Three.

SPRING SNOW
BY NORIKO HOSHINO

KITCHEN COMFORT
BY CATHERINE CAMPBELL

DEVONNA
BY AUDREY FRANCIS-PLANTE
Three.

THE 2017 PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA STUDENT AWARD FOR FICTION
Introduction

Much as the glory of publication is sufficient motivation for most writers, getting actual dollars for your writing is a validation that lends a deeper significance to seeing your name and words in print. For that reason, I’m very excited that this 15th edition of *Three* marks a substantial increase in prize money for our winners. Five years ago Penguin Random House Canada agreed to double their endowment, and this year we received the final payment into the endowment that makes this award and this chapbook possible. The University of Toronto has also agreed, through their Boundless campaign, to match the funds generated each year, allowing us to give one prize of $2500 and two $1000 prizes to the three writers published in these pages!

Those three writers are evidence of the multicultural richness of our city and of the University of Toronto. This year’s winner is Noriko Hoshino for a love story set in Japan, “Spring Snow.” The other two winners are Catherine Campbell, for her delightfully comic and moving story, “Kitchen Comfort,” and Audrey Francis-Plante for an excerpt from her YA novel “Devonna.” Audrey is a graduate of our Certificate in Creative Writing who lives in Quebec, writes in her second language (like Noriko Hoshino), and who took all of the courses online.

Thanks to Lihua Gui, Benjamin Wood, Karen Franczkowki, Luba Zisser and Emily Sanford at SCS, and thank you to Gina Pironi, Tracey Turriff and everyone at Penguin Random House Canada for your ongoing support of emerging Canadian writers. A final thanks to our amazing instructors for helping these writers tell their stories. I trust you will enjoy them.

Lee Gowan
Program Director, Creative Writing
When curious, passionate learners intersect with talented and engaged instructors, magic can happen. We see this profoundly with this year’s edition of Three, the showcase publication for the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction. This is the fifteenth edition of this publication and I am delighted that from many exceptional pieces, the jury has selected Noriko Hoshino’s “Spring Snow” as the award recipient, and Catherine Campbell’s “Kitchen Comfort” and Audrey Francis-Plante’s “Devonna” as Honorable Mentions.

The Creative Writing Program at the University of Toronto’s School of Continuing Studies is highly valued. We are proud to see our learners enrich their craft with the support and encouragement of accomplished instructors, and proud to connect this emerging Canadian talent to leaders in the field of writing and publishing like Penguin Random House Canada. This convergence of talent strengthens our program and helps the School to continue to enrich lives and transform careers.

Congratulations to the award winners, Noriko, Catherine and Audrey, and to all who provided submissions. I trust that this recognition will continue to spark your passion for writing. A special thank you to Penguin Random House Canada for making this award possible. We are grateful for your ongoing support and your leadership in this field.

I encourage all of us to Be Unlimited and to embrace learning at all stages of our lives!

Maureen MacDonald, Dean
University of Toronto, School of Continuing Studies
It is my great pleasure to congratulate the winner and honourable mentions for this year’s Student Award for Fiction on behalf of Penguin Random House Canada.

It is always a pleasure to read the fiction submissions contained in *Three*, and to have the opportunity to share this work with a larger audience. “Spring Snow” by Noriko Hoshino, “Kitchen Comfort” by Catherine Campbell, and “Devonna” by Audrey Francis-Plante are very engaging reads that we hope you will enjoy.

Penguin Random House Canada is proud to be associated with the University of Toronto’s School of Continuing Studies Creative Writing program, which shares our commitment to, and passion for, the development of emerging Canadian writers. Along with the winner and honourable mentions, we also congratulate all of the finalists and thank everyone who submitted their work for this award.

I would also like to thank Lee Gowan for his ongoing leadership of the Creative Writing program and to Dean Maureen MacDonald and all of the instructors in the program. And special thanks to this year’s jurors Claire Cameron, Bianca Marais and Melanie Tutino, as well as Gina Pieroni who helped make *Three* possible.

Congratulations again to Noriko Hoshino, Catherine Campbell and Audrey Francis-Plante. Happy reading!

Tracey Turriff  
Senior Vice President, Corporate Communications  
Penguin Random House Canada
Finalists for the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction 2017

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NORIKO HOSHINO was born and raised in Tokyo, Japan. She came to Canada in 1997 and now lives in Toronto. She works as a DVD subtitle editor, which provides her the opportunity to learn how to write great dialogue. One of her short stories, “Home,” appeared in Asian Journal of Literature, Culture and Society published by Assumption University Press in Thailand.
The fluorescent light mounted above the bathroom mirror casts a pale glow, deepening the circles under my eyes. Stubble on my chin feels scratchy on my finger tips. With ten hours’ sleep I should feel rested, but my body is heavy. Funny, fatigue sets in when I finally have time to feel it; this is the first day off in weeks. After graduation, I could have gone home and taught at a high school in Mikuni. I took extra courses to qualify as a math and physics teacher, didn’t I? But at that time, living in Tokyo and working for a big company seemed enticing.

The kettle shrieks. Did I put the kettle on the stove? It was probably the first thing I did, just as I do every morning. I pick up the stained mug from the sink and rinse it before pouring the boiling water. The instant coffee smells better than the stale office brew. I sip the hot brown liquid as I return to the bedroom. My throat feels stiff. I haven’t spoken much lately other than “good morning” and “see you tomorrow.”

A motorcycle rumbles in and out of the driveway of my apartment building. The dull drone announces mail delivery. All I get these days is junk, but I’ll go downstairs anyway; my day off has become blank since I broke up with Michiyo. Seeing someone at work was a mistake in the first place. I snatch my jacket from the peg on the wall and slip into wooden sandals.

Dark clouds hanging from the sky have ripened. As if to offset the ominous look, fluffy flakes are dancing down in the whirling wind. I wonder who first compared snow to cherry petals blown by the wind. As I reach out to open my mailbox, stray silver blossoms drift into the sheltered entrance and land on my arm. The delicate petals glisten in a flash and dissolve. Snow in Tokyo does not stay long. In spring, its life ends the moment it hits the ground.
Hidden among the white envelopes, a small powder pink envelope catches my eye. It’s from Sayoko, my former student. Her letter is unexpected, but I feel as if I have known all along it was coming.

I met Sayoko in Mikuni a few summers ago, when I was in my senior year of university in Tokyo. In July and August, I used to stay in the city to teach math and science at a cram school, which offered entrance exam preparation courses for university applicants—high school students and ronins, who had failed the previous winter. That year, however, I decided to go home while I worked on my graduation thesis on superconductivity. Eating my mother’s home cooking was far better than slurping instant noodle soup in my tiny kitchen.

After a week holed up in my room with books and lab data, I needed to get some exercise. I visited Saito-sensei, my former homeroom teacher and basketball coach, and asked him if he could use a hand with team practices.

“That would be great,” he said. “Everyone thinks a middle school teacher has an easy life with a long summer vacation, but I’m really busy. You know, being busy makes some people feel they’re important. But it’s not a good thing.”

“It’s not?”

“Yamane-kun, the kanji character for ‘busy’ is made of two parts—the left side of the character means ‘heart’ and the right one means ‘to lose.’”

“I’ve never paid much attention to individual parts of a kanji.”

“Well, the kanji tells you the truth; you have to slow down. Anyway, I appreciate your help.”

I went to the gym every weekday morning. I sometimes oversaw the whole practice period when Saito-sensei had a meeting or some desk work.

One morning, Saito-sensei came back from his office and asked me to come with him.

“I’d like you to have a look at a math workbook. Sayoko Kawada, who was in my class last year, is asking for help with her workbook, but I can’t deal with the high school level. Maybe too much paperwork has dulled my math skills.”
Sayoko was waiting at Saito-sensei’s desk in the teachers’ room, sipping tea from her thermos. When she saw us, she jumped to her feet and gave a quick bow. I felt as if I was towering over her. She was a little short for a sixteen-year-old and slightly on the chubby side. Her pigtails made her look like a preteen girl. When Saito-sensei introduced her to me, her dark brown eyes shone in her tanned face. She bowed again. Then she looked straight into my eyes, and smiled brilliantly.

Sayoko and I headed for the library around the block, where she spent most of her days studying. The competition for higher education was especially fierce in urban areas, but a quiet rural town like ours had its share of the survival contest. Students didn’t want to fail university entrance exams, for the label *ronin* would follow them for years to come.

On our way, I found out that Sayoko went to the same private school that I had attended. Prestigious from the outside, it was in fact an academic boot camp. All the regular courses were completed by the end of the second year, leaving the third year entirely to entrance exam preparations. They even taught tricks for picking the right answer when you have no clue.

“Did they tell you the tips for multiple-choice questions?” I asked.

“On the first day,” said Sayoko, chuckling. “Select the second one from the last.”

“Go for either the longest or the shortest alternative, whichever makes more sense.”

We laughed.

When we settled at a desk in the study area, Sayoko showed me her workbook. She had already solved the problems in trigonometric functions except for the last two questions. I told her which elements were involved, and let her formulate the answer. After five minutes of twirling her pen and mumbling under her breath, she started to scribble in her workbook. When she was done, she looked up and beamed.

“Yamane-sensei,” she said, addressing me as “sensei” as if I were a real teacher. “I think I got it.”

She turned her workbook around so that I could see it. She had the correct answer. In another five minutes, after I gave her some hints, she figured out the other problem on her own. Thanking me over and over,
she promised to bring iced barley tea and rice crackers to the gym later.

She showed up the next day, and handed me a plastic jug of ice-cold tea and a bag of treats big enough for everybody on the team. She thanked me again, and left, like a gust of wind.

That evening my father brought unexpected news.

“Toru,” he said as he sat across from me at the low table. “Kawada-san told me you helped her daughter with math.”

“Yes,” I said, a little surprised. My father didn’t speak much except for occasional comments on food, such as “this daikon radish and yellow tail stew tastes good.”

“She wants to hire you as a tutor for the summer.”

Mrs. Kawada was my father’s co-worker at the Town Hall. I had met her before, but up until this moment it had not occurred to me that she was Sayoko’s mother.

Sayoko and I met twice a week at the library. I was used to teaching high school students at the cram school, but none of my students was as enthusiastic as Sayoko. Besides, the way she looked at me made me feel good. I was merely a survivor of the rat-race, but my reflection in her eyes was that of a hero. I would be happy to have a baby sister like her instead of my bossy older sis.

Sayoko seemed to dread math for no apparent reason. My role was to guide her through the numeral forest. As she began to find the path herself, she picked up speed. When her workbook was completed, I was able to squeeze in some lessons on the new material for the second term. That should give her room to breathe for the first few weeks of September.

On the last day of our session, Sayoko was more relaxed.

“I don’t like math, but when I find a solution to a difficult problem, I feel like a winner,” she said, grinning. “Why do you like math, Yamane-sensei?”

“Actually, I’ve never thought about it. Maybe it’s because there’s always an answer. It’s simple and straightforward.”

“Hmm,” she said.

“What’s so hmm about it, Sayoko-chan?”

“It’s just . . . I think it would be more interesting if one plus one equalled more than two sometimes—or less. I like literature because
when two words are combined, the result is different from the sum of each word."

“For example?”

“Let’s see . . . The word ‘promenade’ is composed of ‘scattered’ and ‘walk’.”

“I’ve never looked at words that way. For me ‘promenade’ was just a word made of two characters. Now, it makes sense. When you go for a walk, you don’t need to set a course but you can go in any direction. It’s ‘scattered’ all right.”

“I can’t think of good examples, but by combining words, nuance shifts, and at times even the meaning changes.”

“You like shifts and changes?”

“I don’t know. But I like the idea of the infinite possibilities word combinations can create.”

It was my turn to _hmmmm_ about what she had said. “So your favourite subject is literature, obviously.”

“Especially Japanese Classics. Those who lived in the Heian Period had refined taste. They knew elegance.”

“What makes you think so?” I said, trying hard not to show my amusement. Sayoko and “elegance” seemed to sit on the opposite ends of the scale. The girl in front of me was a lively little chili pepper, far from the demure, docile female figures depicted in the stories written over a thousand years ago.

Unaware of my stifled smile, she gazed through an imaginary window into the distant past. “People in that era saw beauty in things that are overlooked by the modern eye, like dew under the leaves reflecting the soft morning rays. They heard frost crystals crunch under their feet on a late autumn day. They knew spring was near when easterly winds carried the scent of plum blossoms. And they captured those moments in _tanka_ poems to immortalize them. We phone someone to chat, in a thousand words that just pop up in our heads, but ancient lovers exchanged poems written in polished expressions to articulate what touched their hearts . . .”

Sayoko seemed to be lost in her thoughts. The low hum of the air conditioning filled the quiet library. I wondered if her free spirit and sensitive mind could stay alive in this highly competitive education system, where
students were not allowed to think, but were forced to memorize formulae and facts. Could she tread within the narrow margins of the balance beam? If she fell, a second chance would be hard to come by.

Before I found out the answer, the summer was over. I returned to Tokyo, to the concrete jungle.

I occasionally thought about Sayoko, but soon I became buried in my daily routine—attending classes and going to the lab on weekdays, and teaching at the cram school on Saturday afternoons—except for the month of October, when I went to a high school for practice teaching. I wasn’t keen on getting a teaching license, but my parents insisted that I should, so I took extra courses to qualify. However, I didn’t really picture myself teaching at a school in Mikuni, or in Tokyo, for that matter. By then I had received an offer letter for a job that would start in April, following my graduation. Securing a prospective position early was one of the few perks of science and engineering majors, for big corporations tended to harvest “rice seedlings” from the green field.

It was on the late morning of January the first. I was alone in my apartment, struggling to write the final chapter of my graduation thesis. Organizing the lab data was the easy part; stringing the words together was not.

I heard the mailman’s motorcycle in the driveway, and went downstairs to find Sayoko’s New Year’s card.

After the formal greetings, she had written a tanka poem.

Pot of soup steaming,  
rice cakes toasted on the grid.  
“Zoni is ready!”  
Aroma of happiness  
wafting from the warm kitchen.

The thought of zoni made me hungry—chunks of root vegetables and chicken stewed in bonito and soy sauce flavoured soup, with toasted rice cakes thrown in at the end. I suddenly felt homesick; it was the first time I had ever spent the New Year’s Day away from home.
After graduation, I started to work for a semiconductor manufacturer based in Tokyo. New employees were sent to the company’s recreational facility at the foot of Mt. Fuji, where I met other “rice seedlings” during the two weeks’ training.

When I returned to Tokyo, Sayoko’s greeting card was waiting for me in my mailbox. It was a short message followed by a tanka poem, just like a letter in the Heian Period.

Dear Yamane-sensei,

It’s not a formal greeting season, but it’s hard not to send a card on a beautiful spring day.

A new school year has begun—not that I enjoy cramming knowledge into my head—but still, it’s a fresh start.

Pale pink confetti
east wind has tossed in the air.
A new beginning.
Soon peach blossoms will follow.
And apples are next in line.

Sayoko

Her tanka brought back a familiar image. Mikuni’s apple orchards spread in the front, with snow-capped Azuma Mountains in the background. How I missed the blue expanse. Here in Tokyo, my eyes could only travel to the nearby buildings with strips of gray skies in between. I raised her card to my nose for a hint of apple, knowing full well it was not scented. I just wanted to breathe in the air of my hometown, even in my imagination.

The following Monday I woke up to reality. The training was, it turned out, the most exciting part of my work. Once I was assigned to the lab, my daily routine became pretty much the same as the one I’d had during my university years.
When summer came, Sayoko sent me another greeting card

_Dear Yamane-sensei,_

_Do you think you can reach a certain point in time?_  
I don't. _The moment “tomorrow” turns “today,” it’s no longer “tomorrow.”_ If you wait long enough, _will the time finally come?_  
I _keep waiting, for what, I don’t know._

_My shadow cast long_  
on a rock along the stream.  
_Awkward sundial,_  
_with its six o'clock hour mark_  
a _dried-up dragonfly shell._

_Sayoko_

It certainly was different from a “standard” summer greeting card, which usually starts with “Best wishes for the hot season.” I envied her ease with words.

I imagined a dragonfly nymph surfacing from the shallow water and climbing up the rock. When it emerged from the pupa, its delicate wings gradually spread. Were you flying over the water, Sayoko?

The way she described the elusive nature of “time” was refreshing. I no longer maintained the same level of wonder. Maybe living in a concrete jungle had dulled my senses. Was that an excuse? It was lame. I felt old.

Toward the end of that year, I received a gray-rimmed postcard with a printed message. “Please excuse me for not sending New Year’s greetings this year, for I am in mourning for my father.” She must have been devastated. But somehow I couldn’t picture her with a sad face; in my memory, she was a girl with a sunny smile.

I bought a “letter set” with sheets of paper and three matching envelopes at a convenience store. It was difficult to express my sympathy, but I managed to fill the page. I read what I had written.
Dear Sayoko-chan,

I’m sorry about your father. It must have been difficult for you. I hope you are going to overcome the feeling of emptiness . . .

It didn’t sound right. I crumpled the paper and threw it into the waste basket. Another try the next day did not work. Soon all the sheets were gone. I stuffed the matching envelopes into my drawer as if to bury my guilt for not sending her a note.

When I called home in late December, my mother told me that Yasuo Kawada had died.

“I know, Mother. Sayoko-chan sent me an ‘in-mourning’ postcard.”

My guilt resurfaced, but I pushed it back. After a pause, I said, “I’m coming home for New Year’s holidays. I took a few days off, too.”

Every platform at Ueno Station was full of people with big bags, heading home. Quiet anticipations wafted through the cold crisp air. I lined up at the end of the queue, and pulled out a book from my shoulder bag. While my eyes followed the print on the page, my thoughts kept returning to Sayoko. I could understand the gravity of losing a parent at her age, but could not fathom the depth of her sorrow. I closed my book. It was going to be a long ride.

The celebration of New Year used to be a major event in my childhood, but now it had become less ceremonious. As my older sister stayed with her husband’s family, it was just the three of us. My parents and I watched television together, and ate fish and vegetable dishes that my mother had arranged beautifully in the square lacquered boxes with dividers. Fine brush strokes depicted cranes in flight on the glossy black surface.

Although I wanted to know what had happened to Sayoko’s father Yasuo, I did not ask. Talking about death during the first three days of the year was bad luck. It was not as if my parents believed that misfortune would befall us, but they were the kind of people always trying to be on the safe side, just in case.
It was the night of January the fourth. My father and I were drinking beer. My mother had gone to bed earlier. A silly holiday special with singers and idols was on the television, but the parlour tricks and comedy sketches played out on the nineteen inch screen did not register.

“Still can’t believe Yasuo is gone,” said my father, “I went to school with him.”

A TV ad blew up on the screen with loud music. I suddenly realized that my father and I rarely talked face to face. We always watched something on TV, like a quiz show or a baseball game, and drank beer or sake to wash down awkwardness.

“This is what Y asuo’s subordinate, Kubo, told me at the funeral,” he said. “On that day, Yasuo and Kubo went downstairs to retrieve some chemical in the storage unit. They removed the lid of a tub that also contained large chunks of dry ice. Yasuo was familiar with handling hazardous substances, but at that brief moment his caution must’ve slipped. He leaned over the tub a second too soon and inhaled carbon-dioxide streaming out of it. He gagged, and staggered away from the container. His knees buckled, and his body toppled down to the floor.”

“I know carbon-dioxide can be deadly, but can dry ice cause that much damage?”

“I’d never heard of anything like that.” my father stared at his glass on the low table. “Kubo says it happened so fast. He was horrified, but had the good sense to call an ambulance. Yasuo was rushed to the Town Hospital, but passed away before his family arrived.”

My father emptied his glass, and poured another.

“I talked to Yasuo’s co-workers at the funeral. They say he’d been working long hours after his promotion to section manager. He always took his responsibility seriously.”

“I can imagine,” I said, remembering how intense Sayoko became when she was concentrating.

“Everyone there works long hours these days. The factory went through a tough time, and dozens of workers were laid off. Now new orders are coming in, but they are being cautious.”

“The workload must’ve been overwhelming.”

“You know, I hear that people in foreign countries call us ‘economic
animals. But it’s not all about money. Luckily, the Town Hall is not as busy as their factory, but even there, when other people are working overtime, I feel guilty if I leave before they do. Anyway, one guy said it could have been worse. Yasuo could have suddenly died from overwork.”

“And the Workers’ Compensation Board might not take karoshi as work-related.”

“Right. But money doesn’t ease the pain of his family. A loss is a loss.” He sighed. “We say we don’t know what’s around the corner, but that doesn’t prepare us for the worst, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t. But I don’t want to be prepared.”

“Neither do I. I’d rather go on with everyday life.”

The TV emitted a high-pitched tone, and the screen showed colour bars. I turned it off.

“Well, I’d better go to bed before I doze off here.” My father drained his lukewarm beer. Pushing himself up from the floor cushion, he trudged toward the toilet.

I sat there for a while. It was the first time I had an adult-to-adult dialogue with him. Then it struck me that Sayoko could no longer talk to her father.

The following summer Sayoko did not send me a greeting card. When fall came, I found a small envelope in my mailbox. At a glance, I noticed something was missing. Her letter had always had a tanka poem at the end; this one did not.

Sayoko apologized for skipping summer greetings, and explained briefly that her father had died in a work-related accident, which she described in a detached, matter-of-fact tone. Black ink on the pale blue writing paper formed a stark contrast.

She wrote about the universities she was going to apply for. “Three are in Tokyo, and one is local. Those universities are well within range according to the test scores I’ve received from the practice exam agencies.” She concluded her letter with five words. “I will do my best.”

In January, I received a phone call from Sayoko’s mother. She asked me if I could help her daughter find the places where she was to write the
entrance examinations. Sayoko was going to arrive on the first Sunday of February, write three exams, and go home on National Foundation Day, which would fall on Friday.

“I'm sorry to trouble you, but I couldn't think of anyone else,” said Mrs. Kawada. “Tokyo is such a big city. Sayoko has only visited there once on her school trip.”

“Don't worry, Kawada-san. I'll help your daughter.”

“I would accompany her if I could, but I have an appointment at the hospital that week. If I miss it, I have to wait for another month.”

Although I was concerned, I did not ask her what the appointment was for; it would be intrusive.

“It's all right. I'll show her around.”

On Sunday afternoon, I arrived at the hotel where Sayoko was staying. As I was fifteen minutes early, I took off my coat and headed for an empty sofa in the lobby. A slender girl rose slowly to her feet from the leather chair at the far end while straightening the crease on the skirt of her school uniform. She bowed graciously, her shoulder-length hair swaying. I stopped in my tracks. Staring at her for a moment, I took a few uncertain steps toward her.

“Sayoko-chan?”

“Hello, Yamane-sensei.” The faint smile on her pale face failed to mask the sadness in her eyes.

While we visited the universities, she did not talk much. I had many things I wanted to ask her, but could not. Her downcast eyes and pressed lips erected an invisible wall around her, which made her look more vulnerable. Even a gentle push might rattle her fragile composure. I simply pointed out the landmarks and major intersections, and commented on cafes and eateries local students frequented. The bookstore that might carry Japanese classics caught her attention. She stopped to jot it down in her little notebook.

After we visited the entrance exam sites, I asked Sayoko if she would like to have a cup of tea. I was hoping that she would open up a bit.

“I'd love to, but I should go back to my hotel and study,” she said, but her pace slowed.
As we headed for her hotel, we ambled through Ochanomizu, the University District. A side street along the gentle slope led to the station, which we walked past. Turning the corner, we came to a bridge over the narrow river with railroad tracks on the bank.

“This is Hijiri Bridge. To get to the exam sites from your hotel, you either cross this bridge or the one we went over earlier,” I said.

“Isn’t this the bridge in ‘Lemon’ by Masashi Sada?”

“You know that song?”

“Yes. I like Sada,” she said. “His lyrics are sad, though.”

I nodded. “‘Lemon’ is a breakup song.”

“I know.”

Halfway down the bridge, Sayoko halted. I stopped. Pedestrians stepped around us as if we were a rock that had parted the human stream. Sayoko weaved through the crowd to the parapet. I followed her. We looked down at the river in silence. When a train rumbled toward the station, the muddy water rippled.

“Yamane-sensei, you know that my mother’s going to have a biopsy?”

“No. She did mention an appointment, though.”

“It’s tomorrow morning. I hope it’ll turn out all right.”

“What’s it for, if you don’t mind my asking?”

“She has a tumour in her breast.”

“Oh . . . I’m sorry.”

Sayoko fell silent again.

It was nearly five o’clock. The wind was picking up, and blowing away the fading warmth of the setting sun. We started strolling. People trotted past us with their hands in their coat pockets.

“Yamane-sensei,” said Sayoko, with her eyes on the passers-by. “When my father died so suddenly, I regretted that I’d taken him for granted. I loved him, but that wasn’t enough. Now my mother . . .” Her soft voice was drowned in the traffic noise.

She turned her face toward the shop window as if to check inside, but the reflection on the glass was that of the saddest girl I had ever seen. My arm shot up spontaneously, and hovered behind her back. I did not know what my arm was doing up there. Should I pat her gently on the back? Or did I want to pull her to my shoulder? She’d probably be embarrassed.
Besides, it would be inappropriate; she was my former student. My arm went limp.

My feet became heavy as we trod the last few blocks to her hotel.

“Sayoko-chan, what time are you leaving on Friday?”

“Eleven forty.”

“I’ll see you off at the station.”

“You don’t have to, Yamane-sensei. I’ll be fine.”

“I want to.”

“Thank you,” she said, lowering her gaze.

By the time Sayoko and I arrived at Ueno Station on Friday, it had begun to snow. On the long platform, we threaded our way through other passengers clustered around the sheltered area in the mid section. The north end was deserted. Inside the train, the cleaning crew was busy sweeping the floor and collecting the trash. I glanced at my watch. Eleven thirty-three.

“Yamane-sensei,” said Sayoko, kicking at a cigarette butt on the concrete floor. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

“Well—”

“I’m sorry. You don’t have to answer,” she said quickly. “I was just curious.”

“It’s all right, but my answer is ‘yes and no.’”

“What do you mean?”

“I have a girlfriend, but I haven’t seen her lately. I may end up singing ‘Lemon.’”

“Oh.”

“She was transferred to the lab in Shizuoka-prefecture last April. In the beginning, we managed to see each other once a month. Then it started to fall off. We’re both busy, and sometimes we work on Sundays. You probably know this, but the kanji character for ‘busy’ is composed of—”

“Two parts: ‘heart’ and ‘to lose.’ You become too busy to have any feelings,” she said. That sad smile again.

A monotonous voice sounded from the speaker. “The train for Sendai on platform number twelve is ready for boarding.” The doors opened with a hiss.
I stood by the door, watching Sayoko pace on the platform. I checked
my watch again. Eleven thirty-eight.

She stopped abruptly and looked up with her arms stretched. “I like
to watch snow falling from the sky.” She blinked when white flakes
landed on her eye lashes. Still looking up, she said, “Will you see me if
I come to Tokyo?”

“You’ll make a lot of friends at university. You wouldn’t like to see me.”

“If I would?”

“Well, I’ll—” The departure bell finished my sentence.

Falling snow filled the momentary silence. Sayoko hesitated, took a
deep breath, and stepped up onto the raised floor of the train. For the first
time during her Tokyo trip, she looked straight at me. Her dark brown eyes
were as clear as a mountain lake. I was suddenly lost for words.

“Sayoko-chan, I’d—”

The door slid shut between us. The low hum of the engine reverber-
ated from underneath. The train slowly began to pull away. I followed it.
With her palms on the glass, Sayoko leaned forward, her face nearly
touching the surface. Her lips formed good-bye while melted snow ran
down her cheeks.

The noon chime rings from the elementary school behind my apartment
building. I realize melted snow has blotted the ink on the powder pink
envelope. I open it.

Dear Yamane-sensei,

Thank you for taking the time to show me around in Tokyo.

I failed one of the Tokyo exams, but fortunately I received
acceptance letters from the other universities. Three out of four isn’t
bad, is it? But having choices is not always good, for I might regret
my decision some day.

My mother’s biopsy results came out all right. She said she had
been convinced she’d had breast cancer. She thought she was going
to die and that I would be left alone. She believes bad things happen
in succession. Silly idea, isn’t it? She’d kept her thoughts until her
doctor called her with the good news. She cried when she hung up
the phone. Perhaps relief poked a hole in the “little bag” in her heart, where she’d stuffed all her emotions.

Yamane-sensei, she didn’t cry when my father died. I remember her stiff posture at the funeral. It’s strange because I hardly recall anything during that period. It still feels like a bad dream. But the reality started to sink in. My “little bag” was torn open when I received the acceptance letters.

Before all this, I wanted to go to Tokyo. Maybe I had a crush on the urban life. Gradually the truth dawned on me. All my mother and I have is each other.

Again, thank you very much for your kindness.

Shower of blossoms
a gust of wind has stirred up.
Pale pink petals whirl
like falling snow. Or is it?
Frozen land of lost seasons.

Sayoko

I step out on the driveway, and look up at the sky, just like Sayoko did at Ueno Station. I stretch out my arms, feeling the cold stinging touch of the delicate crystals before they dissolve on my palms.

Sayoko, will you see me if I return to Mikuni?
KITCHEN COMFORT
CATHERINE CAMPBELL

CATHERINE CAMPBELL was born and raised in Toronto. She recently returned to Toronto after having lived in Nova Scotia, Peterborough and Belleville. Catherine works in the not-for-profit sector in marketing and communications. She is currently working on her Creative Writing Certificate with the aim of producing a collection of short fiction.
Ever since he had moved out a feeling close to propriety had enveloped her. A pleasure to have a kitchen all to herself. Not to have Mr. Malstron lurking, sticking his nose into her business, her life.

Standing in front of the stove, her stove, absently stirring the chowder, she again began to list the things she would fill the empty cupboards with, if only she could. But you can always dream. She would be frivolous. She would lay in a larger store of cans, even though she preferred to start from scratch. She could keep a wider variety of biscuits and crackers on hand—perhaps Pally Butter Biscuits, Carr’s Water Crackers and some Walker’s Oatcakes. A selection of teas would be nice—Constant Comment, Camomile or Twinings Darjeeling. Jam—she might really splurge and buy some pots of Robertson’s Redcurrant and Bramble spreads. Who knows, maybe even some of those oils and flavoured vinegars.

What a treat to be completely on her own. Mr. Malstron, Frank, as he had asked her to call him, really had become a bother. At first he had seemed pleasant enough and she had actually enjoyed their little chats. But then it had become obvious that he was purposely planning his kitchen time and meal preparation to coincide with her long established routines. Even when she tried to vary her schedule, he would appear, feigning nonchalance, but unable to hide his eagerness. Invitations to share a cup of tea, even a meal. And the questions. “Where did you buy those lovely apples?” “How was work today?” “How much salt do you put in your chicken broth?” She knew he wasn’t really interested in her recipes. She found his behaviour inconsiderate, downright rude. At least, however, he had not gone so far as to presume upon calling her Margaret. Miss Boultbee it was (yes, one of the Boultbees, and not just distantly).
It is amazing the lengths to which some people will go to set up their lives to be impenetrable. Margaret Boulbee calls it comfort. She is fifty-six. Never married. Once, when she was in her early twenties, she had an intimate relationship with a young man who had hoped it would lead to marriage. She doesn’t feel she missed out in life by not having a husband and sometimes thinks back fondly to her “affair”. It is important to have had a past.

Home to Margaret is two rooms—a bedroom and a sitting room—a private bath and a shared kitchen on the third floor of a large, old Rosedale house. Having a smart address is meaningful to her. She has lived here for eighteen years now. It is not like residing in a rooming house. The premises are very well maintained. Her rooms are large. She gets much enjoyment from the garden which she has a full view of from her back room window. And, the Pattersons are very particular about whom they allow as lodgers. The drawback is that Margaret does not enter through the front door.

She was feeling a tad adventurous. After her morning ablutions Margaret ventured into the kitchen wearing only her dressing gown. Normally, she would be dressed and fully presentable before she would venture out of her rooms. She only looked over her shoulder a couple of times as she prepared her breakfast. Hot oatmeal—not the quick-cook kind—half a banana, orange juice, a multi-purpose vitamin and tea. A well balanced start to the day.

Just last night, she had lingered over dinner. She had set the mood with candles, using the brass candlesticks she had purchased four years ago from a reputable antique dealer. She had been very taken by them but had never had the occasion to use them.

It is no wonder that Margaret is so concerned with appearances—and she is. She is a Boulbee after all. This means that she was born into a rarefied world. It is unfortunate that her father, who initially showed the great promise that could only be expected, experienced a rapid decline. Horses should be enjoyed in the proper social and financial context. Unchecked, this can lead to a common enterprise. Combined with alcohol, it can lead to a spiralling fall. Margaret’s father spent his last and still young days in a
stupored haze, seated in the general admission stands of the Greenwood racetrack. It was quite fitting that his heart attack struck him here, only days after he surreptitiously filed for creditor protection.

Should Margaret have spent her formative years resenting her father’s weakness, or what today is benevolently viewed as a disease? Or was it more productive to have blamed her mother for her inadequate attempts to deal with her abruptly fallen state? Sympathetic or not, Margaret did not form a positive view of family life. And who could blame her? She did, however, value her father’s one bequest—the true essence of the Boultbee name.

Tonight Margaret enjoyed her meal with music (she had moved her small portable radio into the kitchen), the linen napkins she had purchased the day before and, again, candlelight. She put her earlier conversation with Mrs. Patterson out of her mind. Passing on the side hallway stairs, Mrs. Patterson had asked after her and then announced that she had been interviewing potential new guests. One young woman appeared suitable. Of course, her references would be checked. Margaret had agreed that you couldn’t be too careful. She did not indicate her dismay at her impending kitchen loss.

It’s true that in her early years the kitchen was Margaret’s favourite room in the Rosedale family house. She spent hours at the kitchen table listening to Sarah’s stories and prophecies. Sarah was the help who had helped the Boultbees since before Margaret was born. The kitchen was her primary domain, a kingdom that she ruled with efficiency and flair. It was from Sarah that Margaret learned to cook and the value of balanced, nutritious meals. And it’s a good thing too, for once the full impact of the decline was realized, and Sarah had to abdicate her throne, the running of the household fell to Margaret. The household then consisted of a four room apartment on Wellesley Street, far enough removed from Rosedale that Margaret’s mother was unable to face the outside world. Here Margaret received her training in living on her own.

Margaret quietly hummed to herself as she rinsed the last of the dinner dishes. Tonight she had had a guest, Anne. Anne is a co-worker whom
she occasionally accompanies to a movie or the symphony. Since living here she had not entertained and, she had to admit, she had successfully executed the evening. Anne was visibly impressed with the beef wellington, the pastries from her Saturday treat patisserie and the glass of wine. Margaret was sure that the fine quality of the china had not gone unnoticed. She might invite her again.

Before retiring, Margaret gave the front of the kitchen cupboards a quick wipe with the wet dishcloth—even the empty ones.

_Margaret works downtown at a large insurance company. This is quite convenient and most days she walks to and from the office. On days when the weather is particularly unpleasant she takes the bus. She is an assistant to an actuary, which she finds suitable. She is very comfortable with the precision of the numbers. From the tables that she works with and her family history she knows that she will live to be eighty-seven. She sees this as a fact rather than a probability._

_Margaret is very good with her money and has made a few small investments to insure that her next thirty-one years are provided for._

This morning Margaret was fully dressed when she entered the kitchen. She had had a very uneasy night and the four beer cans and two water bottles that were lined up on the counter served to confirm her mounting sense of loss. She had not imagined the voices last night—she guessed two male and one female—and the parade of footsteps up and down the stairs and hallway. Someone had moved into Mr. Malstron’s rooms. Beer! What was Mrs. Patterson thinking of?

Margaret gathered her radio, candlesticks, linen and good china to return them to her rooms. Annoyed, she berated herself. What had she been thinking?

_And what had Margaret been thinking? That the kitchen was now hers alone? That over the next thirty-one years no one would move in to replace Mr. Malstron? That this was her home, her domain? How improbable._

This evening a young man, quite presentable looking—however, he did
have bare feet—came into the kitchen while Margaret was putting away her groceries. Saying hello as he reached around her to grab a beer from the refrigerator, he brushed against her arm. Margaret glared at him. He smiled and retreated. Surely he couldn't be the new guest.

Voices from down the hallway. The scraping sound of furniture being moved. Hammering, hanging pictures? Settling-in noises. Margaret lost her appetite.

Margaret is a bright woman, although not what you could call well-educated. Her mother’s decline in circumstance was coupled with a decline in health. It was not a decline in will, as her mother’s will to die was strong. Margaret found herself an orphan at the age of sixteen, although any familial instincts had long left her. She left school, went to work and began building the parameters of the life she now lives. Marriage and children were beyond these parameters. No maternal instincts were ever allowed to take hold—she has never even been tempted to get a cat; however, there is a vague memory of a child that never was. What does this mean? At the risk of being obvious, if analyzed it could mean the child she never was. Or maybe Margaret had once been careless, maybe with the young man with whom she had a past, which might have resulted in an abortion. Or maybe if she had once been careless, she had had a child and given it up for adoption. Or maybe deep down she had once dreamed of having a family. There are so few questions in Margaret’s life. This is one. We will never know the answer. Margaret may never really know either, but at times she has believed all of the above.

It has been quiet again. No more noises, no more voices. This afternoon, which is Saturday, Margaret had surveyed the kitchen. Mr. Malstron’s cupboards have now been filled, as have his two shelves in the refrigerator. Both, she thought, bore further evaluation.

Her name is Valerie. Mrs. Patterson had told her this morning when Margaret met her on the way back from the bakery. She is a medical student. She has a part-time job in the evenings. Mrs. Patterson had seemed very pleased with her new guest selection and was sure that Miss Boultsbee would be too.
Putting her pastries into the cookie tin, Margaret decided to forego her Saturday afternoon tea. She opted for a nap instead.

*These days store-bought cookies are not very palatable. It used to be that you could buy quite acceptable ones, packaged in their own tin. One of Margaret’s few indulgences is the fresh baked goods she purchases once a week—a selection of small fruit tarts, cookies and squares. These she stores in an old Peake Frean tin. Another is the glass of red wine she has prior to her Saturday evening meal. This she pours from an old crystal decanter and drinks from an exquisite goblet.*

While preparing her evening meal Margaret carried out a closer inspection of the new guest’s provisions. This only after she listened carefully to make sure that the young woman was not home. (She could not bring herself to think of her familiarly enough to call her Valerie. That would make the unmet too real.) What she found was strange indeed.

Soy milk, a thick orange liquid, sprouts, lettuce with dirt encrusted roots, bizarre-looking fruit (or were they vegetables?). Three packages of tofu. On the counter a huge plastic container of ozonated spring water. A hand-held blender and a juicing machine. Was this woman one of those nouveau hippies Margaret had read about? In the garbage was a huge mound of what looked like mashed carrot peelings. Looking in the cupboards she found pita bread and two different types of flat breads, rice, grains and seven bottles of capsules with unpronounceable labels. There was a jar of what she assumed was peanut butter, with a thick layer of oil on top. And a couple of bags of what she could only hope were tea leaves. Margaret had been vaguely alarmed, but also vaguely intrigued. The couple of long black wavy hairs, stuck to the side of the sink, impressed her, but not positively. She returned to her sitting room for a second glass of wine.

*You might think, as set in her ways that she is, that Margaret is a bit of a frump. You would, however, be quite wrong. Margaret is very smart-looking, not quite chic, but she does take pride in her appearance. Her clothes are stylish, all purchased, on sale, at Holt Renfrew. She is slim and in good shape, owing to all the walking she does and her careful diet. Her hair is not*
long, black and wavy, but auburn and very short, cut in what used to be called a pixie-cut and is now again fashionable. She has a years-long standing second Tuesday of the month five-thirty appointment with her hairdresser.

Margaret has high cheekbones, another thing she is proud of. She wears a minimal amount of makeup; however, she is particularly careful that her lipstick is properly applied right after she brushes her teeth in the morning until she washes her face before retiring at night. Her fingernails are filed close and covered with a light coat of clear polish.

All in all Margaret is very attractive. Why then, is she not attractive to the opposite sex? Maybe the way she carries herself discourages pursuit. Maybe the men who are courageous enough to venture into what might be the beginnings of pursuit are quickly cut off. At the risk of again being obvious, maybe Margaret is scared and this carries an odour all of its own.

But then again, Margaret doesn't have any female friends either.

The level of intrigue has been mounting. The last few evenings, upon returning from work, Margaret has been met by strong lingering cooking odours hanging heavily in the kitchen. Not totally unpleasant, but definitely curious. She has surmised that the young woman prepares a meal before leaving for her evening job. Further inspection of the cupboards reveal jars of spices that Margaret has seen mentioned in recipes in magazines but which she has never felt inclined to use—turmeric, lemon balm, cumin, massaman curry, coriander, fennel, tamarind. These must account for the unusual aroma. Last night, when preparing a meatloaf, she added a pinch of the young woman's cumin. She quite enjoyed the taste and made herself a sandwich with the leftovers. A treat for today's lunch. She is only slightly shocked at the fact that she had borrowed from the woman's cupboard without asking.

Tonight, on the way home from the office, Margaret stopped at a news-stand to pick up this month’s edition of Chatelaine. She found herself drawn to the home and cooking section of the store and was fascinated to see the number of magazines devoted to vegetarian and holistic nutrition. She bought a copy of Vegetarian Times. She thinks she might flip through it this evening.
Margaret’s only exposure to the realm of family life and relationships has been through the magazines that she addictively absorbs. Even as a child, familial experiences were gleaned primarily through the magazines her mother subscribed to. In her early years she allowed the pages of these magazines a life so intrinsically tied to her own that she could almost feel warmth within her actual reality. This came to an end with the unwelcome and uncomfortable onset of adolescence, and the chilling clash of these two worlds. Safety was lukewarm and comforting. Why then does Margaret continue to give such credence to the lives and lifestyles of the unmet people within magazine covers?

It has been almost two weeks since the new guest moved in. Margaret has yet to meet her but has surprised herself by occasionally thinking of her as Valerie. And she does think of her often.

She continues to find interesting additions to the young woman’s shelves in the refrigerator and cupboards and surmises that she too enjoys cooking. And she always cleans up after herself.

Valerie is also very quiet. Only twice has Margaret heard her as she arrived home late in the evening. And there have been no visitors—no sign of the young man. Perhaps there has been a break in their relationship. Perhaps Valerie is on her own. Perhaps she prefers it this way. Margaret assumes this is a good thing, although sometimes she is not sure.

One thing does worry Margaret. In the reading of *Vegetarian Times* and the books she has found in the library, it has become apparent that there could be some serious deficiencies in a vegetarian diet—the lack of vitamin D and zinc, for instance. Most troubling is the fact that vitamin B-12 is not sufficiently present in plants. Margaret has learned that one would have to consume twenty-three cups of organically grown spinach in order to meet the daily requirement of B-12—and that inadequate amounts can result in anaemia, memory loss and even spinal cord degeneration. She photocopied an article suggesting alternative sources of B-12— the addition of things like tempeh, miso and seaweed. She then felt obliged to visit a health food store to make sure that these products are readily available. While there, she actually bought a cube of tofu and,
later that evening, when she was sure Valerie was not at home, she prepared a meatless lasagna from a recipe she had found in one of the young woman’s cookbooks.

Margaret left the photocopied article, with carefully highlighted sections, on the kitchen counter.

_This is unusual behaviour for Margaret. Does she really care if the young woman is lonely? Is the young woman’s health any of her concern? Margaret does not allow herself to question either her actions or motives._

The article has obviously been read. It is in a slightly different place on the counter and there is a small red stain in one corner—possibly tomato sauce. Margaret is pleased with herself. She is sure that Valerie appreciates her concern and effort.

Valerie continues to pervade Margaret’s thoughts. What does she look like? What does her voice sound like? Would she like Margaret? Surely she would. Surely they have a lot in common. Margaret had even begun to fabricate conversations with Valerie, most often held over a shared cup of tea at the kitchen table. At first she had felt mildly anxious at this prospect. What would they talk about? Would Valerie find her dull, uninteresting? But gradually, as the conversations begin to take form, Margaret can see them laughing together over the silly antics of her overbearing boss, excitedly discussing books they had both enjoyed, sharing the details of the demise of her distant but daring love life, chuckling over Margaret’s little joke about Mr. Malstron’s half of the refrigerator being so disorganized—a maelstrom indeed. She hears the excitement in Valerie’s voice as she announces that she stood first in her class this term and that she has just got a raise at work. Margaret is understanding about Valerie’s hurt and confusion over her recent break with the young man. Smiling, yet sincere, she assures Valerie that there are plenty of fish in the sea and it is best not to rush into anything. In a moment of unfamiliar closeness she can almost hear herself dredge up and delve into the questions she has previously refused to answer. It is with a real certainty that she knows that they are friends—one quite a bit older than the other—one seasoned, the other fresh.
Since the age of twelve Margaret has never been one to romanticize people or events. She is coming dangerously close to acknowledging a need. It is interesting that she does not step back and notice that she is behaving out of character.

Last week Margaret began to feel an inkling of what could only be described as excitement. Possibly it was time to meet Valerie, come face to face, take the next step in the friendship. On Tuesday evening she left a pot of soup on the stove and then went back into her sitting room to wait. Although it meant staying up much later than usual, when she heard Valerie coming up the stairs she would go into the kitchen, pretending that she had accidentally left the pot out. Talk of food was a good starting point. At two o’clock, when Valerie had still not come home, Margaret went down the hall to the kitchen and put the soup in the refrigerator. She was disappointed but held hope for the next night.

On Wednesday night at one-thirty, when Valerie had apparently still not been home, Margaret began to feel anxious. Surely her job would not keep her so late. Maybe something had happened to her. Would they notice at school—at work? Margaret returned the soup to the refrigerator. There was still no sign of her as she drifted off into a light sleep at four o’clock.

Thursday, on her way in from the office, Margaret stopped to chat with Mrs. Patterson who was pulling weeds in the back garden. Trying not to reveal her distress, Margaret asked if she had seen Valerie during the past few days. She hadn’t and went on to say how delighted she was that her initial instincts about her new guest had been well founded. The alarm that Margaret had been trying to bury all day became shrill. She hurriedly left, made her way up the stairs and poured herself Saturday’s glass of wine. How could Mrs. Patterson not be concerned that Valerie had not been home in three days? How awful to go unnoticed. Should she call the police? The University? Margaret didn’t even know where Valerie worked in the evenings.

That night Margaret skipped the pretence of the soup pot. At one forty-five she heard someone come quietly up the stairs, stop briefly in
the kitchen to open then close the refrigerator, and then enter Valerie's room. She was home. Margaret prayed that she was all right.

_Margaret has never, in her life, been one to pray._

Five days after Valerie returned Margaret's composure was sufficiently regained. She was assured that everything was fine. Evidence of cooking. Valerie's regular schedule had resumed. Margaret decided to be forthright and invite Valerie to join her for Saturday afternoon tea. She wrote a note on her personalized stationary. She was satisfied after the third attempt—just the right tone, formal yet friendly, the script not too shaky. She slipped the note under Valerie's door. Afterward, the flashes of panic were short-lived and minimal. The excitement was more prevalent. Their relationship was about to take an important turn.

Anticipating Valerie's reply, Margaret felt her excitement build throughout the next afternoon. Rushing home from work, she began to hum quietly under her breath. Entering the house she noticed a number of brightly coloured envelopes on the entranceway table where Mrs. Patterson left her guests’ mail. Maybe Valerie had left a note for her here. They were all addressed to Valerie Gray. (So that was her last name. Margaret thought it most unfitting for Valerie.) Hurrying up the stairs she entered her sitting room, expecting to see an envelope on the floor just inside the door. Seeing nothing there she looked out onto the hallway floor. Nothing there. Maybe she had left a response in the kitchen. Nothing on the counter or on the table. Trying to hold back her disappointment, Margaret told herself that Valerie had probably been too rushed that morning to reply to the invitation. Surely she would respond when she returned that night or the next morning. She prepared and ate her dinner. She made a list of what she would purchase for Saturday's tea.

The next evening there was more mail for Valerie. At the top of the stairs, by Valerie's door, was a florist's box. And again, there was no note for Margaret either in her room or in the kitchen. Now the disappointment could not be held down. Why would Valerie—her dear sweet Valerie—not respond, even if only to say that she would not be able to join Margaret? Had her invitation not been clear? Was there a carpet or mat
inside Valerie’s door that Margaret might have pushed the envelope under? Not feeling particularly hungry, Margaret made herself a poached egg on toast and retired early. She did not have a restful night. She heard Valerie come home at midnight.

When again the next evening there had still been no response, Margaret felt herself on the verge of tears. This was a rare feeling, something she was not at all comfortable with. She had no appetite. Sitting down she tried to read but could not settle. What she needed was a good long brisk walk to take her mind off thoughts of Valerie and the rift in their friendship.

Returning home at eight-thirty, Margaret sensed something different as soon as she opened the downstairs door. There was faint music in the background and voices. The aroma she had gotten used to in the kitchen reached down to the bottom of the stairs. A sharp loud laugh shot through the stairwell. As Margaret slowly climbed the stairs the voices grew louder. Even with Valerie’s door shut, Margaret could tell there was a large group of people in the room. More laughter. The distinct smell of alcohol.

Margaret quickly let herself into her sitting room and closed the door. Just in time as she heard voices and footsteps coming down the hallway from the kitchen. Her kitchen. There was a laughing shriek followed by a loud chorus of happy birthday. “Happy Birthday dear Valerie, Happy Birthday to you!”

The threatened tears of earlier dried. The long-held, sharp-edged lukewarmth regained its hold.

*Margaret does not normally go too far. But then again Margaret has not been acting normal lately. It is safe to say that this is one time she went way too far. Whatever had she been thinking? Whatever had she expected? That this unmet young woman wanted to know her, cared about her, was her friend, would look to her for support? That this unmet young woman wanted or could even relate to the same parameters that Margaret had constructed around her existence? Margaret should consider herself lucky that, although she did go too far, the distance back was easily and quickly travelled.*
Margaret slept well that night. She did not let the party patter that went on well into the early morning disturb her. She did not let self-pity pierce her. She did not berate herself—how stupid, how childish, how ridiculous. She did not acknowledge her desire that Mr. Malstron had never left.

Margaret did allow herself one concession. Instead of following her usual Saturday morning visit-to-the-bakery ritual she went to the supermarket. There, along with other groceries, she bought a sirloin steak.

The house was quiet when she returned. Entering the kitchen she could discern no sign of the previous night’s party. She placed her parcels on the counter. As she put the kettle on to boil for tea she noticed an envelope leaning up against her cookie tin. On the outside there was a note, written in firm, well-formed letters. “Margaret, I do apologize. I wrote this on Tuesday evening and put it in my purse, meaning to deliver it to you Wednesday morning. I found it this morning. Please excuse my rudeness, Valerie.” Inside there was a card, written in the same confident script. “Margaret, Thank you very much for your kind invitation to join you for tea on Saturday. I have been looking forward to meeting you. Unfortunately, I will be out of town for the weekend and am leaving Saturday morning. I would love to join you sometime soon, Valerie. P.S. A few friends are having a birthday party for me here on Friday night. Please feel free to drop by.”

Rooted, Margaret stood staring at the note. Not quite knowing why, she reached for her cookie tin and opened the lid. Inside were half a dozen of her favourite fruit tarts and squares from her Saturday treat patisserie. Smiling while the tears actually welled, she went down the hall to retrieve her grandmother’s Prince Albert teapot and matching cup and saucer from the china cupboard. This Saturday would be in Boulbee style.
AUDREY FRANCIS-PLANTE is a part-time traveller and part-time writer who completed the Certificate in Creative Writing doing online course from the University of Toronto, School of Continuing Studies. She blogs (audreywritesabroad.com), reads (mostly YA), and is still waiting for a letter (Hogwarts). She lives in Québec.
ONE

DEVONNA
According to my birth certificate, I’m 17 years old. I don’t feel 17 years old. Though I don’t know how old I feel either. Maybe 10. Maybe 213. It’s confusing. All the same to a body like mine. All emptiness.

My three secrets are the only things I hold on to, and I absolutely cannot let anyone know about them.

My first secret: I can’t physically feel anything.
The second: I hide candy bars in the attic so my brothers won’t find them.
The third: Once, I died.

BRAM
I do not remember much.
Three things.
1. That it hurt.
2. That the unhappiness in which I existed should have made it easier, but only made it worse.
3. Waking up in a veil of sweat that soon vanished, leaving me like I have been ever since I died. (Nothing.)

This is what I am allowed to remember as I wander around my miserable faith, invisible to the rest of the world except to those who went through the same I went through. Sometimes I forget whether what I want the most is to end this death or to remember more about my life. Sometimes I have a strange feeding—no. What is the word again?
Feeling.
A strange feeling that those two opposite things—life and death—are connected.
I am probably misinterpreting. It must be the last and foolish traces of hope in an aimless ghost.
To celebrate the end of our last high-school year coming up this month, Ryder Colt throws a monumental party and, like always, Jimmy D and I are the first ones there. We love to do that.

Come whenever you want, you say?

Eight o’clock: ding dong!

What usually happens is that we’re the first ones out of there too, since at eleven Jimmy D is wasted and I simply can’t have any more beer. Not that I feel any of the symptoms alcohol inflicts on the body—my taste buds aren’t even functional—it’s just that I can’t pretend to be drunk very long. Gets boring.

“Do we really want to go to this party?” Jimmy D says as we reach the front door of the fancy house. He steals a sip from my bottle of wine before continuing. “Colt’s parties are always dumb.”

I take back the bottle and ring the bell. “Ryder’s parties are the biggest ones. And you’re the one who mentioned our lack of social involvement.”

“Why do you call him Ryder? Everybody says Colt. You into him or something, little lady?” His hands in his pockets, he nudges me. “Heh?”


Before I can send Jimmy D to hell, the door opens.

There’s Colt. All tall and muscles and cloud of cologne. He tries to smile. Fails. “You’re early,” he says.

“S’up, Colt?” Jimmy D says and we enter in sync.

The house is vast, clean, and, most importantly, empty. Silently, Jimmy D
and I do our secret sign—hitting our knuckles together twice followed by a low-five—as Ryder joins us in the living room.

“Classy house you got here,” Jimmy D says after a brief whistle.

Colt, or Ryder, or whatever, runs a hand through his blond hair.

“Thanks.”

Silence.

There we are.

We’re not interested in the ultimate point of the night, which is the same every time, only with different furniture broken, different outfits stained, and different people crying. Nah. We crave the way people work very, very hard to sustain a conversation when they are still sober, and how they try to look comfortable in their clubbing clothes under all that light.

When Mary and Nicole arrive, Jimmy D and I are delighted. They’ve probably only talked to Ryder once, and now they must hope to hell it’ll be enough to justify their prompt arrival, and that their punctuality won’t be interpreted as a crush on the host.

“I’ll put some music on,” Ryder offers, walking toward the stereo.

Ah. Musical background. What a great way to avoid human interaction. But my Jimmy D won’t let our fun end this quickly. He raises a palm in the air as a stop sign. “Please,” he says, getting his iPhone out of his jacket. “Let me.”

He winks at me. Of course, he’ll take forever to pick a song, and he’ll make sure it’s a weird one. I sit on the couch, almost knocking the coffee table over on my way.

“Where’s the bathroom?” Mary asks.

“Over there,” Ryder says. I notice he’s been watching me. He smiles. Checks me out from head to toe.

“Devonna, your mama loves you,” Jimmy D says over his shoulder. That’s code for We can see your bra.

I roll my eyes and tug at my large, blue sweater. I can’t feel the fabric on my skin, and it drives Jimmy D—and my mom—crazy that I’m not more prudish.

*
In first grade, Jimmy D’s favourite game is Who’s Got The Biggest Scar—I always win. By width and quantity.

Jimmy D calls, “Check this out. A two-inch nail through my palm, Jesus-style.”

That’s my cue. I catwalk over the hopscotch game, stopping on number one, already tugging up my shirt.

Me, exposing the burn on my pale belly: “Played with burning marshmallows when we went camping.”

Jimmy D, pointing at ugly scratches on his arm: “Dog clawed me during a thunderstorm.”

Our first-grader fellows put their recreational activities on hold to have a look. I show my still-bleeding calves. “Got pinned at the top of the school’s fence.” Then my swollen fingers. “Garage door closed on my hand. Three times.”

Kids gasp. “You nuts?” Collin calls. “Why didn’t you move the first time?”

“I didn’t feel anything,” is my simple answer. My like-it-or-not-you’re-never-ever-going-to-feel-a-thing-on-Earth, usual answer. In a way, that answer is my closest friend and my worst enemy.

Jimmy D’s jaw is low on the number four of hopscotch, but I have plenty more. Like that hexagon of bee stings on my left butt cheek. I’m lifting my skirt when Mrs. Tina muffles the exclamations by shouting: “Devonna Moreau!” She hauls my skirt down like she wants to stick it on number one.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to do that?”

“Just showing off my war wounds, Mrs. Tina, that’s all.”

“It scares Nicole and you know it,” she whispers. “Stop playing with fire.”

“I don’t mind fire that much,” I confess.

“Don’t convince yourself that you’re invincible, or someone might believe it and test your limits.”

“But ma’am,” Jimmy D says. “She swears she didn’t feel any of it.”

Mrs. Tina straightens up. “And can you feel this, Miss Moreau?”

Okay. So from what I feel, I’m floating over the ground like a hopscotch angel. From what I see, Mrs. Tina is towing me inside the school by pulling—I think—my ear.

Kids laugh, like I’m some clown puking raw eggs—I later learn that my skirt was stuck in the elastic strap of my Pocahontas panties. I let her
dry? clammy?) hands shepherd me inside. “Can you now?” she repeats.

I roll my eyes. “Yes, Mrs. Tina,” I lie.

Had Mrs. Tina known I wasn’t trying to impress anyone; had she known I have never felt the pressure of the wind, the smack of a punch, the warmth of my mother’s kiss; had she known all that, maybe she wouldn’t have sent me to detention that day. But eventually, her words sink into my gut and I realize she could’ve sent me somewhere worse.

*

Jimmy D hums an ABBA song, eyes on his iPhone.

Ryder coughs.

Nicole smooths her skirt.

There is still no music.

When Mary comes back from the bathroom, the doorbell rings and everyone but Jimmy D and I volunteers to go. My friend finally settles for Andrea Bocelli and slides onto the couch next to me.

“Enough awkwardness for you, my friend?” I whisper with a smile as Con Te Partiro blasts out of the speakers.

He stares at his nails, smiling. “Mmm. I don’t know.”

*

After my third win at beer pong, I’m bored. I feel like I’m cheating. I’m 100% sober and my opponent barely notices he’s been using his cell phone as a racket for the last two rounds. Someone quickly takes my place when I declare my night over. As I search through the soused crowd for Jimmy D, a hand pops into my side vision, coming from behind my shoulders. I start, which often happens.

“Hey, Ryder.” Judging from the two centimetres I lost in height, he’s putting his whole weight on me. What a gent.

“I s’watching you as you played,” he says, his words slurred. “You rooock.”

I laugh politely with him, but then glimpse that his hand isn’t on my shoulder anymore. It has to be somewhere on my back, but where? Could
he be grabbing my ass? Would it be weird if I checked?

Ryder leans so that his mouth is just a thumb away from my ear. “You want une bière?” He loves to shoot random French words into his sentences to remind us that part of his family lives in a castle across the ocean.

I twist myself to face him, and from the corner of my eye, I see that he was grabbing my ass. What must he have thought of me for not even budging?

“How have you seen Jimmy D?” I ask.

A beat.

“I think he left.”

“What?”

I’m no longer bored; I’m royally pissed. But I don’t get the time to be very mad at Jimmy D because I hear his voice through the dancing mob. “Dev,” he calls and I seek his brown eyes. “Your papa works tomorrow.”

Awesome. That’s the butt-crack alert. I yank my jeans up as I say adieu to Ryder. Next thing I know someone is whispering in my ear again. “Let’s get out of here,” Jimmy D says, his beer breath reaching me instantly. But smells, I endure. Smells, I welcome.

I glance down at my bladder watch when it beeps twice, telling me I need to go ASAP.

“In a minute,” I say, and make my way to the bathroom.

I’m usually good at following bathroom schedules, but at parties, I drink way more and tend to forget, so I wear the watch from my childhood as a reminder. Otherwise, the worst is bound to happen. I might like to act a bit weird with Jimmy D, but I’m not socially suicidal either.

When I meet Jimmy D outside, he’s leaning on the mailbox, sleeping. I kick him awake. “It wasn’t me,” he mumbles.

Fortunately, the walk to his house isn’t that long. Not that I complain. My legs or feet never ache. It’s Jimmy D I’m thinking about. His trajectory is a little too Jack Sparrow. But we make it to his house and up his bedroom eventually.

Now.

It might look suspicious to sleep at a boy’s house, and in his bed, but we’re really just friends. With the freak that I was as a kid, putting
experimental wounds all over myself, I’ve had a hard time fitting into girls’ cliques.

  Except with Peggy.

  Still, Jimmy D never judged me. I’ve been sleeping over at his place ever since primary school, and now it just seems a little silly to make a separate bed for me.

  His large bed has always looked comfortable to me. As I sag into the grey blankets, I wonder what comfort is like.

  “God it’s hot,” Jimmy D says, clumsily opening the window above the bed. “How can you handle that sweater?”

  “Good night, Jimmy D.”

  He snorts. Lies on the other side of the bed. “Okay, enough. There are no other Jimmys in this room, or at school for that matter. So can you start calling me Jimmy, period?”

  I keep my eyes shut, but I’m surprised he’s kept this to himself all those years if it bugged him. Everybody calls him Jimmy D. Even his father. “Fine,” I mutter, breathing in the delicate fragrance of fresh linen that exudes from the pillow. “Jimmy Period it is.”

  “Dev, please.”

  I open my eyes. His expression takes me aback.

  “Sorry,” I say lamely as he purses his lips. He suddenly looks very sober. “Good night, Jimmy,” I try again, convinced I’ll never get used to this.

  I’m drifting off with the scent of him in my nose—wine and wool—when he abruptly claps his hands. “I knew it!” he yells.

  I groan. “What?”

  “You don’t feel a thing. You don’t feel a freaking thing.”

  My eyes snap open and I sit up. “What are you talking about?”

  “Dev,” he tells me with all the seriousness he can muster. “I just kissed you.”
THREE

DEVONNA
A scream backtracks halfway up my throat. “What?”

Jimmy D grins and slowly blinks at me. “I kissed you right on the mouth and you didn't budge.”

I envision running away.

“I knew it,” he repeats, clutching his bangs. “I actually kissed you before, back when we were kids, just to check. But then you were really, like, deep asleep. Like, snoring and everything. I had this fantasy you'd wake up like those cartoon chicks in the Disney movies, but you just kept snoring. Kind of hurt my pride to be honest.”

I bolt to the door but fall immediately back on the mattress. He must have grabbed my wrist or something.

“Wait,” he says and I shush him.

His father can't hear this. Nobody can.

As a kid, I used to think it was a cool thing and I figured the other kids would think it was a cool thing too, but now I can only see the dangers. I don't mind the kiss because Jimmy D means me no harm, but it's freaking me out to imagine what someone could do to me in my sleep without me sensing any of it.

My eyes focus on the hand lacing my wrist. I kneel on the bed, looking up at him: his warm eyes, his short brown hair, the few freckles on his crooked nose. “You can't tell anyone,” I whisper, almost mouthing the words. “They'll want to test my limits.”

“I won't let them,” he tells me quietly, combing the top of my hair with
his fingers, a gesture that is simple air to me. A hand disappearing beyond my range of vision and returning to Jimmy D’s lap. He could have stuck chewing gum on my scalp for all I know.

“Promise me you won’t tell,” I say.

“I promise I won’t tell a living soul.” He raises a fist so we can do our sign again, the fist bump and downward high-five. Then he catches my hand, his movement slowed by the alcohol. “But is it really about everything, everything? Like not even my hand in yours?”

I sigh. “Not even that. Nothing at all.”

“What if I punch you in the stomach really hard?”

“A, you can’t punch hard anyway. B, as I said, I feel nothing at all.”

“It’s still hard to believe. I know you’re tough, but still. What exactly do you mean by ‘at all’?”

I hate to admit that Mrs. Tina was right. People can’t help it. Some devilish curiosity in the human mind wants to see how far things can go. The best thing to do is to show him that they can go freaking dangerously far.

I spot a few pencils and a pair of scissors on Jimmy D’s desk, next to a ridiculous school project involving homemade Star Wars figurines and coffee beans. I stand up, looking carefully at where I move my legs, and reach for the scissors. I stay away from the bed; I don’t want to stain his new blanket. Rolling my blue sleeve up, I glance at the long mirror on the back of the door. I’m surprised by my pale reflection.

I look scared. I’m never scared. Few things scare you when nothing hurts you. I have a good reason to be afraid now; my first secret is out.

I dig the blunt blade into the middle of my left palm, tracing a line all the way to my inner elbow, like I’m just drawing on my skin with a red marker.

“I mean that I didn’t feel that.”

His eyes widen with concern. “Holy cow, Dev,” he says and I fear for a moment that this is just too crazy for him. He leaps off the bed. “You could’ve just let me punch you in the stomach. Jesus.”

“Sorry,” I say, but he’s gone.

He comes back a second later with a grey towel which he wraps around my red-soaked arm. “Man, that’s a crapload of blood. I need to get you cleaned up before my dad notices.”
I wonder what took me so long to tell him. Was I not sure I could trust him with this?

Oh. I know why.
Guilt.
Because of Peggy.

* 

My twin neighbours, Matias and Felipe, are spending the afternoon at my house. Even though they are four years old like me, I can’t wait for when my older cousin comes by after her school day.

Matias wants to play tag. I don’t because I keep stumbling when I walk, today, and I don’t want them to make fun of me. So I’m on the sofa and I stare down at them sitting on the floor. Matias keeps running his fingers into the creases of Felipe’s neck, making him giggle in a crazy way. My parents do that to me sometimes, but it never makes me laugh like that.

“Why are you laughing?” I ask.
“Because it tickles,” Felipe says, catching his breath.
“Tickle, tickle,” Matias says, drumming his fingers under my feet. I don’t budge.
“You’re not ticklish?” his twin asks. He stands and jabs me in the belly. Twice.
“She’s weird. She’s not even smiling.”
For the first time, I think maybe something is wrong with me. Maybe I am weird. Or broken. Maybe kids are supposed to laugh when they’re tickled. I should laugh, next time.

Someone says, “She’s not weird.”
My cousin has arrived and thrown her backpack on the floor with an attitude only a nine-year-old could pull off. “She’s not smiling because it’s a dumb game.” She winks at me, flicking her black hair over a shoulder, and I feel better. “Hey, Dev,” she says.

“Who is that?” one of the twins asks.
I wave at her. “Peggy.”
FOUR

BRAM
I do not sleep. (I never sleep.)

However, sometimes I seem to—there was a word for this. The action of walking as you sleep. Sleepmarch?

Yes. Sleepmarch.

I am somewhere.

I blink my eyes.

I am somewhere else.

Rooftop. I always end up at the same place. On that rooftop. Always at 3:04 p.m.

It happens to the others as well, only at different places and different hours. We do not talk about it. We like to pretend it is not happening.

That it will not happen again.

Above all, that it never happened.

DEVONNA
I don’t sleep. I stare at Jimmy D as he does and then I tiptoe my way out of the room as if we both got drunk, had a one-night stand, and I don’t want it to go any further. In a way, it was a one-time thing I did, since I’ve never shared one of my three secrets before, but the things I confessed to him have bound us together more than ever. Bound like I used to be with Peggy, and I feel horrible knowing that I’ll never get the chance to tell her who I really am. She’ll never know. Because of me.

My feet seem to choose each single board that creaks, but I suspect
every square of this old wooden house creaks anyway. I bet it’s cold, too. It’s a beautiful house, but even Jimmy D confessed he didn’t enjoy living here anymore. The vast rooms didn’t circulate such a strong loneliness when his mother lived with them, but since she went back to Italy, it’s like every piece of furniture mourns their former roommate. And then the dog died.

I don’t know if Mr. Donelli feels the same way, but I know he would never sell the property, considering what’s in the backyard.

I walk out and admire the sunrise over the rows and rows of trimmed vines that make up the Donelli Winery. The structured patterns of the vineyard shrink all the way to a lake, which I try to avoid looking at every time I’m here, but it’s so wide it’s impossible. Like not squirming when someone asks you to stay still.

Smelling a pleasing scent of dew, I run barefoot on the rocks, imagining how the breeze would be in my hair. I run, and run, praying maybe if I concentrate hard enough, if I run fast enough, my skin won’t have a choice but to respond to the wind.

It never does.

I reach the end of the field, where the flat, inescapable lake begins. Fire meets water. I want the sun to burn me, and the lake to freeze under my toes.

If I go left, I’ll reach the city, where more people will be awake. If I go right, I’ll reach Lakeside Cemetery, where more people will be asleep. I don’t feel like seeing anyone but her, so I go right.

* 

“Does this hurt?” the doctor asks, patting my foot.

I shake my head no.

He touches my ankle. “And this?”

I shrug.

“Strange.” He stands up and grabs the X-Rays on his desk.

“What’s strange?” my mother asks, biting her nails in the corner of the room. “Why can’t my daughter take two steps without falling? She’s four, not one.”

He shows her the X-rays. “Because her left ankle is fractured. Looks like
Audrey Francis-Plante

it's been that way for a few days already.”

My mother's hand falls from her mouth. “Honey?” she whispers, rushing
to me. “Why didn't you tell mommy you hurt yourself?”

I don't like the way the doctor keeps staring at me, so I look down at the
shiny white floor instead.

“Some kids don't like to show it when they're hurt,” he says slowly. “They
fear it will mean . . . punishment.”

My mother glares at him. “What are you insinuating?”

“How did you hurt your ankle, Devonna?” he asks me, but I keep avoiding
his stare, stubbornly quiet.

“She's a kid. She must've played and fallen.”

“With all due respect, Mrs. Moreau, I need to hear it from her.”

“What you need to do is put a cast on her broken leg, doctor. She's prob-
ably in too much pain to even tell us what happened.”

“Then why would she pretend it doesn't hurt?”

“Because she's a four-year-old and she's scared!”

The silence that follows is wired. The doctor glances at me. “You're right.
I apologize. I'll tend to her leg right away. If you would please wait
outside—”

“I'm not leaving her.”

“There are several tests I need to perform and it might take a while.”

“I'm staying.”

“Mrs. Moreau—”

At the word tests I jerk. I grab my mother's hand and meet the doctor's
cold stare for the first time. He lets her stay.

BRAM

When I am not sleepmarching my way to that roof, I like to explore
cemeteries. (Creepy?)

I walk from one grave to the next, reading each name carefully,
looking for one that would trigger something in my few memories. I saw
another Hanaghan, once, but he died in 1918, and I have only been here
five years. (Only . . .)

Then I found Pauline Hanaghan, 1960-2010. I like to think that she
was my—
The woman who raised you? Momer, motter, mother.

I like to imagine that she was my mother. Sometimes I go to her grave and spend the entire day trying to summon a memory. (Useless.)

I do it anyway, yet I do not know the proper way to remember the deceased. I copy the behaviour of the living humans who come to remember Pauline's neighbours—Martin Duclair and Peggy Moreau.

**DEVONNA**

Out of habit, like turning off the oven unconsciously or blinking, I trace the same path in the graveyard's muddy tracks. I skirt a small temple of marble and halt to say hi to my grandpa's grave. Then I turn right, and at the grave of Simona Donelli—Jimmy D's grandmother—I veer left, continuing until the trees grow thicker and the graves become sparser. Her grave is the brightest.

I think of my third secret. I almost wish I could share it with Jimmy D as well, but I know that's not a possibility. On August 3rd 2010, two girls died. Only one came back.

The grave is small, flat, and round at the top. Sparkling little pebbles embedded in the grey rock remind me of her eyes. It says, *Peggy Moreau, February 1993 – August 2010.*

I was twelve years old that year. She will be seventeen years old every year.

* 

The sun is so hot Peggy has to say it every three seconds. I don't feel its heat, but I agree to go to the little falls. We run barefoot through the forest behind the church. The grey trees are slim, tall, and lined up so we can run in a straight line, but once in a while we have to jump over fallen trunks. Most of the time, I trip over them, making Peggy laugh. The branches and leaves meet high over our heads, forming a ceiling that, mixed with the apple blossom and sage smells, make us feel like we're in our very own, unpoppable bubble.

*My cousin's thick dark hair sways before me. Over the tweeting of hidden birds, I hear her musical laugh. It makes me laugh.*

*She comes to a halt and leans over with her hands on her knees, catching*
her breath. I mimic her, pretending I’m out of breath too. She winks, chuckles, and we race again to meet the part of the forest where the trees are small, fuzzy, and dark.

Then we slog forward, pushing the low branches and following the dribbling noises. Greenish water looms ahead.

“First one in,” my cousin chants.

We leap, then splash!

Water seeps into my clothes, into my ears, into my nose.

I guess.

Not that I notice. I don’t even catch my breath. I emerge out of the water with my lungs pissed at me. They pump the liquid back up my throat and Peggy chortles, telling me I’m drooling. I remind myself to be more careful.

“I won,” she says, sliding a hand over her sleek hair, which shines with the bright sun. Silver strands in the fierce black.

“You didn’t,” I say, aiming a spray of water at her face.

She gasps and laughs. We water one another until she’s panting.

“Stop it,” she says sternly. “I—I have a cramp.”

Her head sinks into the water for a moment and she comes out coughing.

I fumble-swim toward her like an inexperienced astronaut in space.

“Peg?”

A mischievous grin. “GOTCHA.”

Eyes shut, Peggy lets herself float on her back, her purple shirt forming a balloon of air on her belly. She breathes heavily, as though she’s finally at peace with the weather. Like always, I imitate my cousin. My idol. The girl I brag to everyone at school that I share friendship dolphin bracelets with.

“It’s so fresh,” she says. “Isn’t that great?”

“Amazing.”

Keeping a hand on the turfy border of the pond, I listen to the soothing waterfall just a few metres from us. It’s about half my height, but it sends strong ripples through the basin. Peggy and I dangle over the surface like floating mattresses abandoned in a pool after kids made a wave contest.

Above, the dark trees’ summits form a ring; a clear space to admire the sky. Two black birds fly from one point of the blue hoop and disappear on the opposite side, and I imagine that those birds are us.

I watch until the bright ring of sky is etched behind my eyelids, and I
listen until the waterfall and the chirps of the forest are no longer noticeable. I tilt my body upward and look at Peggy, who still looks like a floating plank, her long hair wavering around her in the shape of a giant, gliding raven.

“You think there are beasts under the water?” I ask.

“If we see something, we can just scream for Mrs. Oliver.” Her eyes still shut, Peggy points in the direction of Mrs. Oliver’s house.

I stare at the drops on her white lids, thinking that my cousin is so cool. That one day, I’ll be like my cousin, because she’s so cool.

“I’ll check if you want,” she says.

Her bright smile disappears into the almost-opaque water. I let go of an awkward laugh that is too loud in the new quiet. The pond plonks and splashes, trying to keep me company, then quits. Even the waterfall calms down. “Peggy?” I say.

I disturb the surface with my arms, hoping she sees my signs from below. “Peg. Come up now!”

I laugh. She’s teasing me. She’s always teasing me. She takes swimming classes; she can hold her breath forever and she loves to put on a show with that Flipper talent of hers. My laughter gurgles with water—nervously.

Something pricks my sense of smell. Like damp leaves. Like that day a sparrow flew straight in the window of my house and spent the whole afternoon trying to fly away again.

I dive. “Peeaaeeeg!” My scream is all woozy. I want to swim up and call for Mrs. Oliver, but suddenly I can’t move. Something is holding me below.

I shove my arms as wide as I can, in vain. Even when I let myself float, I stay in the same position. My heart is loud, thumping like thunder.

It’s a muddy view. Algae swirls everywhere, but I manage to see my pale legs through the thick liquid. When I follow the line of my shinbone I find out my ankle is bulky, deformed. Clasped by a hand. Bubbles escape my mouth as I shriek.

“Peeaaeggy.” I must swallow lots of dirty water and tadpoles.

I don’t know how long I’ve been underwater. I don’t feel my lungs as they fill up.

It’s dark at the bottom, giving a sense of both endless void and narrowness. I can’t see, and when I search for her with my hands stretched ahead, I can’t
feel anything. Maybe her other hand is right between my fingers and I don’t even know.

My brain is foggy. I finally discern a sharp branch through a mass of swaying darkness. Around the jagged piece of root, black ribbons are twirling. Hair.

A bomb shatters the surface and the sun rays slither above my head, making the water look like that famous painting where all the clocks are melting.

It’s safe down here, I think. The beasts are up there. I want to stay here with Peg.

I close my eyes.

With Peg.
DEVONNA

Are tears blurring my vision or have I been fixating on the grave for too long? There is a rustle by my left and I jump up. “Hello?”

Nothing moves, but I could swear I heard something. Like someone walking through the bushes.

“You could’ve left a note.”

I stifle a screech. Jimmy D raises his hands in apology. One hand has gauze wrapped around it. “Didn’t mean to scare you,” he says.

I laugh, forgetting about the weird noises from the bushes. “Jeez, Jimmy D. Don’t do that again.” His arms sag and I bite my forever-numb lip. “Sorry. It’ll take me a while to drop that D.”

He glances at my arm. “Yuck, Dev. Didn’t you notice you were bleeding?”

The bandage he made me last night is drenched in dark blood. “That explains the dizziness,” I say. Things are a bit blurry since I stood up.

“Come here.” He takes hold of my hand and uses the clean gauze to make me a new bandage. He also brought a bag for the old one, and even a moist cloth to wipe my skin.

I smile at his messed up hair and the bedsheets marks on his cheek as he focusses on my arm. His hands are very precise. I wonder what they would be like on my skin.

“You don’t have to go easy on me,” I say because his movements are so delicate.

“I think I always kind of knew.” He gently ties the last knot. “Because
of all the crazy injuries you had when we were kids. But I was silly enough to think you would at least sense it when I would—well, if I ever kissed you. But no. You really can't feel anything.”

I glance around to make sure there's no one in the vicinity. “Hey.” I punch his arm, but my fist just slides along his sleeve. “Do not talk about it.”

“Relax, there's no one up here at six a.m.”

“I don't care. Under no circumstances are you to use those words.”

“Fine. Let's make a code like your mama loves you or something.”

I smile inside. “Like what?”

“Let's see.” He brings a finger to his chin. “Your brothers are grounded?”

“I sure like the sound of that.”

His smile beams. “Settled then.”

I make my way back to his house but my legs don't cooperate and he catches me by the waist. “Okay,” he says. “You're walking like I was, last night. Maybe we should get that arm checked by someone who knows what he's doing.”

“No. No doctors.”

He sighs. “Fine. But you need to sit down.”

We sit in a patch of grass, facing Peggy's grave.

“So exactly is it that your brothers are grounded?” he asks.

I shrug. “There's no one around to answer that question so better not to think about it.”

“Aren't you curious? Maybe you're Superwoman or something.”

“Superwoman would've been able to save her. I'm no Marvel hero.”

His smile fades. He tugs a lazy hand through his hair. “Here,” he says, out of absolutely nowhere, and he takes a small piece of shiny metal from his pocket.

“What's this?”

“A gift.”

I grunt. “I said no gifts. Not this year.”

I truly wish we could just skip the whole thing, but I know my parents and Jimmy D won't accept it until I give them a good reason.

“It's not your birthday yet,” he counters. “And I said I didn't care.”

He brings the rusty object toward his lips and blows into a thin
mouthpiece. A strident noise blasts from the whistle. Jimmy D smiles proudly as he puts it into my hand.

“It’s a compass, too,” he says, pointing the other end of the whistle, where an old, cracked glass covers a red arrow. “Awesome, right?”

“It’s beautiful,” I admit, staring at the miniature flute.

“I spotted two of these and I thought, man, that’s what Dev and I need. All those times I look for you around the winery. Would’ve been useful this morning, by the way. You didn’t answer your cell phone.”

“I didn’t get any calls.” I check my phone, not without dropping it twice first. Three missed calls. “Oh. It was on vibrate mode. I must’ve switched it to it accidently.”

He laughs. “That explains so much.”

“Sorry.” I look at the whistle again. “So you got yourself one too?”

He shows me another similar whistle, though his is silver while mine is bronze. He blows it. The note is so piercing it makes us laugh.

“Yours has a little loop so you can, I don’t know, make a necklace out of it or something.” He tugs at the handle of the plastic bag, making little rips in it.

I think about the bracelets I used to share with Peggy. Jimmy D’s been my best friend for a long time now, but I never stopped thinking that my one best friend forever was Peggy. I still have the dolphin bracelet hidden safely in the attic. Having a new friendship jewel makes the other one antique, past, over.

None of which I want to associate with Peggy.

“Are you okay?” Jimmy D asks.

“Yeah. Sure. Thanks again, Jimmy—” I almost slap a hand on my mouth to stop myself from uttering the D.

“Jimmy,” he repeats with the same beginning of the D sound. “Well that’s progress.” He nods toward the winery. “Come on. You must be hungry.”

“Well, since my brothers are grounded, no.”

His brown eyes widen. “No way. Never hungry?”

“Never. Not to mention my taste buds being completely useless.”

“But— What about last year when I made your birthday cake and you said it was the best you ever had. You lied?”
“It smelled really good.”

He shakes his head. “That’s a shame. I wanted to make you a hell of a breakfast. With pain au chocolat and all that stuff.”

“I’d be crazy to refuse that.”

“My theory too. Bye, Peggy,” Jimmy D says, helping me up.

“Bye, Peg,” I say, and follow him to the winery.

BRAM

Wait. Rewind.

She sat on a sharp, sharp rock for an hour but did not budge. (Abnormal.)

Her arm was bleeding in the dirt and she did not notice. (Abnormal.)

Tears were wetting her face but not once did she blink them away. (Abnormal.)

She was beautifully calm to look at. She did not see me back. (Normal.)

“Greetings,” I said. “You are bleeding.” She did not look up at me. (Normal.)

“Hey, Bram,” Kian called from behind the small house where no one seems to live. “Stop lurking around. Come on.”

The pretty human statue still did not move.

“In a minute.” She did not hear my voice. (Normal.)

Kian—always reckless—passed straight through the bushes and that she heard. She jumped, all sorts of questions meeting up on her face. I wanted to wipe the tears.

A living boy arrived. They talked.

I stuck around. I did not want to go with Kian. He is always making my death a hell.

Something they said caught my attention.

He, proudly: I always knew you didn’t feel anything.

She, sharply: Do not talk about it.

They walked toward the lake. I found myself following.

I learned she is never hungry. Never tastes anything. (Abnormal.)

Hope rose in my pulseless heart. Could she be the one we are waiting for? I listened. Vibration, bleeding; nothing affects her. Her brothers . . . something puzzling. (Abnormal.)
“Hanaghan. You coming or what?” Kian was being annoying.
(Normal.)
I hope he has not heard the humans’ conversation. I watch them walk
between the rows of vines, and part of me begs for a confirmation. If it is
her . . .
I need to know. I will follow her all day if I have to.
The Judges’ Comments

“Spring Snow” is a beautiful short story that invites readers to live inside the world of the protagonist. Through the lens of politics, language, school, education, and family, the story roots us in the character’s worldview. Not only does the reader feel immersed in a sense of place, but also in an outlook. The prose is elegant. The story structure has a graceful arc. But the beating heart of this story is the tanka poem, an ancient form, written for over 1200 years in Japan. By rooting the early expressions of love in this cultural form, the author shows how it might feel for the character’s love to take hold and blossom. The jury is thrilled to agree that “Spring Snow” should be awarded first place.

Claire Cameron, Novelist

Margaret has never needed friends. She has structured her life around tidy, decorous, utterly unthreatening pleasures: a smart address, a well-balanced meal, Saturday afternoon tea. But when a new tenant moves in, she soon finds herself projecting onto this stranger her longing for connection and fear that she is unworthy of it. In “Kitchen Comfort”, Catherine Campbell crafts a nuanced portrait of a regimented woman undergoing, most uncharacteristically, a change. In prose as elegant and exact as her protagonist, Campbell explores the consequences of opening oneself up to the possibility of companionship—the space it creates for exhilaration and fulfilment, as well as for anxiety and instability.

Melanie Tutino, Assistant Editor, Penguin Random House Canada.
I was immersed in “Devonna” from the very first paragraph, and though it's a page turner that's paced and plotted wonderfully, I also had to stop frequently to admire a turn of phrase or the skill with which Francis-Plante tackles the subject matter of congenital analgesia. The characters are endearing and engaging, and Francis-Plante brings them to vivid life with masterful dialogue and authentic interactions that capture how awkward and painful it is to be a teenager on the precipice of adulthood. “Devonna” explores themes of guilt, grief and identity, and I'd be extremely surprised if it doesn't get published one day soon. I know I’ll be first in line for the author’s autograph.

Bianca Marais, Novelist