings about cunnilingus.

Maybe I am old. I am old. I'm in my forties, which is old.

I think about Alex, about him waking up to the apartment strewn all around him, piles of bags and boxes lined up against walls. I was trying to pack as much as I could before leaving: a hamster tearing up wood chips of life, sorting, bagging, books, tank tops, sweaters, a spatula, pictures of old classmates, a bag of crystals—the fuck?—a vase, a Himalayan salt lamp . . . packy-a-packy-packup-pack and then there was Alex kissing the back of my neck and telling me everything was going to be fine, just leave it, leave it, leave it, let's lie down.

We did lie down, he put his hand around my neck but not tightly enough to choke me as he slowly slid into me, it was

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perfect, it grounded me, I fell asleep for fifteen minutes and then it was time to go.

The song ends and another one starts but I don't recognize the artist. It's a bouncy thing, something about doing rails with Daddy. You read that right and I heard it right. Maybe.

The airport is quiet and empty. No one flies anymore unless essential or unless you're an asshole. The announcements implore travellers to tell the truth about having COVID. If you have any symptoms, please fess up. I'm sure any minute someone's gonna drop down to their knees: All right, fine, I do, I do, I can't lie any longer.

The airport has to do what it has to do to give us all a sense of being taken care of.

Daddy what? Rail me, Daddy.

I'm flying not because it's essential but because I'm an asshole. I've agreed to go on a writers' retreat that didn't get cancelled. Western Canada is business as before. On the plane, we are given disinfecting wipes to clean our seats. We will not be served any meals, only water. The plane is too quiet. The usual low-grade hysterics of flying seem to have been eradicated. There are no babies on the plane. A couple next to me erupts in a quick whisper fight over headphones. The plane takes off. I close my eyes and keep them closed for the duration of the flight.

I try to think about Alex again. While I'm away, he will move my stuff to our new apartment. I haven't told him that I am still not sure about this living together. He seems a lot more optimistic about it. He loves me. He tells me all the time.

At the airport, a man pulls my suitcase off the carousel. He doesn't realize his mistake and starts walking away with it. I yell after him but he can't hear me, AirPods jammed into his ears, so I end up running after him and tapping him on the shoulder. He looks me up and down like this is a club and I'm eyeing him.

Rail me, Daddy. I cover my mouth to stifle the giggle. It's the lack of sleep.

I point to my suitcase, he takes out his AirPods. I point to the little red string on the handle of the suitcase.

Oh shit, I'm so sorry, he says. His voice is deep and it reverberates somewhere in the middle of my chest. Oh shit, I think.

I don't know why I decide to wait with him for his suitcase but he says nothing when I turn around, he waits a beat, actually, as if we've agreed to walk back together so I walk back with him and by the time his suitcase arrives, I know his name is Yves and he's also going to the writers' retreat. What are the chances.

Yves takes his mask off after a few minutes of conversation, as if the virus is no longer a threat now that we've exchanged names and made suitcase blunders, but I guess since we're going to the same retreat, it is inevitable that we will at some point talk without our masks. There will be drinking. There always is at these retreats. And I can't imagine getting drunk with a group of masked strangers. We are sloppy. People are sloppy people.

We are to be picked up by the woman who organized the retreat, Susan Stone. Most published writers are only too happy to be invited to things. We are like lesser rock stars. Broke and demanding. But Susan loves people and she's an organizer. She says it's not true that talent is what separates a real writer from an aspiring one. She says the only difference between an unpublished writer and a published one is luck, which is not bullshit when I think about my own career. I guess I have had the luck. I have no idea how people decided that my writing had any merit. This conversation about luck and talent happens on the way to the retreat in the small town of Roseland.

Susan writes books about troubled young women losing memory and running away from serial killers. Lots of her characters get mutilated. Susan is petite, blond, and partial to pinks and whites; she reminds me of a small butterfly and a piglet at the same time. She speaks with a slight lisp. I've known Susan

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for years; we've been to the same authors' festivals and we share an agent. We are friends but not the kind of friends who talk often, just a once-in-a-while check-in and gossip about the boring industry we're part of. We have both slept with a tortured middle-aged Irish novelist many other young female writers have slept with. That's how we connected years ago when she found my texts on his phone. Neither of us was married to the novelist who was very much married to a woman in New York who owned a yoga studio. Susan said it was pointless to get mad at the novelist over his philandering; he wasn't her problem. Since I also had no feelings for him and I'm not a territorial kind of a person, I was happy to exchange mediocre sex for a new female friendship. The novelist was exposed for his philandering and also for pretending to be somebody he wasn't; it was all over the news and I'm sure you've never heard of it because that's not your world's gossip, unless it is, in which case you know exactly who I'm talking about.

Susan asks Yves about Yves. Yves is from Quebec. He's published two books of poetry and a book of essays about art and love. I've seen his name before but never read him. He is tall and has a COVID beard, handsome guy, could be an extra from that TV show about Mexican drug lords. He's read what I've written or at least heard about it; everybody has read my short story collection in which I wrote about encounters like this one, in airports or at parties or in playgrounds where grownups meet to fulfill familial obligations and stave off suicide by suburbia. I wrote about hating parenting. I wrote about terrible men and terrible women who were terrible to each other. I've lived some of those stories, but most were made up.

I don't know why my stories became popular, but they did, maybe because a powerful mommy group picked up the collection for their book club and told other mommies. A famous actress bought film rights. There were some essays written about it, it was excerpted in *Elle* and *Hers*, and I went

on breakfast television to talk about people hating parenting. And the big reveal was I wasn't even a parent! But I got it right. What I got right, I don't know, the boyfriend at the time said it was zeitgeist. He was also a writer but he claimed he's never been able to tap into the zeitgeist. He made it sound like dumb luck, which it was, again, everything is dumb luck unless you work hard or enter another dimension via spiritual awakening or psychosis. I make no sense. That's because I'm tired, it is late, and now I am in my hotel room alone, thinking about Yves.

Yves is married and has a baby at home, a toddler, and his wife is pregnant. Yves is on my floor of the small hotel, same floor as the hot tub, which is where we'll end up if not tonight then probably tomorrow after the welcome drinks. There will be other people with us but we will linger and we'll go out onto the terrace to have another glass of wine, then we'll be back in the tub and then this will go the way those things go in my stories and in real life. Which is, who knows.

I have no intention of cheating on Alex but I also didn't say I wouldn't. I know he feels insecure about the retreat, he's made jokes about me banging other writers and he's not wrong in how he perceives those things.

I don't quite get why Yves picked me. I mean, I knew at the airport—sometimes you know right away—but tonight we were introduced to a small cluster of aspiring young first-time novelists, a gaggle of breasts, yoga pants, and vegan flat shoes. The numbers are smaller than they normally are at these things, and there's no band and some of us are wearing masks so it's a little strange but we're all giggling about it, saying the same old thing about *post-apocalyptic* and *weird* and *back to normal*. I get the usual four ladies who want to tell me about their shitty husbands, one shy girl who wants to tell me about her mother, the worst relationship of her life.

Why? I say.

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She says, Never mind.

Anyway, at some point the crowd gets smaller, and an aspiring writer from the Maritimes with a pink tie and hair like a small orange cloud tries to organize everyone; he's screaming something about the best seafood joint in town, and everyone leaves except for those of us who stay, in the lounge, and then the two of us in the tub.

It's hard with a baby, Yves says, and then he says other predictable things, things I write about that men say before they do something they don't really regret because they've been thinking about doing it all along. I don't ask him why he picked me, we both know this is just temporary and we're bored and attracted to each other. Sleeping with a fan girl would be a bad idea—she would write about it on her blog, I'm too old for that. I'm authentic. I authentically give off the vibe of wanting to be laid, I suppose, with my nonthreatening squeaky laughter and self-deprecating lines, and how I'm a little tired. Tired-looking and just tired, like I can't afford any more bullshit. I don't worry about wrinkling my forehead at the wrong moment. Some guys like that, younger guys like that.

In the hot tub, Yves slides up closer and I can smell him now and he smells fresh like he just shampooed his hair. We kiss. We are interrupted by the commotion at the door. A small group of drunks walks into the room and tumbles and plops themselves inside the hot tub and we're scrambling out despite their enthusiastic calls to please, please, the party is just starting, stay, stay, stay,

Sorry, sorry, sorry, we say, and leave. The carpet fibres feel sharp and unpleasantly plastic against my naked feet; my dress is clinging to my wet bikini. But it's warm and I don't shiver even though my body tries on a shiver that disappears instantly, unconvicted.

In his hotel room Yves shows me a sketchbook. This is a diversion from the script; in my stories it is always the woman's room, the man always leaves. Yves shows his drawings, like

he needs to dazzle me extra, like being predictable unfaithful spouses at a retreat is not enough to have a tryst. But I look, I am interested, genuinely interested because I love boys who know how to draw. In school, those were the boys I was friends with, we all sat in the back of the classroom, me and those artsy boys. I was artsy too. I loved being able to compete with them, loved being able to make something as well as a boy could. Yves's sketches are nice, mostly of people, up close a mess of cross-hatch lines and black ink absent spaces that when looked at from a distance make the blurry features stand out, give three-dimensionality to non-existent noses and make the eyes without the whites look right into you. Their blurry mouths move as if they were caught mid-talking. I love that detail.

I'm really good at reading lips, he says.

As I flip through the sketchbook, he kisses my neck and starts to undress me, one thin strap of my dress off my shoulder, the silk like a wave sliding down my side. I wear silk because I like its suggestion of sleep, of sex; this summer women's shops are full of sleepwear, appropriately, as the world goes in and out of lockdown and we live in our beds for days as the government mandates our collective depression.

I miss my mother. I don't talk to my mother anymore and I miss her. She is probably alone and she has no idea where I am. I hope she is at home, her cats like fluffy pillows around her bald head, naked shoulders. The image makes me gasp and the whole thought about her explodes inside me, and muffles the little almost-sounds of silk and sucking and licking and whatever's happening.

I wish I could tell Yves why I suddenly stiffen under his touch, why I shake my head when his hand snakes up my thigh, why the sketchbook falls out of my hands. He is asking what is wrong and then he says that he agrees with me that this is wrong, and what is wrong with him and he should call his wife, this was a mistake—he says all those things that you'd imagine a man in his situation saying as he tries to straighten

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out, as he lifts the straps of my dress and pulls my dress back over my breasts, the waves of silk rippling and then settling back on my body. I am saying things too, I am apologizing, I am telling him it's not him, and it's not me either—I try to make that joke but it falls flat. I say that it's my mother, despite myself I am telling him the real reason why even though I know it will only make everything more confusing. We will have to go through this week sitting awkwardly in shared spaces and awkwardly making small talk when alone, and there will be all those looks, unanswered beginnings of sentences, and uhsaehmshms because nothing, almost nothing happened. And it's worse to have nothing happen in the space of where it was supposed to be happening. It's worse to have almost nothing rather than *something* you could feel guilty or excited or confused about. Thank god for this sketchbook, I think, at least that will be a thing we can talk about—art, drawing, and how come he didn't pursue it, or something along those lines. I will probably find out he has an Instagram where he posts his drawings, not too many followers, because it's nothing special, it's just a thing he does, seriously.

Before all of that, and now, here in this space with my revelation of “mother” we are sitting beside each other on the edge of his bed.

My mother is sick, I add.

Your mind is preoccupied, he says.

I nod because that's exactly it.

I'm sorry. I understand. My mother died when—

My mother is not dying, I say, but I am not sure if that's true because like I said, I no longer talk to her. My sister emailed me in the morning saying I should probably get in touch but that she won't be a *conduit* anymore, an odd choice of a word.

I've always wondered if I was stupid. How would I know? This is not a self-esteem issue; this is a serious concern I have. It is

also a question my mother used to ask me; she is not someone whose presence enhanced my life. But it's pedestrian to hate one's mother, and it is perhaps stupid. This is the real reason I wonder if I am stupid—because I cannot get over my resentment. It stops me in my tracks. And I don't mean figuratively—I can be walking somewhere and a memory will pop into my head—my mother's wild red curls shaking as she screams about one thing or another—and I will stop, my breath suddenly a choke. In the middle of a sidewalk, on an escalator. I have to let it play till the end. It's my own YouTube of trauma, no ads, no break.

I asked a therapist once: Am I incurable? She said as long as there was somebody else in my life who loved me, who showed me real love I would be all right. Even a teacher, a friend, somebody else's mother. One person only and I could reverse the damage, erase the words or at least mute them, prove them to be the wrong words said about me. The therapist didn't ask me if there ever was somebody like that, she probably assumed there was because I remember smiling and nodding and her nodding back and smiling encouragingly as if I did in fact name a person like that.

I didn't go to therapy because of my mother, it was something else. Not changing clothes for a couple of days in a row; limp, greasy hair, somebody noticed, a supervisor in my dorm. Off to talk to a professional. We talked about my mother but only because you talk about mothers in therapy.

I didn't go for a long time and I suddenly felt lighter. One day I woke up and my energy was back and I was no longer gasping for breath from unidentified grief or whatever it was that put me in bed. I can't even remember what the therapist looked like, I just remember those little moments, the smiling and nodding and how the couch felt, too worn-out and soft, the brownness of it all. And I remember not being able to come up with my antidote person. There were always men who tried to rescue me, even back then in my undergrad.

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There was a boy who moved with me from the small town where I grew up. He urged me to move out of my dorm and into the dingy apartment he sold weed out of. I packed a few garbage bags one day and paid some friends in pizza to help me start my new life as a live-in girlfriend. I didn't know if the boyfriend loved me unconditionally or enough to make up for my mother's abuse but soon I forgot about my criteria and focused on the nice aspect of sharing space with a male, which meant sex. I could get lost in sex, I had easy orgasms and I was happy with my body even as it slowly grew larger, no longer scrutinized by dorm mates who watched obsessively what they and everybody else ate. I achieved a state of contentment, settling into a routine of sex, weed-smoking, and exquisite midnight grilled cheese sandwiches, the making of which was one of the few things my boyfriend learned from his own mother who loved him enough. I knew she loved him enough because she disliked me, she was suspicious of my going to university and she called me a snob. She was under the impression that it was my idea to live in a large city, and she resented that her son dropped out of school to follow me.

Eventually, she convinced the boyfriend to leave me and move back home.

I am thinking of all the other mothers I've met and know—dozens of mothers of friends and boyfriends and mothers of strangers on Facebook and even in movies and books. Not the hideous ones from the horror trope, just regular, imperfect mothers but also mothers who are almost perfect. Not the extremely perfect mothers who scheme and kill and sacrifice their own lives to push their babies through the membranes of life. But the behind-the-scenes mothers, the ones who are authentic and warm and a little embarrassing but who are keepers of secrets and defenders of faults, to whom the word *proud* tastes sweet and addictive so they have to say it over and over—*Mom, sto-op*—but they never stop so the pride is

an invisible armour grown by their children who are baffled but nonplussed when someone who is not their mother is not proud. I'm talking about the mothers who talk to their daughters every night, the best-friend mothers, the sister-mothers, the mothers who bake and cook, and send care packages. The mothers who take on another job to pay for piano lessons, who form groups, who advocate and start foundations and marches, or participate in foundations and marches—not to be seen as Great Mothers but because it's the right thing to do. I'm talking about mothers who have met their daughters' best friends, mothers who are friends with the best friends, mothers who were phoned the morning after their daughters happily lost their virginity.

Mothers who never said, I don't know who's going to drive you to the abortion clinic but not me, when in a moment of joyous oblivion the daughter let her usual guard down and made such phone call the morning after.

Who would I even have called had I had to find my way to the abortion clinic? It was a good thing I smartened up right away that morning. I called a friend's mother—of course—and she drove with me to a gynecologist who put me on birth control. The mother didn't understand why I was crying but I couldn't tell her, I couldn't take the humiliation of having to rely on a strange mother for mothering.

I call Alex from the writers' retreat and he says that everything went well, I am all moved in, and all I need to do is just relax and enjoy myself and come back to him when I'm ready. That's a joke, it's not like I've run away so I'll be back when I'm supposed to be back. He's set up the bedroom and bathroom but he doesn't know where all the kitchen stuff goes but he's making some lasagna and a bean salad, would I like anything else? He's bought some mango kombucha, a whole litre of it and I won't even believe the organic store he's found in our new neighbourhood.

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I am touched, I feel tender. I want to tell someone but I don't know who I can share my Alex story with; I am not one of those women who gushes about her new boyfriend to anyone who would listen and I haven't gotten close with anybody on the retreat except for Yves who I manage to avoid. There are twelve other people in the hotel, people who have books they've been working on their entire lives, memoirs and novels about sea monsters, and detective series. It is thanks to those people that Yves, Sue Stone, and I attend the retreat for free. We are the writers who have been published, we are the promised guests. We spend our entire days reading manuscripts and going for walks with the Unpublished, the evenings are devoted to getting drunk and sharing stories about other writers' retreats and conferences with workshops on how to pitch novels. The Unpublished all have sent out their work to various agents, including New York ones. Two nights in a row, I retreat to bed early claiming a headache. I can feel Yves watching me but so what? Tonight, when I join everyone for dinner, Yves is sitting close to a young Chinese writer who is writing a memoir about cooking traditional dishes and how dumplings brought her closer to her culture because—

At dinner, still buzzing with feeling happy about Alex, I send a text to my sister to tell her that my move went smoothly. I don't ask about our mother. I don't know what to ask and how.

You should stay, Susan says when I get up to go. Her hand is firm on my forearm and I understand what she's saying. I am a monkey paid to perform. I cannot claim a headache again, I have to be here with these people and I have to give them their money's worth.

Let's get drunk, somebody suggests. Really drunk.

We all get really drunk. It is the usual. Drunk, elbow-holding instant friend conversations. My phone buzzes a few times. I pull it out of my pocket at one point but Susan, again, is there to discipline and I put the phone away but not before noticing the seven notifications from my sister.

My mother is dead.

I don't know how I know it but I do.

Somebody tells a joke and I laugh too hard. I want to draw attention to myself. Yves's attention. He's still with the young Chinese writer but he's looking at me as I laugh and I don't look away.

I'm so messed up, I mouth and he nods. He mouths something back but I am not good at reading lips like he is. I walk toward him, and the room is swaying. Somebody walks up to me and says she's thinking of leaving her husband.

Great, I say, and she looks at me with big, hurt eyes.

I'm sorry, I say but I hate her right now, hate her and her intrusion, hate that she's stopping me as I'm on my way to make this a lot worse.

I see Susan looking at me and Yves as we leave the room and I see the Chinese writer looking too. I don't care. I'm feeling aggressive and sexy. I remember the Cardi B song about cunnilingus. I want to listen to it right away and I pull out my phone but then remember the texts and shove it right back into my pocket. It's strange that alcohol hasn't given me the courage to read what it says. I'm on a different mission now.

We end up in my room. It's how it is in my stories. He kisses me, he cups me between my legs, he peels off my silk dress. He puts his hand around my neck—I guess everyone watches the same porn now. I enjoy the feeling of his taut skin against mine, so different from Alex who is a little plump and my age. I don't have a thing for young guys. But I do as my characters do, I go along with the script.

He comes on my stomach. I don't come at all. I consider asking if he's got anything—chlamydia, syphilis—but the question—at this point in this story—strikes me as so stupid, I burst out laughing. I feel nauseous.

My mother was healthy her entire life. She didn't deserve this health. She had terrible habits—smoking, drinking, yelling.

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But her body didn't care and kept going. She came to visit me in my old apartment and she told me I was a failure. At my age, living alone, with no family, in a place like that. That's not how she raised me. I wasn't sure how she raised me. That was just a fight like every other fight we had but for some reason I decided I would no longer attempt to forgive or make up. I would have to learn how not to care. When she turned sixty-five, she fell ill. I didn't know what was wrong. I talked to my sister and she said cancer. Of course it was cancer, a banal serial killer that lays waste to women more than men do. My sister said it was bad, she had ascites, a fluid buildup in the abdomen, which is always a bad sign; it meant that her disease was advanced. This was when the pandemic was just starting, a few weeks before the entire country, then the world went into the lockdown. My sister went to treatments and she said our mother was impatient with doctors, but didn't fight them, she just let them administer needles and pills and the only wish she had was a subscription to all the movie channels. All of them. She was always frugal, never even got cable and had an old laptop that she referred to as "my computer machine."

I remember that now, that little phrase, *my computer machine*.

I am in my hotel room, my packed suitcase on my bed, a signed book of poetry from Yves on top of it. He wrote, *Thank you for everything*.

Everything what? In bed, earlier, he said our meeting was like a door opening. To what? He said I made him feel alive.

A new baby will also make you feel alive, I joked, and he glared at me.

I suppose, he said. He was getting dressed, he struggled with one sock, it seemed narrower than the other one. I wondered if it was perhaps his wife's sock; it was a black sock, an easy mistake.

We were going to the airport in an hour. Everyone ran around the hotel, exchanging numbers and last-minute con-

fessions and tips about how not to get published. You need luck, there is no tip to be given about that. So whatever they are saying to each other—wait at least eight weeks before writing to enquire about your novel, again, read their book lists—is useless. In that past week, during afternoon readings, I heard some good writing, I thought how it was relatively subjective, this process of choosing who should see their shit in print, really. Nobody was bad, they all had talent. Even the ones who wrote about werewolves. In my head, I wished them all luck. I could tell bad writing because I once taught a group of women at a community centre; it was a class on writing personal stories, short memoirs. That experience taught me that some people should never write. I didn't know what to do with sentences lacking a subject, verb, and predicate. I didn't wish those women luck, I wished them to be able to find other hobbies. But out loud, I did say, Good luck!

Yves sits beside me on the plane. His hand is under the blanket, I squirm against his arm, inhale his sweater, which smells of lavender. I wonder if he has moths at home.

The plane is quiet as before, we keep wiping our seats and headphones, and no one talks. No babies again.

When the plane touches the ground, I pull out my phone. There are twelve texts. All from my sister.

Our mother opted for assisted suicide. My sister texts there is a letter for me. *Our mother was very brave. You know how pragmatic she is. She doesn't want to be a burden.* She hated having to go for treatments all alone. Relatives were not allowed because of the lockdown restrictions and it was just too much for her, to have to sit in the chemo chair all on her own, with poison pumping into her veins. There was no point, she was stage 4, why prolong it?

My sister writes she is not prepared to talk about what it was like to sit with our mother during her last moments. *Funniest thing, she did the dishes and swiped the floor before like she had a to-do list or something.*

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Funniest thing that's not funny. Unfunniest. And she probably did have a to-do list.

I don't know what to write back to my sister. *Sorry?* I type the word just to see how it would look in response to her text, and it is as ridiculous as the shit emoji. I find a face that has no mouth, just eyes. That's what I send her as a response to everything that she's written. That's the kind of person I am. A speechless kind of person.

In her last text, my sister writes that she isn't mad at me because what I've done to myself is enough punishment. She is right.

Yves and I don't exchange phone numbers or any other coordinates. I mean, social media, you don't need to do that kind of thing to get in touch but not exchanging numbers is an agreement that we will not get in touch. I say to him, I hope the baby is healthy and I wish you all the happiness.

I'm going to write a poem about you.

Please don't.

I take a taxi to my new address and the same Cardi B song comes on, how funny, but the words are all bleeped out so it's just one long hiccup with some beats that goes on for three minutes. Outside the windows, the city is the same slog of incompetence in the shape of steel and glass. A giant blown-up gorilla bounces in the air above a car dealership. If you were a first-time visitor nobody would blame you for asking to turn around and drive back to the airport.

My new neighbourhood is a hangover with some vomit splattered on its shirt. Shufflers everywhere and dads without scarves dragging their *filthy, sturdy unkillable infants** through dug-up sidewalks. Dogs in strollers.

The taxi stops, I get out and inhale the wretchedness.

* Ezra Pound, *The Garden*

I comfort myself with my usual anxiety-appeasing thought: 90 x 0.5 mg, 60 x 1 mg, vodka, hop. Clonazepam, zopiclone hoarded, and then the bridge. I have access to all four. I'm not as brave as my mother but it brings me comfort to know that I have the option. I don't have the option because I don't have the desperation. My mother really was the bravest, and I am sorry I didn't know. I miss her more than ever, now. What would I do with that hole? Should I pin a flower right in the centre of my chest to stop the bleeding, stop the guilt; staple a rose to my breast—good enough?

My building is called Everglades. Beige brick, a door dark red like a blood clot. A tiny woman in a coat as big as a sleeping bag, wide-eyed above the blue surgical mask, opens the door and stares at me, her eyes narrowing as I come closer.

Where do you live? she screams in a voice that's equally threatening and scared.

Here, now, I say.

She groans a swear word that I don't catch, she shakes her head, jumps away from me as if tasered and scuttles off.

Alex is home. He pulls me into a hug and holds me for a long time as I sob. Without evidence, I know he can smell Yves in my DNA, he can smell whatever is still smouldering from the witch's burning stake. He says nothing. That's what I most like about him, what has made me fall in love with him, actually, him not saying anything when there are no words to describe what could possibly be said. And I remember: *All you need is just one who truly loves you.*

My mother is dead, I finally speak, and he sighs. It's the kind of a sigh that pulls you in; it's a depth of a sound, a filter through darkness, bottom of a murky lake, an underwater camera, lens on top of a lens switching rapidly to make a blurry image clearer, bass, and softness, and sonorousness, and tenor, and static.

CONTRIBUTORS' BIOGRAPHIES

David Bezmozgis is the author of the story collections *Immigrant City* and *Natasha and Other Stories*, and the novels *The Betrayers* and *The Free World*.

David's stories have appeared in numerous publications including *The New Yorker*, *Harpers*, *Zoetrope All-Story*, and *The Walrus* and have twice been included in *The Best American Short Stories*.

His books have been nominated for the Scotiabank Giller Prize, the Governor General's Award, and the Trillium Prize. He has won the Amazon.ca First Novel Award and the National Jewish Book Award.

A graduate of the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts, David's first feature film, *Victoria Day*, premiered in competition at the Sundance Film Festival. His second feature was an adaptation of his story "Natasha." Most recently, he was a screenwriter on the animated feature film *Charlotte*, about the life of the German-Jewish artist Charlotte Salomon.

Born in Riga, Latvia, David lives in Toronto where he is the Creative Director of the Humber School for Writers.

Jowita Bydlowska is the author of *Drunk Mom* and *Guy*. She immigrated to Canada as a teenager. Her new novel, *Possessed*, comes out in October 2022.

Kate Cayley has published two short story collections, *How You Were Born* and *Householders*, and two collections of poetry, *When This World Comes to an End* and *Other Houses*. Her plays have been performed in Canada, the US, and the UK. She has won the Trillium Book Award, an O. Henry Prize, and the Mitchell Prize for Poetry, and has been a finalist for the Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction and the K. M. Hunter Award. She is a frequent writing collaborator with immersive company Zuppa Theatre, and has been a writer-in-residence with Tarragon Theatre, McMaster University, and

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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