

---

# Three.

---

CHARLATAN

BY KATE BRAITHWAITE

FOR SALE

BY SHARON OVEREND

SHE STEPS OUT

BY KAREN PLATER

Copyright © 2010 Kate Braithwaite  
Copyright © 2010 Sharon Overend  
Copyright © 2010 Karen Plater

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the authors, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review. Published in 2010 by the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies.

*Three* is the eighth volume in a series of chapbooks, previously named *Two Stories*  
ISBN 978-0-7727-7660-0

Names, places, characters, and events in *Three's* works of fiction are the product of the authors' imagination, and any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. In those few instances when the authors mention real persons and reported events, it is within a similarly fictionalized context and should not be construed as fact.

Editor: Lee Gowan  
Jacket design: Erin Cooper  
Text design: Erin Cooper

University of Toronto  
School of Continuing Studies  
158 St. George Street  
Toronto, Ontario  
M5S 2V8 Canada  
Phone: 416-978-2400  
Website: [learn.utoronto.ca](http://learn.utoronto.ca)

Printed and bound in Canada

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  

---

SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

# Three.

---

THE 2010 RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA  
STUDENT AWARD IN WRITING



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO  
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES



RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA LIMITED



---

## Introduction

---

What an honour it is to edit this wonderful publication. Nothing means more to emerging writers than seeing your work in print, and it feels so good to present three talented new writers to the world. I'd like to thank Random House of Canada for making this possible through their generous endowment and their production expertise. Special thanks to Jessica Todd and Erin Cooper at Random House. Also thanks to Bill Zaget for helping me out with proofreading, and to Ed Carson and Nory Siberry for their help and support.

For the first time this year, one of our winning entries is creative non-fiction. Karen Plater's *She Steps Out* was a unanimous choice of the judges. *Charlatan* by Kate Braithwaite is an historical novel, but if you Google some of the character's names you may be surprised to find that they are historical figures. Rounding out the wonderful variety of genres in this edition of *Three* is Sharon Overend's short story *For Sale*, a piece of pure fiction, elegantly told. Besides being published in this lovely chapbook, all three writers take home a \$500 prize.

Thank you again to Random House, and I trust you will enjoy the read.

Lee Gowan

Program Head, Creative Writing

University of Toronto, School of Continuing Studies

What is it about stories? In what mysterious fusion of imagination and words does their power reside?

While there is no single solution to those questions, the Creative Writing Program at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies affords a host of opportunities for adults from all avenues of life — and stages of writing development — to explore literary expression. With guidance from some of Canada’s most renowned writers, students expand their own abilities to shape language into forms that arouse, captivate, and inspire.

Since 2002, Random House of Canada has been a steadfast ally in the School’s efforts to honour our Creative Writing students’ achievements. This partnership is graphically manifested in the Random House of Canada Student Award in Writing. On behalf of all my colleagues at SCS, I sincerely thank Random House for its generous support of our Creative Writing Program and students.

This edition of *Three* presents stories by the trio of winners of the 2010 Random House awards. In the hands of Kate Braithwaite, you will step into the savage demimonde that was 17th-century Paris during the anti-witch “burning times.” Reading *Charlatan*, you are sure to be both entranced and repulsed by Braithwaite’s depictions of Machiavellian scheming, sorcery, and lust. Outwardly more familiar, Sharon Overend’s world of scrapbooking parties and middle-aged motherhood cloaks a startling seam of frustration and erotic desire. With its spare style and mundane setting, *For Sale* lands an emotional punch not soon forgotten. Adding to the diversity of expression found in this year’s chapbook, we have also included a remarkable piece of creative non-fiction: Karen Plater’s *She Steps Out*. Before reading this narrative, I would never have considered sheep-farming in Beaver Valley to be a likely context for tracing life’s sorrows and joys. Now I know better.

Congratulations to all three of this year’s Random House Award winners and, indeed, to all the forward-looking adults who turn to the School in order to further their creative ambitions. Thank you for sharing your imaginations and words with us.

Continue to learn!

Marilynn Booth, Director

University of Toronto, School of Continuing Studies

On behalf of Random House of Canada, it is an honour for me to congratulate the three winning writers you will find on these pages: Kate Braithwaite, Sharon Overend and Karen Plater.

Random House of Canada is very pleased to have the opportunity to work with the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies Creative Writing program in bringing attention to the work of fine new writers through the Random House of Canada Student Award in Writing. We are steadfastly committed to the development and support of Canadian writers, and we thank Lee Gowan and Marilyn Booth and everyone at the Creative Writing program for all of their efforts. I would also like to thank the judges, and Erin Cooper and Jessica Todd for making this chapbook possible.

Now I welcome you to read on and discover three fine new writers and their work, *Charlatan*, *For Sale* and *She Steps Out*.

Tracey Turriff  
Senior Vice President  
Director, Marketing and Corporate Communications  
Random House of Canada Limited

---

## Winners of the Random House of Canada Student Award in Writing 2010

---

NAME OF STUDENT	TITLE OF ENTRY	NAME OF INSTRUCTOR(S)
-----------------	----------------	-----------------------

---

WINNERS:

---

Kate Braithwaite	Charlatan	Dennis Bock
Sharon Overend	For Sale	Dennis Bock Ibi Kaslik Ray Robertson
Karen Plater	She Steps Out	Ronna Bloom Ken Murray

---

OTHER FINALISTS:

---

Trisha Causley	I Know You Are, But What Am I?	Dennis Bock
Janice Colbert	Sagacious Limbs	Margaret Christakos
Saad Omar Khan	Drinking the Ocean	Dennis Bock Kathryn Kuitenbrouwer Sam Hiyate
Peter McCann	First Blood	Alissa York
Robert Mounstevan	Krabong Hill	David Layton
Martin Nel	Blowing the Bridge at Masseca	Dennis Bock David Layton
Susan Smith	Secrets of My So'n	Helen Humphreys Lee Gowan

---

# CHARLATAN

---

KATE BRAITHWAITE



*KATE BRAITHWAITE was born and grew up in Edinburgh. She studied English literature and worked as a teacher and consultant in special education. In 2008 she moved to Canada with her husband and three children. Since having a family, Kate has been reading history books instead of doing the housework and is about to complete the first draft of her second historical novel. A finalist in the competition last year, she is delighted to be selected as a winner in 2010.*



PARIS, 1676

The naked woman lay on her back on a thin mattress supported by two sturdy, but crudely fashioned, wooden chairs. Her knees were bent, bare legs left to dangle towards the uneven stone floor. A roll of black cloth was loosely wound about her face and hair. It effectively blinded her but Lesage had made sure she would be able to breathe. He imagined her hearing would be dulled. To the woman, the recitation must have sounded like the far away echo of disembodied calls on a thick, foggy night: words indistinct, meaning unclear.

The light in the room was poor and a persistent draught wheedled its way through the locked door and window, shrouded though they were in thick black drapes. It teased the candles Lesage had watched Catherine arrange in a wide circle around the figure on the mattress. Shadows were cast and recast: first over the naked woman's cold, pale flesh, then up across a line of sooty hangings which patched the coarse stone walls. Lesage stood in one gloomy corner and watched as the faces of the others in the room were lit and then pushed back into darkness as the flames bent and curved. Only the man leaning over the woman at the centre was quite clearly picked out in orange and yellow. Abbé Guiberg had a short, bulky body and preternaturally wide shoulders. His long flowing white surplice and stole did not quite disguise his twisted leg and malformed hip. Guiberg's face tensed, growing fierce with concentration. Every one of his fleshy features appeared to fight for prominence. Thick lips, flaring nostrils, heavy-hooded, bulging eyes, a high, fat forehead and extravagant eyebrows: they created a grotesque ugliness which, to his credit,

Guiberg had always exploited. His hair — thin, grey and long, according to the fashion — coursed down his back and across his shoulders.

The damp made Lesage's fingers hurt. He resisted an urge to crack his knuckles as the priest raised his arms and closed his eyes. Guiberg delivered his practised incantation in a surprisingly agreeable sing-song tone.

Catherine looked at Lesage. He formed a smile but doubted she could see it. She had stationed herself by the door, a picture of calm assurance. She was dressed in a simple gown, a mix of grey and dark blues. He liked her careful understatement, the way she had her dark hair modestly pinned in a tidy coif. Of the three women observing this strange ceremony, Catherine was easily the most in command of herself and her features. The occasion offered her no surprises. Lesage knew she'd planned the priest's every move. She probably could have spoken the words herself. The pewter flagon on the small table to the left of the circle of candles held no mystery. The two clients might have wondered about the source of the blood-red liquid it contained, but not Catherine. This was her night. Lesage had been told to remain in the background, only lending a hand if needed. His primary duty was to admire.

Catherine was in her late thirties. Age was beginning to thin her lips and crack the fine skin around her eyes, but she possessed a magnetism, a confidence in herself and her powers that continued to attract visitors to her famous house in the Rue Beauregard. She had visibly relaxed once everyone had assembled, once she had a glass of wine in her hand, when she was free of tasks and could relish the fact that her business was attracting such elevated interest. She barely glanced at the two other women. She did not need to. They could not be disappointed in her, in La Voisin, as they knew her. Instead Catherine's eyes were drawn to the priest, fascinated, as he leaned over the woman, muttering and wafting incense in a mockery of religious services. Lesage noted a tiny shift as she moved back, repelled by Guiberg, but at the same time controlling herself because the priest was a tool, a necessary evil, she had said, in the service she was so successfully providing. Lesage's eye drifted to Catherine's hand. He thought he saw her fingers, perhaps unconsciously, rubbing the soft twist of paper that he had pressed into her hand just before the candles were lit.

But Lesage's real interest was in the two clients. Catherine had placed them only a few feet from the naked woman but the chair backs stood between them and her body, obscuring their view and going some way to alleviate their obvious discomfort. They were forced, however, to look directly at the bulky frame of the wayward priest and their eyes widened as they watched him bend to arrange his parody of an altar. He draped a white cloth across the woman's torso. Gently, crucifix and chalice were positioned upon it. Both women were heavily cloaked and held large lace handkerchiefs across their mouths and noses. Lesage frowned, trying to find some identifying features, but saw only two pretty pairs of eyes, anxiously blinking. Their nervousness excited him. In such God-fearing times only a fool would not appreciate the great danger of being involved in such a sacrilegious act. The words and the ceremony were familiar, played out with all the normal trappings and solemnity of a Roman Catholic mass, but here they stood in semi-darkness, watching nakedness exposed to the leer of such fantastic ugliness. For Lesage, the room held an almost audible frisson of risk. This was what could be bought with hard currency, what was demanded by ambition and desire. Maid and mistress regarded proceedings with equal concentration. They had not exchanged a word or glance since they arrived. But the maid locked eyes with La Voisin and, with the merest nod, signalled her appreciation. Just by watching, Lesage felt he knew everything about them, except the one thing Catherine wouldn't tell him: her clients' names.

He would have it out with her later. In the meantime, he turned his attention back to Guiberg. It was a good performance, if not quite a great one. Lesage was more generous in his admiration of the flesh of the woman. Not young flesh, true, but well enough fed and smooth in all the key places. The woman seemed not to feel the cold air in the room and suffered the ministrations of the ceremony with little discomfort or concern. Calm and professional, he thought, or more likely slightly drunk. Lesage's cheeks twitched. He had to admire La Voisin. Ever controlled, ever measured, Catherine certainly knew her business well. She would not provide a specimen for such an event without being sure that the woman in question was reliable, well-briefed and able to play her part to perfection.

Lesage stifled a yawn and shifted his weight from one leg to the other. He had neglected to fill his glass before entering this gloomy chamber and suddenly the need for more wine grew like a fur on his tongue. Still, the priest was definitely working up to a crescendo. Lesage watched as the host was elevated and the stolen wafers, transubstantiation complete, were offered to the two women. They crushed them between dry lips like winter leaves.

Then they stepped back. The priest Guiberg lifted a fragile sheet of parchment which he had laid on the woman's belly earlier, beneath his makeshift altar cloth. The spell it described was understood to have assumed much greater power, having been consecrated in a holy mass, however unconventional. Guiberg held up the paper over a large, dripping candle and slowly closed his eyes. As he spoke again, the flames licked the paper and in a moment it crumpled into nothingness.

"Parchment," he said, "I set fire to you, but it is not you that I burn; it is the body, the soul, the will, the heart and the understanding of Louis de Bourbon; that he shall not come or go, rest or sleep until he fulfils the wishes of this supplicant and this will hold true forever."

Lesage couldn't suppress a smile. The spark of panic, the comprehension and the guilt started to rise, widen and smart in the eyes of the two women. Had they really expected anything less? The priest was damned ugly, but he'd certainly earned his fee.

Through it all, Marie had remained well hidden by window drapes and another sturdy wooden chair. For the most part, she saw only the rear view of her mother's priest but as he clumsily shifted and turned, moving up and down the woman's body, the young girl caught swift but clear glimpses of this unusual scene. Her small, concerned face twitched when she saw the soft black folds of material that covered the woman's face and hair, leaving no clues. She saw mottled skin and the pinch of goose flesh created by the cold night air seeping through the walls. She stared at a wide brown circle of nipple with a tight, cold bud at the centre, a triangle of pale hair, two dimpled thighs, two long thin feet. It was at those that she looked the longest, absorbed by the creamy white cleanliness on top, by the dusty black soles beneath. Marie almost tasted her dislike of the priest. She felt

an unsettling, inarticulate, disjointed worry, concentrated in a mistrust of the way he seemed to tower so ominously over the anonymous woman. She disliked his hands, and his hair. She hated the caress of his babbling words. Her stomach tightened. The incense made her nauseous. She closed her eyes in order to shut out the brightness of the candles and the woman's white, white skin. Her stolen view was compromised but from the corner of her eye she just made out her mother's neat feet, one foot gently tapping with customary impatience. To her right she saw only the stocking leg of the other man. It was the magician, Lesage. Marie struggled to focus on the meaning of the priest's many words, but was distracted, finding her eyes drawn again and again to the woman's skin.

The priest fell silent. Then he picked up the pewter flagon and held it high above his human altar. Employing the sense of drama that had earned him a small fortune, he slowly bent his wrist and poured out a dark, near black, liquid. It formed a pool in the hollow of the woman's torso. Marie's breath caught in her throat as she watched it seep between pale thighs, well up and over pointed hips and then fall, in thick, discordant droplets, a diminished and fading heartbeat, down onto the stone below.

Two miles away, Nicholas La Reynie lay asleep in his bed. His wife had rolled away onto her side, but he slept, as always, on his back, his light snore something Madame La Reynie had long since learned to live with, like a hardened sailor, accustomed to the rise and roll of his boat. It appeared to be a night like any other for the La Reynies, but Nicholas was the Chief of Police. Other people's business had a habit of becoming his.

### Three Years Later

"Never underestimate the value of a public execution."

With thumb and forefinger La Reynie smoothed his thin moustache and looked with satisfaction at the scene before him. The square teemed with people. Paris had set down her tools and baskets and taken off her work-a-day overalls. A few entrepreneurial types wound in and around,

selling coffee from scalding pots slung from strong shoulders or offering hot chestnuts to hungry spectators. When the time came, however, they would all stop and witness the physical manifestation of their justice system. The people had come to suck on the thrill of watching the prisoners humbled before them, to eat with their eyes as priests administered to the guilty in the last sorry moments of their lives. They would shiver in their own skins as the condemned confessed, repented, died. Hangings were always popular, watched with every outward appearance of complaisance, yet if closely observed, how many in the crowd would finger unconsciously at the fine skin at their necks? How many, on some level, envisaged their own head in the noose one day?

“There is no better deterrent. I am convinced of that,” continued La Reynie, addressing the air at large.

At his side stood Louis Bezons, his assistant investigator, and ranged before them on the balcony of the Hôtel de Ville were the thirteen judges of the Commission who had tried the prisoners and condemned them to this fate. They had assembled early and trooped out into the public gaze, presenting, as La Reynie termed it, the stony face of implacable justice. None had any doubts about the judgements they had reached or the sentences passed. Like a black-clad chorus in a Greek tragedy, they stood as though on a stage themselves. They watched the public assemble, first in a trickle of ones or twos, then in increasing numbers until a steady flow of people, arriving from all directions, filled up the square like a glut of water from a hose. The scenery for the coming drama had been assembled silently, built up overnight and then guarded continuously by sombre faced soldiers with unsmiling eyes. First was the double gallows, a familiar, tall shadow in the life of the people. More unusual were the two pyres, erected on neighbouring scaffolds. Between them, most closely guarded, was a large cart stacked high with branches, sticks and coarse cut dry timber, ready to be added to the pyres after each prisoner had been tied to her stake.

First Madame Ferry, the client in the case, and Monsieur Bosse, son of one of the witches, would hang. Then the burning.

Four days earlier, two women had appeared before the Commission in the dark and threatening basement of the city’s Arsenal. To give

proceedings every appearance of seriousness, the walls had been entirely draped in black cloth. There was no natural light — instead, devilish shapes danced across the blackness as flaming torches flickered and spat. The thirteen judges, flanked by La Reynie, Bezons, and their clerk, sat behind a long table which had also been draped in black. In front of them was the only other furnishing in the room, a solitary, three-legged stool, where the accused sat while the evidence against them was read and they were questioned by the Commissioners.

The two women faced the Commission separately, although the evidence against them was almost identical. La Reynie began by listing the incriminating substances found at their properties. He outlined experiments committed on several dogs to ascertain that there were poisons present. Statements from a doctor and an apothecary were read and their conclusions were unequivocal. They had found Spanish fly, menstrual blood, human nail clippings, orpiment and, in quantity, arsenic. Next, Bezons passed him the annotated ledgers where the women's statements had been recorded during their interviews and finally, he furnished La Reynie with the corroborating witness evidence, including, most damningly, a confession from Madame Ferry who admitted being one of their clients. Questions were put, but the women's denials were predictable and made little impression. After a brief debate, the Commissioners had found Martine Bosse and Louise Vigoreaux guilty of 'involvement in evil spells and composing, distributing and administering poison.' As was their legal right, when adjudicating in cases where a capital offence had been committed, they demanded that the two undergo torture before their execution.

There was a light breeze across the square. La Reynie heard the flap of the flags above the Hôtel de Ville and glanced up trying to judge what direction it might blow the smoke from the bonfire. Perhaps, he reflected, it was well that only one fire would be lit, not two as planned. Still, it would have been better if the older woman had not been subjected to the brodequins. It was an established method of legalised state torture, where the prisoner's feet and legs were placed in moulded wood casings, known as "the boot." Next coin-shaped wedges were hammered in, one by one, gradually crushing and finally breaking the prisoner's

bones. But the pain had overcome La Vigoreaux and she died without adding anything of substance to their store of knowledge. There was no doubt that the sight and smell of two infernos would have been much more effective to the masses in front of him. La Reynie planned to be very careful about how they used torture in the future. Thankfully, La Bosse had proved to be made of sterner stuff and there would still be a burning in the Place de Grève. The crowd would not be disappointed.

Loud and hilarious expectancy gripped the populace down in the square. Then, as the appointed time grew near, a quiet hush settled as though the people had grown nervously fretful under the shadow of the stake. A violinist played, walking slowly from one corner of the square to the other, his long, painful searching notes producing haunted looks and whispers as he passed. Heads turned.

They had been forced to kneel in prayer before the looming portal of Notre Dame. Now the three condemned souls, wearing only simple thin linen shirts, symbolic nooses looped around each neck, were conveyed the short distance into the square. They had been scrubbed clean and their hair shorn. Thin and pale from their dark months in prison in the Château Vincennes, they looked younger and weaker than the imagined devils of the public consciousness. Martine Bosse had shrivelled up in prison, her previously plump flesh now hung loosely on her arms as though already melting away from her sorry bones. There may have been people in the crowd who had known her, but they would have found little to recognise in this wretched walking corpse. She was guided up the scaffold and roughly bound to the stake. Twigs and branches scratched and scraped her through the thin layer of shirt but she only winced slightly and looked straight ahead with unseeing eyes.

Her son was hanged for aiding and abetting her activities. The crowd watched her closely but she did not shed a tear for him. She did gasp, however, as the executioner, with a sharp axe, bludgeoned off the right hand of the feckless Madame Ferry before quickly placing the noose around her neck and sending her twitching and tearful into the hereafter.

As the priest at the bottom of the scaffold called to her to make a last confession, Martine remained remarkably undemonstrative, as if she had

separated already her mind from her body, perhaps as a result of the torture she had undergone. Slowly she turned her eyes down towards him and said only five, quiet words:

“Pray to God for me.”

At that, the pyre was lit. The wood took quickly and the inevitable screams began. La Reynie looked to see how Bezons would cope. He saw his assistant’s face redden and his eyes drop. There was a time when La Reynie would have been equally reluctant to watch too closely the blackening flesh, the shifting glimpses of her straining muscles behind and between the flickering, licking flames. Now he maintained his gaze on it for as long as he could. Finally he felt he had done his duty and turned his eyes instead towards a small group to the left of the scaffold where a young girl, hysterical with grief, was being held by the arms and forcibly made to watch her mother burn. He sniffed slightly. Across the crowd, in the windows of overlooking buildings, even amongst the judiciary themselves, people were pulling handkerchiefs from pockets and holding them against their faces. It would take more than a few scraps of lace to ward off the sulphurous stench or deny the flecks of ash that tumbled about as branch and body burnt into nothingness.

“God’s will be done,” he said quietly as he crossed himself. Then he turned on his heel and looked at Bezons with large, sad eyes.

“Come young man,” he said. “We will be here again soon enough. We had best accustom ourselves to it. And we need to discuss Martine Bosse’s confession. She has implicated half of Paris. We have much work before us — you and I.”

Lesage felt excitement thrum in his veins for the first time since his arrest. Thirty days and nights in a cell with five gibbering, filthy fools had been more than enough time for him to reflect on the decisions he’d made and the limited choices now before him. He had awaited this first interrogation eagerly. He’d forced himself to sleep on the hard stone floor, to ignore the cries, the wails, the muttered inanities, to block out the stink of piss, shit and vomit. All to be ready for this moment.

The guards brought him in front of three men. One was a clerk and could be quickly disregarded but the other two captured his full attention.

The older man was obviously the senior of the two. He did not even glance at Lesage but was reading with concentration, a deep line cleaving the centre of his high forehead. He was slim, long-limbed and with slender fingers, his face composed of thoughtful, Roman features. More politician than policeman perhaps. The other, younger fellow was a much brighter study. He had quick, inquisitive brown eyes and a mouth which twitched, teetering on the brink of an inappropriate smile. It seemed he anticipated the interview almost as eagerly as Lesage.

When the older man put down his papers, the younger one opened proceedings.

“Name?”

“I am known as Lesage.”

“Indeed. However, for the record, we note that your name is Adam du Coeuret, residing on the Rue Paradis. Not married. Age?”

“As old as the oak, but as young as its freshest acorn. All ages and none.”

“An interesting response,” said La Reynie. He turned to the clerk. “Please note that the prisoner looks to be forty-five, at least.”

Lesage waved a hand dismissively. “Numbers, mere numbers,” he murmured.

“Occupation?”

“Sometime wool merchant, sometime wise man. Known, you see, as Lesage.”

“Well let me make it clear,” snapped La Reynie, “That your manner and delivery are in no way indicative of any wisdom on your part. Confine your answers to fact.”

“My apologies! Of course, of course.” Lesage folded his hands primly on his lap.

La Reynie cleared his throat. “You have been described to us variously as a magician, as an interpreter to the spirit world, as someone who can harness the powers of the supernatural to find things, to bring luck, to bring about marriages. Also as a blackmailer, a charlatan and a thief. What answer have you?”

“Ah, Messieurs. It is as I feared it would be. Tut tut. Tut tut.” He shook his large head sadly. “You have been listening to the women. Always a mistake. I try to avoid it whenever possible.”

Lesage smiled over at the men before him, searching for any twitch of reaction.

“Tell us what you know of Catherine Montvoisin,” said Bezons.

“Ah!” Lesage broke into spontaneous applause. “Monsieur, if I had only my hat to hand then I would most surely take it off to you at once. Yes,” he said. “I am impressed. I can see Monsieur that you, and your assistant here, are a force to be reckoned with. Why, not one in a hundred men could so quickly and neatly have jumped to the very heart of things. And even more, I am delighted, because I am the very man you need, the very man.”

“The very man?” echoed La Reynie.

“The very man. For I must tell you gentlemen — as you may have some notion of already — that La Voisin is a truly evil woman.” So saying, Lesage sat back and folded his arms.

“And this makes you the very man, because?” asked Bezons.

“Why, because I know everything about her. I have made, if I may say, something of a study of her, and I consider it my duty as a good subject to the King and a good servant to our Lord to share this knowledge with you, even though it sees her to the very gates of hell and oblivion via a long and painful death.”

All the best lies begin with the truth. And it was certainly true that Lesage had studied Catherine since his very earliest days in Paris.

Lesage stood in the shadows of a doorway, pressed back against the large, dark double doors, hoping to blend in and observe the house across the cobbles without interruption. It was a substantial property, clearly that of a successful bourgeois businessman or merchant. It was set back from the road and a wide trim of grass and apple trees separated it from its neighbours on all sides. Villeneuve, a suburb just beyond the city’s northern limits at the Porte St Denis, was one of Paris’ more affluent areas. There was none of the grandeur that he admired in the Marais district, but yet it was far more comfortable and well-to-do than the cramped and dirty streets of St Germain where he was forced to lodge at present.

On an earlier survey Lesage had explored the rear of the property and discovered amongst the thick shrubbery a small outhouse heated by

some hearth or stove, its smoke spiralling up into an overcast sky. In the evening the main house was a busy social centre, a multitude of candles lighting up window after window. One cold evening he had watched as well-dressed, laughing, pleasure-seeking guests had come and gone, but thick drapes left his prying eyes unsatisfied. There was show for the neighbours, the outward demonstration of success and easy wealth offering generous entertainment, but beneath this, there was also a desire for privacy about the place. Most nights there was music and laughter, but at other times there could also be silence and he had seen several visitors exchange whispered greetings and partings, voices muffled by some apparent need for secrecy, aided by their hooded and cloaked, impenetrable exteriors.

Lesage's observations of the house bore more fruit in the daytime. First, several children exploded through the doorway like shot from a rifle, spilling onto the pavement and into the gutters with a volley of shrieks and catcalls. Lesage counted seven of them, aged from three to eleven or twelve perhaps, a harum-scarum bunch under the inexperienced management of a maidservant, who, not many years older than the eldest of her charges, clearly faced an uphill struggle on this outing. With much chivvying and threats and promises, she shepherded them up the street and around a corner out of sight, perhaps to find an open space to expend some energies, perhaps to find some warm pies or bread and butter to fill their many stomachs.

Next to issue forth from this intriguing household was a fat gentleman, in whom Lesage was closely interested. This was the husband, in his late fifties, of florid complexion and wearing a magnificent embroidered waistcoat so fine that it was hard to know whether to be more amazed by the garment's craftsmanship or its sheer size, so portly was Monsieur Montvoisin. As the door closed behind him, the man turned and appeared to shudder at the sight of his own fine property. He hurried from it like a bee had stung him, but at the gate Lesage watched him gather himself and then step confidently and assuredly out onto the pavement, to all intents and purposes a relaxed and well-to-do man of business. His fine linen, his ample property and his fashionable bone-handled cane suggested a successful and profitable career somewhere in

his recent past. Yet his composure, thought Lesage, was a fragile thing. His left hand seemed to want to nag at his collar just a little too keenly; his eyes were darting all about him as he strolled.

Lesage called over to a young boy who was digging at the roadside nearby with a short stick, his dirty clothes and matted hair suggesting he would be a willing employee.

“Here, young man,” he said. “I’ve a livre for you, if you’ll follow my fat friend there and when you see him settle his arse upon a cushion, come back and tell me where that cushion can be found. Can you handle that for me do you think?”

The boy didn’t pause to bargain, but grinned from a broken-toothed gash in his grubby face and set off after his quarry. Lesage settled again to his task.

He observed a series of arrivals. First, a short woman, bowling along the streets at a goodly pace. He had seen her before, and once followed her himself. He’d even found out her name: Martine Bosse. She was in her mid-thirties and dressed more for fashion’s sake than to best suit either her figure or her pink complexion. A tight yellow bodice gripped her stiffly, straining as she bent to grapple the soft folds of her skirt and petticoat, in a vain attempt to keep them away from the dusty walkway. She lingered briefly, breathing heavily on the doorstep, but then knocked and was quickly admitted.

The next visitor was ushered in with equal smoothness but this was a much older woman, plainly and serviceably dressed, her head covered and face obscured from his view. Her arrival was unhurried, but focussed, she barely raised her eyes from the pavements as she walked down the street and then turned right and up to the door which seemed to open without her having recourse to any knocker, suggesting that her presence was expected. She could have been a washer-woman going to collect a basket of clothes, but Lesage did not think so.

Only minutes later a carriage arrived, the coachman drawing his horses to a patient stop outside the gate. The large black vehicle obscured Lesage’s view of its occupant and even spilling a few coins from his pocket and ducking to the ground to gather them up only afforded him a glimpse of a gown and a long black satin cloak, through the wheel

spokes. By the time the coachman had whipped the horses into action once more, the door had clearly opened and then closed again, swallowing up this latest visitor.

And so it went on. For several hours, Lesage watched a regular traffic of coaches setting down and picking up from the home of the Montvoisins. As he pondered on the nature of these visits, his little spy came bustling back, ready to trade his knowledge for some coin of the realm.

“And?” he asked the boy, eyebrow raised, eye stern.

“I have done it, Monsieur, I have indeed, Sir,” came the breathless reply. “He is sitting on a bright red cushion in Monsieur Clair’s coffee house, with a mug of wine at one elbow and the *Mercure Gazette* spread before him.”

“Mmm,” considered Lesage as he picked through his pockets for a coin for the boy. “But how much longer will he stay there?” he muttered into his chest with his head bent forwards. “Now that would be worth the paying for, that would.”

“But Monsieur,” cried the boy, with a seven year old’s eagerness to please his master, “he will be there all day, you may depend upon it. He’ll be there all day. Suzette told me.”

“Suzette?”

“Oh yes. She is my sister, my oldest one. She has worked there three years this September. I know that because it was on my birthday that she first went to work there and came back crying with a black eye and a bloody lip.”

Lesage struggled out a vaguely sympathetic guttural noise. “And she told you something about the fat man, did she?”

“That’s right, Monsieur. I said I was following him to see how a man gets so fat and so rich but she said there was no secret about that in this neighbourhood.”

“Really?”

“So Suzette says, Monsieur. She says that he has grown fat in the taverns and coffee houses, for he lives there all day, but that his money comes from his wife who pays him to go out while she works at her trade and then beats him in the evening when he staggers back home again. It is true and she may do worse. All the children round here know full well she is a witch. Don’t be fooled by her fine clothes and servants.”

“Are you sure about that, little man? What would you know of witches, eh?”

“Well I know she does spells in her garden.” Lesage’s informant sounded indignant, not pleased to have his information questioned. “She’s got her own little witch house there and when she does her spells and makes her poisons, we all sit on the wall and watch the smoke rising up with evil smells into the sky. Ugh.” He wrinkled his nose and pulled his face dramatically. “It’s disgusting.”

And with that, he had pocketed his livre and was gone.

“Tell us. What is Catherine Montvoisin’s business?” asked La Reynie.

“You may as well ask what’s not her business.” Lesage saw La Reynie’s brows contract into a slight frown so he hurried on. “What I mean by that is that she offers a wide range of services. She’s a fortune-teller for instance. She reads the tarot and casts horoscopes. You could ask her to read your palm — or even your face. She has studied physiognomy extensively.”

“What else?”

“Cosmetics. She provides powders to whiten teeth, creams to fade freckles —”

“And?”

Lesage studied La Reynie. He was not an easy man to read. Cold crept up Lesage’s arms and a thirst cut the back of his throat.

“To tell the truth, Monsieur, I am not sure what you know, and do not know, about La Voisin. More, I am not sure what you want to know.”

La Reynie placed his elbows on the table before him and pressed the tips of his fingers together.

“I want to know it all, Lesage. All of it. I want to know about the love philtres and the inheritance powders. I want to know which wives have been helped into widowhood and for which wealthy clients she’s made a mockery of honest men through her ungodly tricks and black magic. What I want, Lesage, are names.”

“Then you do know what you are dealing with Messieurs,” said Lesage. “I am glad of it. We were once partners, she and I, but there was always a side to her work that disgusted me, that I would not be part of.”

“Really?” Bezons leaned forward, looking almost amused, a dimple playing in his cheek. He frowned slightly and flipped his papers over and back. “But — yes, here it is. You see, on the sixteenth of last month, Lesage, Catherine Montvoisin deposed to us that you and she were partners right up until the day she was arrested. In fact, she was very talkative about all your skills. I was most impressed. She even cited the Duchesse de Vivonne as one of your clients.”

Lesage’s eyes blinked rapidly. He straightened up and spat out his response.

“Well! But that’s exactly what a woman like that would say, isn’t it?”

“Is it?”

“Of course. The typical trick of a spiteful woman with venom, instead of blood, washing through her veins.” He inhaled loudly. “However, she could not fool such men as you. I can console myself with that. No, Monsieur.” Lesage paused theatrically and held up both hands to silence La Reynie who was leaning forward and about to speak. “No, Monsieur. If I can see it, then it goes without saying that you see what lies at the heart of this fiction. You surmise correctly. It’s not *my* aristocratic connections that need to be probed.”

La Reynie and Bezons exchanged glances. “Go on,” said La Reynie.

“First, Gentlemen, you must understand that the world of these sibyls, magicians and fortune-tellers is intensely competitive. They fight over clients and boast of their successes with the nobility much as lawyers will boast of cases won or merchants of their magnificent wares. Gossip abounds amongst all these women and names are bandied about in efforts to outdo each other in reputation and establish their credentials. What facts I do know though, I will tell you.

“A few years back, La Voisin made several visits to the royal palace of St. Germain.” He paused, letting that feather float and settle in the investigators’ minds. “She made deliveries. Perhaps of poison, but also, perhaps, of less harmful powders: cantharides to stimulate a lover, or the like. Whatever the scheme was, she felt the risks were great but it was whispered amongst their tribe that the prospect of 100,000 ecus in her pocket when her aim was achieved, had made her less than scrupulous.

“I need not spell out for you, Monsieur, the implications of my

statement. It is enough to say that if La Voisin did, as she intimated, have a client at the very heart of Louis' court, then the world will not be safe until that person is brought to justice. Others knew of her visits. You could ask Latour — sadly not La Bosse — but perhaps La Petit, or La Bergerot. Do not, I pray, take my word for it alone. But do take this seriously. You cannot be unfamiliar with her connections to Madame de Montespan —“

The clerk, Jean Sargot, usually so anonymous and shadowy a presence, the scratch of a quill, the creak of paper turning providing the only evidence of his being, started suddenly and overturned a pot of ink. Its contents cut across the floor creating a smooth and glossy stain. His chair scraped back and La Reynie, Bezons and Lesage all watched the slim man nimbly and speedily clear up the mess. Then La Reynie cleared his throat.

“You named Madame de Montespan I think, Lesage. I have not all our interview notes readily to hand, but I cannot recall that anyone has mentioned her previously. Perhaps, if you wouldn't mind, you could give us the details.”

“Well, all the world — or at least all my world — knows that La Voisin had one of her creatures, a girl called Cato, placed in Madame de Montespan's household as soon as it became apparent that she was — how can I put it — a person of influence with the King. Catherine was also intimate with Mademoiselle des Oeillets, one of Madame de Montespan's personal maids. So you see,” he said, laying his arms open towards them, more the lawyer delivering his summing up than a prisoner under interrogation, “it is more than likely that La Voisin is simply trying to implicate me to hide her own links with the highest of nobility. What more can I say?”

La Reynie had heard enough. He brought the interview to an early close and Lesage was returned to his cell where he slept better than on any other night since his arrest.

The same could not be said for his interrogators.



---

# FOR SALE

---

SHARON OVEREND



**SHARON OVEREND** grew up in Toronto's east end knowing two things for sure: that she wanted to be a mother and that she needed to write. With three grown children, she now divides her time between working on her short stories and her novel, *Look Over Your Shoulder*—a tale set in Riverdale and featuring a large, dysfunctional Irish Canadian family. Sharon lives in Ajax, Ontario, with her husband, children, granddaughter, dog and four cats.



Worldwide, stock markets continue to crash down on the rich and the pensioners, and I'm going to a scrapbooking party.

Ice covers the car windows. I haven't taken enough time to scrape them clean. Crouched low behind the steering wheel, I inch the car north along Bennington Boulevard. Red, white and blue lettering appear through the small pocket of clear the defrost has begun to blow open. There's a white T-frame. It looks like a sign, a for sale sign on Don and Carla's front lawn. I creep by the driveway, craning my neck to see through the side window, twisting for a view out the rear window—nothing but frost.

He would have told me if they planned on selling. She would have told me. Someone would have told me. No way is there a for sale sign on Don and Carla's lawn. I snicker at the trick my eyes have played on me and drive to the corner. I make a U turn and approach the house from the opposite direction, stopping short of the driveway. Weathered brakes screech against frozen tires.

The sliver of cleared window has expanded and I see the house, dark and silent. Christmas lights wrap the eaves and cast eerie ripples of blue light across flawless snow drifts. Departure tracks mar the snow in an empty driveway. Hammered into the frozen lawn, a for sale sign swings in the winter wind: a for sale sign in front of Don and Carla's house.

I crawl two houses further down the street and pull into my own driveway. Yellow light leaps from every window. Craig should be putting our kids to bed now. Chasing and riling them up is more likely what's happening. My hands, in the 10:2 position, brace the steering wheel, two deep breaths, then I back the car away.

Snow is again falling and my windshield wipers squawk each smear of wet against frozen. A slanted parade of snowflakes pelts into the headlights. Driving up the street a second time, I follow the grooves of my earlier tires tracks and avoid looking at ninety-three. My shoulders ache. I shouldn't be going to a scrapbooking party. I shouldn't have to put up with Tara bullying me into buying scrapbooking crap. People from our office only agreed to come to her party after she reminded us how she always bought chocolate bars for each of our kids' fundraisers.

Don and Carla have listed their house and he never told me.

I stop at a traffic light. Red washes the inside of my car. I know. I've known for weeks. I just didn't know what I knew.

The light turns green.

I can't move.

A horn bawls behind me. I pull forward through the intersection and turn into a strip plaza. A sandwich board propped open at the entrance to the variety store shouts, *Tonight's Lucky Draw – \$35 Million! Show us your happy dance!*

"Can I help you?" the teenage clerk asks. I see my hand reach across the counter, but don't recognize the shape, or veins, or bones. I push the plastic bottle of soda toward her harder than I intend. It lurches forward and tips.

"Sorry," I manage. My knees are wobbly like when the kids climb too high on the bluffs and I imagine them falling, their bones shattering against the rocks.

"No sweat. Would you like a lottery ticket, or windshield washer fluid?"

I look at her for the first time. She's young, a teenager, and she's smiling the fake store clerk smile she's supposed to flash at each customer. I turn away without saying anything. The crash of the brass bell colliding with the glass door follows me out. Wind whips into me, twists my hair, and snakes snow around my ankles.

The ringtone I downloaded a year ago starts up, *The way you do the things you do*. I click the remote to open the trunk and drop my purse into the dark well. My chest rises and falls, rises and falls. The phone stops singing. I lean against the car, and twist the bottle top. It hisses at me.

Don's five years younger than me, beautiful with sandy blond hair, puppy brown eyes, a perfect nose and a crooked smile, which is also perfect. Those damn eyes drew me in first, the way his gaze settled soft and dewy over me. Those damn eyes, and the way he smiled, secret and private. My pulse stumbles every time he waves from his driveway and he shines that confident, sure of his own good looks, lopsided grin my way. Like he knows how I feel about him and he's pleased, not repulsed, not laughing.

He gives me clippings from his garden. Craig hates gardening. One spring day when Craig went golfing, Don helped me dig a hole for a new birch tree. When he handed me the shovel, our hands touched. Neither of us jerked away. We just stood there, pretending we didn't notice our fingers were touching. He broke contact first.

Maybe if I told him I didn't want him to leave, told him I couldn't manage my garden without him, maybe he wouldn't go.

I push off the car.

I have a scrapbook party to go to, and he has a house to sell.

I'm glad he's leaving. Maybe now I can get back to my life.

*The way you do the things you do.* I pop open the trunk and search inside my purse.

"Hello." My voice sounds phony cheerful.

"Did you get lost?" asks Tara, my scrapbooking workmate, the blackmailer.

"Sorry, I had trouble getting out of the house. I'm on my way. Start without me." I hope they do. Another click of the remote and the door lock springs up.

"How far off are you? We can wait. We'll wait, just hurry. The ladies are starting to dig into my stickers. How far away did you say you were?"

I stretch the seatbelt across my body. "Five minutes. I'll be there in five minutes," I lie. "Don't let them go through the stickers until I get there."

We hang up, and I take another long swallow from the soda bottle. Bubbles catch in my chest and I belch. I turn the ignition key. My fingers recoil from the cold steering wheel. I drag a pair of gloves from my pocket and slip them on. The snow has slowed and the windows are now clear.

Last August, Craig and I took the kids up to Don and Carla's cottage. Before leaving, I bought a new bathing suit and a new bra. I lost my appetite and six pounds. When the guys took the kids down to the marina for ice cream, Carla and I dangled our feet in the water and watched sailboats whisper past. Afternoon light drifted over us. She passed me a drink. *Off Your Ass in a Glass*, she called it: a lethal combination of vodka, gin, Gatorade, Canadian rye, beer, salt, and lemon juice. She finished her second drink and asked me if I had ever considered having an affair.

"No," I said.

She told me she thought about it sometimes. She liked flirting with her boss. She worried about life slipping away. I patted the soles of my feet at the surface of the water, not breaking through, just tapping the top and making a rat-tat-tat sound.

The next morning, we made breakfast for everyone and she asked me to forget what she had said. As her knife scratched across the toast, she said it was the sun and the booze talking. Afterwards, the guys cleared the table and I took my camera out to the dock. The lake was an unruffled calm, trees and sky reflected identical and exact across the still surface, the sun at a perfect angle. I hadn't heard him coming. He cleared his throat and I jumped. We laughed and I told him he scared me.

"Sorry." Don gave me the soft look. "A doe and her fawn live in the woods at the top of the driveway. I'll show you the spot." He touched my elbow. "You'll never see her once the lake wakes up."

The porch screen moaned. "Going up the hill to take some pictures," I called inside.

"Okay," Carla hollered back.

Don and I stepped off the driveway and dew wet grass slapped against our shins. We sat on a boulder and he leaned close to my ear.

"We'll spook her if we move too quickly," he said, his voice hushed.

My heart pounded against my ribs. A branch cracked behind us and we turned to see two deer twenty meters away. The doe cocked her head to one side and stared straight at us. Her fawn munched on a leaf and paid us no attention. I pointed the camera and the shutter clicked. The fawn's head snapped up. A parting glare, then the doe raised her front

legs and leapt toward her baby. Shoulder to shoulder, they disappeared into the thicket.

“Oh,” I groaned, crinkling my nose.

“Did you get her?”

I turned the camera around and pressed the review button. Regal and graceful, the doe stared into the lens, watching Don and me.

Don whistled, “Nice.” He reached for the camera. “Let me take your picture.”

I smiled and he snapped two frames. He showed me the photos and there it was, in my smile, in my eyes. I took the camera back without looking up. That Monday I emailed him the picture of our deer and set it as my screensaver.

We emailed each other often. He sent me Internet jokes, and I teased him how he mustn't be busy at work. He signed off Dante because that's what I called him since he told me he thought he'd been Italian in a past life. I signed off Isabella because it sounded Latin and sexy.

The weekend after the cottage, he and Carla hosted our annual street barbeque. I chopped up toppings for the condiments table: tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, hot peppers. The Stones boomed from speakers dragged out to the sidewalk. People danced in the road.

Tipsy from three beers, I stood on my front lawn, beside my new birch tree, and watched Don light a cigarette. Day old stubble shadowed his tanned face, gel reflected off his hair. He wore the cargo shorts and leather sandals he'd worn at the cottage. He laughed at something one of the other guys said. My muscles twitched as I fought the urge to strut across the party, grab his face in my hands, and kiss him full on the mouth. Instead, I went inside, dropped on top of my duvet, stared at the stucco ceiling, and let tears pool inside my ears. The kids found me and asked if they could have a sleepover with his kids. I said they could.

“Lisa, come on in,” Tara says as if she hasn't just spoken with me, as if she wasn't expecting me.

“Sorry I'm late,” I smile. My hands begin to sweat. I stretch the gloves off and wipe my palms the length of my jeans. I hold onto the doorframe while she announces my arrival to all the on-time guests.

“Did you bring any pictures?” Tara pours me a glass of non-alcoholic punch.

“Oh, was I supposed to?” I have a picture of Don and Craig playing road hockey tucked inside my briefcase. Carla took the photo, and Don emailed it to me. I printed it off at work, slipped it in my briefcase and forgot to show it to Craig. “I never thought.”

“Didn’t I tell you? Sorry. Yeah, you need a picture. We each get to make a free test page. No biggie. I have a million photos. You can pick one from my album and do a page for me.”

“Are school photos okay? I have the kids’ school photos in my wallet,” I say.

“Sure,” Tara looks at me like I’m stupid, “that’ll do.”

I make my free page and buy a scrapbook album. We talk about the stock market. Everyone’s asking what people should do.

“Nothing,” Tara says. She works in accounting and is a self-proclaimed expert in everything to do with money. “If you sell, you’ll realize your losses. Just hold on tight, and don’t look down.

A month ago, Don called me from his car. He knew I got into work early. He mentioned he saw a free gardening workshop advertised at the big box store. The workshop was scheduled for the following Saturday and he wondered if I’d be interested in going. I said I would be. I heard his indicator clicking, then the car motor go quiet, but didn’t hear the door open. He asked about the Florida vacation Craig had planned for us. He admitted to feeling stressed with work and other things. I didn’t ask about the other things. My other line began to ring and he said he had to go.

Don drove us to the workshop. Carla was taking their kids to hockey and Craig was taking ours to dance class. Every red light, Don turned and spoke directly to me. The workshop was full. We sat together. Our thighs touched. The instructor thought we were a couple. Don corrected him. Afterwards, we went for coffee and talked about gardening.

“It’s easy talking to you,” he said. He wasn’t looking at me, but beyond me, at something over my shoulder.

“Everything okay?” I asked because he looked sad.

“Yeah.” He shook his head like he was trying to shake away a pesky bug. “Yeah, maybe we should get back.”

He hasn’t sent a joke since that Saturday—one month, three days and ten hours ago.

On my way home from the scrapbooking party, I order myself to not look at the for sale sign. Craig has left the porch light on for me. He’s asleep. My feet are cold. He never complains when I rub them up and down his shin, but I don’t want to wake him so I reach into the dresser and pull out a pair of socks. I raise the covers and slip in beside him and he turns and spoons into my back. He’s warm.

The next morning, after I pour a coffee and as I’m leaning my forehead on the overhead cupboard door, the phone rings.

“Did you see the for sale sign in front of ninety-three?” the neighbour from ninety-five chirps.

“I did,” I say.

“Did you know they were moving?”

“No. I was a bit surprised.” My fingernail follows a scratch embedded on the countertop. “It’s not exactly a seller’s market. Why? Did you know?”

“Don’s having an affair.”

“What?” I slump into the kitchen chair. My spine bangs against the hard backrest. “No he isn’t.”

“Carla told me he’s been seeing an Italian chick from his office. He’s moved out.”

I pinch my eyes tight.

She makes a clicking sound with her tongue.

I breathe slow breaths.

“Oh, I heard you’ve taken up scrapbooking.”



---

# SHE STEPS OUT

---

KAREN PLATER



***KAREN PLATER** divides her time between her apartment in Toronto and the small farm in Ontario's Beaver Valley that she shares with her husband John, his mother Margaret, three horses, thirty sheep, two chickens, a cat and a dog. When not hunched over her computer, birthing lambs or riding horses, she oversees The Presbyterian Church in Canada's stewardship, youth in mission and short-term volunteer programs. She started to take creative writing courses at U of T to learn to write fiction, but keeps returning to the story she lives. She is thrilled to have been selected as a Random House Student Award winner and have her first piece of creative work, albeit non-fiction, published.*



Shadows stretched across the ground. The sky was still bright, baby blue, but at the western edge storm clouds were rolling in. The wind picked up the smoke rising from the steel drum and carried it away. I stirred the smoldering fire and was hit by the smell of roasting lamb.

I first saw the signs of labour while standing at the sheep's trough, filling it with water. Doing the chores was a nice way to begin the day. The smell of hay, manure and ammonia was familiar and welcoming. As I moved through the tasks, I was planning a day in my office overlooking the barnyard, hunched over my laptop. I barely noticed the sheep, already avoiding the heat of the morning by gathering in the barn. I leaned my head against the weathered grey post, feeling the water flow out the green garden hose. John was in Vancouver for five days of meetings, so I felt more or less alone; even though my mother-in-law was in the small apartment attached to our hundred-year-old farmhouse.

The sound of water hitting the concrete floor jarred me from my thoughts. "Crap," I said, to no one in particular and pinched the hose together. And then, because the sheep were the only other presence there, I looked at them, pressed against the cold stone foundation. Their eyes watched me; all except Number Nine.

Number Nine was in the back northwest corner, apart from the rest who were staying as close as possible to their escape — a small door that leads to the grazing fields. Nine lay down, stood up and lay down again. Then, as if she could feel my eyes on her, she stopped and stared back. I broke the gaze first, water leaking over my hands, and turned to drag the hose across the alleyway and shut off the tap. Feeling the pressure

slacken, I released the bend, emptying the remnants of water into a bucket. Hanging the hose on the wall, I turned back to face Number Nine.

In our fourth lambing season, it wasn't the first time I had seen a ewe in labour. Our flock, now up to twenty, had begun with four ewes acquired from a neighbour selling his farm. They had been a hobby for him, as they would become for us. We bred them late; 'our rent-a-ram' coming from another farm down the road when the real farmer didn't need him. Forget spending hours waiting for lambs in the cold of February and March; our lambs are born mid-June to early-July, when the grass is lush and temperatures warm.

It wasn't the first time I had seen a ewe in labour, but I had only seen a few. Our first year only two ewes took. The first lambs arrived without much ado, on a Sunday afternoon with a bright sun and enough breeze to keep the bugs away. John and I had gone to the barn to saddle up the horses, not even thinking that lambs were due. We were startled and delighted to discover a lamb in the barn, already up suckling at a teat. We climbed to the hay loft and lay on our bellies, watching the ewe from the trap door above. I wasn't even sure she was still in labour. She let the lamb suckle, licking and grooming it constantly. She was panting heavily, but that wasn't unusual in the heat. And then, so subtly that it would be easy to miss, she stepped away from the lamb, stretched her nose into the air, and a second lamb slipped out onto the waiting straw. Front feet first, followed by the head. Perfect, textbook lambing: let the ewe do her job, don't interfere.

Within moments of landing on the straw, the lamb was up, at first wobbly but soon steady on its feet, routing for the teat. It tried a front knee, then a back hock. It bumped into its sister, looking, searching. And there it was: the suckle, the release of the colostrum, the first milk packed with the antibodies and nutrients a newborn lamb needs to survive.

We descended from the loft, grabbed the lambs, doused their umbilical cords with iodine and penned them up with mom for a few days of quality bonding. It was done in under an hour.

I had exhausted all there was to do: had fed Number Three — penned up with her newborn lambs — fed the horses, swept the floors. True, there was

tack to clean and horses to groom; but I wasn't about to start that now. So, having watched her long enough, I decided to give Nine her space.

Not yet ready to settle behind a computer doing work for pay, I walked behind the barn. The ground rose and fell in gentle waves to the creek lined with wild mint and bulrushes. The day was already growing hot; sounds of crickets and birds filled the air. I tried to relax the growing knot in my stomach. I told myself to breathe, deeply.

It wasn't until the second year that things got messy. The two who hadn't lambed the year before were huge, having grown fat on grass and hay. Their excess weight, coupled with the fact that both were carrying triplets, caused their uteruses to herniate. The last few weeks of their pregnancy, as they moved from grazing in the fields to collapsing in the barn, they dragged their stomachs on the ground. It was a freak year; the vet we called in to deliver the lambs said it was unusual to have two sheep with herniated uteruses.

Then there was last year; the year the lambs arrived a month early while we were in Paris — a mis-timing created when the whole flock was bred in December by an overly rambunctious ram lamb, right before he went to the abattoir. To the delight of our neighbours and the dismay of my mother-in-law, who supervised it all with her walker and phone, eight lambs arrived before our plane touched ground. She fussed and worried, urging us to return home quickly; but the fact is that no lamb died under her watch. The dead lambs — four of them — were discovered in the field by the vultures circling overhead the day after we returned. They must have been stillborn; there was nothing anyone could have done.

Lambing, I soon learned, is like that: a blend of experiencing the incredible gift of life and steeling yourself for the death that inevitably comes. You don't dwell on death, you focus on life.

Movement brought me back to the present. Tora, my huge black Standardbred-Clydesdale cross, had come to check me out. "Just killing time," I reassured her, running my hand through her mane, "Just killing time."

I returned to the barn, half expecting a lamb to be suckling at a teat. No lamb yet, but the ewe had progressed. I could see a head starting to emerge.

I watched awhile, trying to remember whether any of the births I had seen before had taken this long once the head had begun to crown. I kept expecting the lamb to slide out in that same silent motion that I had seen from the hay loft three years before. I began to feel something was wrong.

According to the vet book that sits in a ziploc bag in the cupboard next to the tack, the majority of lambs are supposed to be born without complications. If that was true, this year we had already filled our quota. It started with Number Seven, our second ewe to go.

Number Seven had been restless most of the day, pawing at the ground under the trees along the west fence. Just as dusk began to settle in, a string of goo ending in a small red sack, like a tennis ball hanging on a string, appeared — the amnion. The vet book said to wait four hours from the first evidence of labour before moving in to help. So it was after ten, with no progress and the mucous still hanging there, that we herded Number Seven into the barn and penned her up. I held the head while John looked to see if he could help. He couldn't get more than a couple of fingers in. All he could feel was the tail.

“Time to call the vet?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Time to call the vet.”

Calling the vet was a big deal, even if lambing was only a hobby and you weren't intending to get rich off it. Beyond the cost of the visit — gobbling up the profit you might have made on the lamb — there is admitting that you can't do it on your own. If you save the ewe it is more than worth it; if she has more than one lamb inside you can even make a profit. But beyond all that, it's what you do.

It was past midnight by the time the vet arrived. Chris' red hair and freckled cheeks matched John's; she could have been his sister. She hopped out of her truck, brighter and cheerier than you would anticipate with an after-midnight call.

“So what seems to be the problem?” she asked, pulling her equipment out: a bucket which she filled with soap and water and long pliable polyethylene gloves that reached beyond her armpits.

“Number Seven; first-year-lambing. I tried to help, but she's so tight. I couldn't get my hand in,” John said, as he showed her to the lambing pen. I bit my tongue, watching the interaction from a distance.

Chris ran her hand along the ewe, which stayed surprisingly calm (maybe she was just exhausted.) “You’re okay, girl. We’re going to help. We’re going to get that lamb out,” she said, dropping on one knee and sliding her hand in. “Yeah, that’s the tail,” she agreed. “Definitely a breech — we’ll need to turn him around.” As she talked, her arm disappeared farther and farther into wool and flesh. “Okay, I can feel a back leg. I follow it up along the body to find the nose, then back along the neck to the shoulders and the front feet... like that...once you have the front feet and nose, you turn them.” And with that she was pulling out a wet, slippery lamb, front feet followed by the head.

The lamb was huge, perfectly formed, breathing. Chris lay him in front of Number Seven, who began to lick the blood and mucous, revealing damp white wool. But there was little time for pause. Even as the ewe licked, Chris was in again, pulling out a second.

“Come on,” her voice slightly raised, but not anxious, broke the silence. She stepped back and swung the lamb back and forth, like a pendulum on a grandfather clock, only harder. She laid him on the straw and ran her finger through his mouth and nose, clearing away the mucous. “Come on little lamb.” She doused him in cold water, rubbed his chest and swung again, but he was dead; there was nothing more to be done. She turned back to Seven; there was a third one to be pulled out, alive.

Two out of three was not so bad. We were happy with that.

I looked at Number Nine, now more certain there was a problem. The head wasn’t sliding out; it was progressing in inches. And then I saw the leg, just one, tucked neatly under the lamb’s chin, not two over its head. He seemed to be breathing. Do they breathe when they are part way out like that, or were the contractions making his mouth open and shut? It didn’t matter; I believed he was alive.

It wasn’t the first time I had seen a ewe in labour, but it was the first time I was doing it *on my own*. These days I didn’t mind being alone; it wasn’t always that way. When we were first married, before we bought the farm — me in my first job and John working late nights at a law firm — I would watch the clock, waiting for him to come home, anxious for the time we were missing together. I wanted him there, longed to do things

together. But that was fifteen years ago. Somewhere along the way I figured out my own priorities, cultivated my own interests, figured out how to be alone. So why did I so desperately wish he were here now?

I called him, as if he would be able to help from Vancouver. He told me to call the vet. “Really?” I asked. “That’s *really* what you would do?” Even as I asked it, I already knew that’s not what he would do.

Three days before, on John’s watch, Number Three had presented with only a head. *Number Three presented with only a head and he didn’t call the vet.*

Number Three had been big beyond belief. She spent hours lying in the barn, periodically waddling outside to graze. I left for Toronto, three days before John went to Vancouver leaving me on lamb watch, telling him, “Number Three better go before you do.”

In Toronto I spent long hours at the office. I went for drinks with friends. I walked along Yonge Street gazing in windows. I tried to remember what it was like to be carefree in the city — discovering new things, putting on different disguises and venturing into new situations to see what lay ahead. I recalled life as a student at U of T, when I wondered where I would be, what I would have accomplished by the edge of my fourth decade. I had no idea I would be here.

Each night I returned to the apartment and, as was our custom before getting into bed, phoned John. Each night the call ended with my question, “Has Number Three gone yet?”

“No, not yet.”

It wasn’t until Wednesday morning, when I was still in Toronto and he was heading to the barn for a final check before leaving for the airport, that he found Number Three with a head sticking out her backside. A head with no feet means a lamb is caught on its shoulders. It was just before ten, leaving him wondering if he would miss his flight.

“Didn’t you try and call someone?” I later asked, drawing out the story.

“Yeah, Garth wasn’t home,” he replied. “I didn’t have time to call anyone else and I didn’t have time to wait.”

It is hard to catch a ewe on your own. Sheep fear everything but other sheep. Their natural instinct is to flee, together. It doesn’t matter how many times we feed them; they brace themselves as soon as they

hear the creak of the barn door opening. Walk toward them and they are gone.

There is a technique to catching a ewe. Grab her right and she freezes, for a moment. If you are quick in that moment you can flip her. Once on her back, you can manipulate her.

John locked Number Three in the barn with most of the flock and found the halter we use for the ram. Using their fear, he drove the sheep into a corner, so that they were huddled tightly together. Then, with luck on his side, he dove in and caught her. He slipped the halter over her head and pulled her to the northeast corner of the pen, tying her to a post. The thought made me cringe.

“And then I thought of what the vet said,” he explained, as if it were nothing at all. “I just followed what she said.”

He pushed the head back into the uterus, followed the neck to the shoulders, found the front feet and head and pulled them out together. By 12:30 he had delivered triplets, grabbed a shower and was heading to Toronto, just in time to walk onto his three-o’clock flight.

“Really,” I asked, “that’s *really* what you would do?”

“Sure,” he said. “That’s what they’re there for.” John grew up on a farm, and though he abandoned it for awhile to go to law school, he easily stepped back into it. I am a city girl. I am more afraid. So I called the vet and the receptionist said someone would come.

Time passed. The vet didn’t come.

I felt helpless as I watched the lamb, part in, part out. The rest of the flock, tiring of me, had left the barn. It was just her and me. I closed the door so there was no escape, and walked towards her, trying to crowd her against the wall, into the corner. She bolted, the lamb’s head bobbing up and down as she ran the length of the now empty pen.

I tried again, walking slower. Again she bolted, again the head bobbed up and down. I feared the neck would snap. My confidence sank. How long can it survive, hanging out like that?

I stood there, wanting to hear the crunch of the vet truck turning up the drive; wanting to hold my breath and count backwards from ten and it to be gone; wanting to escape, to be anywhere but there.

The farm was a dream from before we were married. John's childhood memories of hours spent with his father at the barn, my dreams of riding horses, the idea of growing the food you eat, afternoons in hammocks reading books, a slower pace of life; this was the stuff that the country promised.

We considered it, buying a farm, when we first graduated from university, but in the end, practicality won out. We got jobs in Toronto and bought a house for two-and-a-half times the price of a farm up north. A sliver of property two blocks from the subway, it was surrounded by every amenity: twenty-four hour drug and grocery stores, movie theatres, book and clothing stores, upscale restaurants, cheap diners and everything in between. It had two apartments; we lived in one, rented out the other.

I settled into a job doing communications at a relief and development agency. John worked at a legal aid clinic. The years passed; one became two, five, nine. John left the clinic and set out on his own. The tenants moved out and we took over the whole house which, though in a constant state of renovation, was slowly becoming home. I think we could have stayed there a long time.

But we never stopped looking at farms, imagining what it would be like, enticed equally by the ideas of risk and escape.

As I watched this ewe, with her lamb hanging out, I felt everything I had done before being stripped away: the poise I worked on, the confidence I had developed over the years, the strong, stubborn thirty-something woman I had become. And then it didn't matter, the lamb slipped out. The exhausted ewe barely noticed as I stepped in and pulled her lamb up by its two back feet. The lamb already felt cold. I thought of Chris as I swung it back and forth, like a pendulum on a grandfather clock, only harder. I rubbed its chest. I threw cold water on it. I desperately tried to shock it back to life, but the lamb didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't cough. It was gone, long dead. I picked it up, heavy and lifeless, put it in an old oat sack and tossed it in the alley. By now the ewe was bleating, frantically searching for the lamb she knew she'd had.

Life and death are intertwined. This is more evident on a farm than many other places. The cat turns up with half a chipmunk in its mouth. A

hawk shreds apart a pigeon. Lambs, each year, are sent to the abattoir. There is a certain detachment that comes with life on a farm, an acceptance that you can't change the way things are. You figure out how to make it work.

I called the vet's office and said they didn't need to come. Then I watched awhile, hoping another lamb would appear. I left, sat in my office, poked at the keys on my laptop. Hours passed. I went back, wondering if I should check to see if there was a twin inside, but she wasn't pawing, she seemed smaller, she didn't seem like she was in labour anymore.

For days she would wander the barnyard bleating, still looking for her lamb.

Eventually we found our farm. At 26 acres it was smaller than the 50 to 100 we had imagined, but the land was cleared and fenced, ready for sheep and horses. Ancient sugar maples lined the drive and the yard was filled with apple and lilac trees. The 125-year-old barn with its solid stone foundation was impressive. The small farmhouse in white aluminum siding, less so, but it had *potential*.

The owner was there. Sandy blond hair, pale blue eyes lined with crow's feet that emerged when he smiled, stubble on his chin, he was about our age, maybe a little older. As he pointed out the property lines, I leaned down to pet his dog, running my hands through the thick coat of the golden retriever cross. "It's beautiful, any time of the year," he said. "Maybe a couple of days in November, when it's grey and rainy, not as much," he paused, reflective, like he didn't want to let go. "No, even then it's beautiful."

Later we pieced his story together from bits and pieces the neighbours told. Like us, the farm had been a dream. Like us, they were splitting their time between the city and the farm. She wanted horses. He wanted her.

Six months after they bought the place she was diagnosed with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. We found an urn at the place by the creek where tulips and daffodils come up each spring.

Sometimes I wonder what he would think if he knew the darkness that chased us here.

---

John was one when the doctor saw the bruises his mother so often talked about and sent them to Sick Kids for tests. His mother drove up the Don Valley Parkway, tears streaming down her face, stunned by the diagnosis.

A common misconception is that hemophiliacs have to be careful of minor cuts. But cuts are manageable with pressure and bandages. The real problem is internal bleeding. Blood pools up inside; swelling, hurting, damaging, until the pressure causes it to stop. Cranial bleeds can be deadly, but it is the bleeding in joints that is particularly damaging. In the days before treatment many older hemophiliacs ended up on crutches or in wheelchairs from chronic joint bleeds in knees, hips and ankles.

In 1966, the year before John was born, they discovered that cryoprecipitate, a frozen concentrated blood product, was rich in Factor VIII. Up until that point the only treatment had been rest and ice. A nursing text book published in 1967 gave a severe hemophiliac a life expectancy of eighteen. But cryoprecipitate stops the bleeding sooner, minimizes the damage, minimizes the pain and extends life. It is frozen, so made travelling a bit awkward, but it made life bearable. It took ten donors to make a batch.

By the late seventies they were able to extract the Factor VIII from the cryoprecipitate and make it into a dried powder. It could then be reconstituted with water and injected intravenously. For about twenty-four hours hemophiliacs could be normal. By the time John was 12 he could treat himself at home. It meant he travelled where he wanted, when he wanted. It was freedom.

They pooled the blood from 10,000 donors to make a batch.

The lamb lay in the corner of the barn for a full day before I decided that it was time to do something with the body. It was almost time for dinner, but I wanted to get this done before the threatening storm arrived; before the lamb began to smell.

Since our first attempt at burying the four-lambs-born-after-Paris — not an easy task in land that was once an ancient river bed — we had been disposing of dead carcasses by burning them in an old oil barrel just outside the barn. Once painted black, the colour of rust had overtaken it; holes that had rusted through the bottom fed oxygen to the flames.

I was getting ready to build the fire, tossing twigs and branches in the barrel, when Ryan came up and peered in. Ryan's parents had bought the farm across the road two years before. They were weekenders, ritually escaping Toronto each week, to ski, to hike, to garden, to breathe in country air. They were keen; they liked the idea of a farm and hoped someday they could move up full time. Most days they did more before we got out of bed than we would do the whole day.

At fourteen, Ryan often turned up on our property, looking to do something with John.

"Making a fire?" he asked.

"Yeah," I smiled. I might have liked to do this act, disposing of the evidence, alone, but as I looked at the darkening sky it occurred to me that boys are good at making fires. "I have to burn a lamb before the rain comes."

Instinctively he began to help. He brought the feed bag heavy with lamb and built a funeral pyre around it, stacking my sticks like a tipi, pressing newspaper into empty spaces. I handed him a match, happy to stay as far from burning things as possible. The paper caught and flared up quickly, but died away just as fast. The sky was growing darker and the wind was getting stronger, swirling up bits of dust and debris. We needed something to speed up the process.

"How about lighter fluid?" I asked. It was Ryan's turn to smile. I knew he would like the idea of an accelerant. We couldn't find the lighter fluid, but discovered a tank of gas in the drive shed, beside the riding lawn mower. He poured some into a small margarine container, just enough so that we could see if it would help. More interested in finishing the job than in the environmental consequences, not even thinking of the embers glowing down below, I watched him pour the gas in.

We both jumped back as fire shot out. This time the bag, the wood, the lamb and more caught fire. I grabbed the bucket of water which I had set at hand and doused the grass which had started to burn. And then we stood watching it as the day grew colder, enticed by the dancing flames. After awhile, without words, we broke from its spell and headed back to our respective houses.

"Thanks," I said.

“No problem,” he replied, already part way down the lane.

I made dinner, fed my mother-in-law, the cat, the dog. I checked the fire periodically, adding more wood, keeping it burning.

And so it was that, on the evening of the summer solstice, when the dishes were done and the food put away, I was standing by the oil barrel, struck by the smell of roasting lamb.

Smoke sank into my hair, my skin, my lungs, and I let loneliness seep in and settle like a hard pit just under my heart. I had always said I loved the blend of city with the escape of country, and yet somewhere, between running back and forth, John here, me there, I wondered if I was losing the magic of both.

John wasn't particularly the type I usually fell for. I liked the tall, lanky, long-haired, pale-skinned brooding type. His red hair, bright chubby cheeks and khakis, often paired with plaid shirts and Birkenstocks, tended to give him the appearance of a lumberjack more than aspiring lawyer. He was funny. He made people laugh out loud and he made people think. I loved to hear him talk of politics and philosophy; weaving Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle into some sort of poetry.

We were both at the University of Toronto. I was studying international development at Scarborough Campus. He was studying politics at St. Michael's College. A mutual friend told me John was giving a talk on AIDS. I didn't admit I was going because I thought he was cute or funny; I was going because it was a topic important to a university student studying international development.

I am not sure what I thought I was going to hear that morning, but I wasn't ready for what he said.

“I was eighteen, president of my high school and had my first real girlfriend.” He looked into the distance, like this was a story he had told too many times. “The day the doctor called was a snow day, so I was home from school. But he didn't talk to me, he talked to my mother. It was my mother who told me that the test was positive. We didn't even really know what it meant at the time, but we knew it wasn't good.”

I kept waiting for him to say it was all a mistake. I kept waiting for him to say that they did the test again. He never said it was a mistake.

---

John was empathetic when I told him about the lamb, not as hard on me as I was. “I should have checked the vet book,” I said. “It would have told me that when a lamb presents with a head and one leg tucked under its chin you don’t have to push it back in. You can just pull, pull, until it is out.” It would have told me what to do. It would have fought my fear. I don’t know why I didn’t check the vet book.

“But now you know,” he said. “Next time it happens, you’ll know what to do.”

I had given John my phone number after the talk, but never really expected him to call. I figured I would stop thinking about him in a few days and that would be that; life would go on. Still, even with midterms coming up and assignments due, I found myself at the library, picking up books on HIV. Before he even used the number, I made a decision, like we would decide again and again and again, that it didn’t matter.

I later found out that he couldn’t stop thinking about me. But as I was thinking about life and death issues, he was more concerned about whether it would be appropriate to ask me to his fall formal and whether I would have anything to wear. For him, he had already been living with HIV for almost ten years. Asking me out was about whether I was interesting, looked good, felt good. It was more about the things that a boy looks for in a girl.

I thought AIDS would be all consuming, but living gets in the way. You never forget that it is there, but in the end it isn’t the disease which defines our life together, but who we are and how we relate to one another. It is about being bored and lazy together, it’s about living up to responsibilities and getting jobs done. It’s washing dishes, doing laundry, cleaning bathrooms, paying bills, raising sheep, caring for parents, working when you’d rather play; suddenly discovering that years have passed.

Six days later, as I throw some sausages onto the barbeque, John calls my name — the type of call that makes you drop everything and run. Number Thirteen — our final ewe to lamb — has a head and one leg tucked under its chin, hanging out of her.

It takes two attempts to corner her. I hold the head, John goes to work. He smears the lamb's head with KY Jelly, grabs it by the shoulders and the leg. He struggles to get a good hold, but with each contraction he proceeds to pull.

The lamb doesn't budge. More contractions, more pulling.

I can see it going badly. I can feel the life slipping out of the lamb. I can feel the pit of disappointment bubbling up in my gut. Pull too hard and you kill the ewe or the lamb.

Something snaps. I fear that the shoulder has been dislocated, or worse, the neck broken. John hesitates. He doesn't know whether to pull or not, but the lamb has to come out. And then John pulls, the ewe pushes, and the lamb slides out.

The ram is lethargic, so I grab it by the heels and swing it back and forth, like a pendulum on a grandfather clock, only harder. Rub its chest, hard; a cough. Life is faint, but it's there, it's still in there. Lay him in front of the mom. She is tired, but raises her head and begins to lick. I can see life coming back into her. He coughs some more. His breathing is labored, heavy, raspy, alive.

Within an hour the lamb is on its feet; suckling at the teat.

And it sinks in; this lamb is going to make it.

---

## The Judges' Comments

---

Alive with vivid period detail and vibrant characters, *Charlatan* is a well written novel drawing on the life of La Voisin, a French sorceress, and the scandal that disgraced the reign of Louis XIV. Kate Braithwaite expertly evokes the dark side of 17th century French aristocracy with her historical tale of witchcraft, adultery and public executions.

*Nina Ber-Donkor*

*Publishing Co-ordinator, Knopf Random Vintage Canada Group*

*For Sale* took hold of me right from the start, and I almost didn't notice. Such is the stealth and the quiet, unassuming power of Sharon Overend's prose. Casual, conversational, simple, spare, yet utterly compelling, she eases you along a familiar path. Then when you see the destination just up ahead, she thumps you in the solar plexus, and veers off the trail. I felt the steering wheel in my hands and the snow beneath the tires. I felt the tension, the anticipation, and the daring wrapped up in her words. Then I felt the sudden sense of loss, just as Sharon Overend intended. A wonderful, memorable, evocative story.

*Terry Fallis, Writer, Instructor*

Karen Plater's *She Steps Out* was totally engrossing, both in style and content, and I felt cheated when I couldn't read on. I can't wait to see the entire book in stores. The narrative about realities of farm life juxtaposed with city realities and emotional back-story made for a textured read and complex structure.

*Zoe Whittall, Writer, Journalist*

