

He coughed and sneezed, rubbed his eyes in confusion.

"You have pornography on the computer. Pornography!" she shouted.

He wrapped the gun in a bundle of stockings, hiding it, prepared to make it dissolve.

He wanted an explanation, too: what was the gun doing in her drawer? I can explain that ridiculous fetish website, but a loaded gun ...

I can explain, he said again, and ran down the stairs to his wife, the stockings still in his hands. His head felt stuffed and everything seemed unclear. On the third last step he tripped and tumbled the rest of the way, the star of a slapstick film, his nose running right on cue. "What happened?" she called from the den, and started to leave the room. He brought one of the stockings close to his face to wipe his nose, and inhaled. The gun, at least, hadn't gone off. He waited for his wife to come to the foot of the stairs and be sympathetic, soothe him, not ask why he was clutching the stockings to his face.

WES SMIDERLE

## DANCING THROUGH THE SKY-BLUE DOORWAY

Alexis has no clear memory of the impact with the tree, or the snow-swept lawn, or the reasons why. All she remembers is the fear and happiness of her naked skin. Bare toes dancing above a wild rush of December air. A sensation of freedom followed by dislocation on the dark ground.

The man with the notepad wants more. He asks what, precisely, prompted the death leap. She smiles. His face remains flat, a row of white teeth set against the nub of his pen. The man with the notepad does not grant her the privilege of a sense of humour. She keeps smiling because the memories are embarrassing.

It started with her first Christmas exam, *Power and Everyday Life*, one item among a laundry list of courses that made less sense the longer she considered them: *Journalism's View of Life Language*, *The Psychology of Public Life*, *Life Writing: Making the Ordinary Extraordinary*. For Alexis, real life was confined to the ninth floor of a campus dormitory. Snug cement rooms, each as narrow as an upright coffin. She shared a two-bedroom with a brainy grade-A type who offered unsolicited studying tips and occasional fashion advice.

When deadlines drew close, Alexis fortified herself with a kitchen sink slop of cheap coffee, cold soft drinks, three-cheese pizza and a vague assortment of pills. A diet for dizzy, perpetual confidence highs. Her thoughts buzzed with psychology. Alfred Adler and his patterns of life. Jung and his shadowy gang of archetypes. Both men discussing the unseen powers beneath her mind.

The man with the notepad interrupts to wonder, why Jung? Why Adler? Because their words turn me on, she replies. He writes this down in careful block script. Underlined.

Alexis had little choice. Jung and Adler were the dead white men being crammed into her head. Daily lectures, study-notes, and cheat-sheets. Random, dislocated information. She could summon facts and theories without effort. She once heard a professor claim that human beings only use five per cent of their brain's capacity. Sitting on the floor of the bedroom, surrounded by wrinkled paper and a mound of textbooks, Alexis saw how easy it was to access the rest. She could do anything.

With the words of dead men still ringing in her skull, Alexis abandoned her notes and left for a quick beer. She savoured the idea while riding the elevator and racing through the lobby. Quick beer, quick beer.

At a campus bar, she ran into that guy in economics class. The straight-A jock with the perfect hair and sculpted ass. The studly brainiac. The philosopher king. The guy she'd never had the courage to talk to until that moment when she strolled over no problem whatsoever. She started discussing roommates and the

conversation quickly devolved into bad roommates, then bad apartments, big cockroaches, big bugs, big weird bugs you'd never seen before until you moved into the bad apartment, and earwigs. Earwigs? His face grew cloudy. Weren't those the nasty-looking pincer things that crept into people's ears and laid eggs in their brains? Alexis was only too happy to disabuse him of this urban myth, first told to her in grade school. Urban myths becoming the next topic of their flirtatious, freewheeling talk.

All these words tumbling out so easily. More beer and words and then some dancing and more drinking and then just a whole lot of good stuff in bathrooms and corner booths, thinking: the jock is mine.

Turned out he was actually pretty stupid, but Alexis liked the "pretty" portion of the equation and the night air was so cold and beautiful, reminding her of when she went parachuting at sixteen. Heart pumping, air roaring, and then freedom so pure it could pulverize.

So she plunged through the streets with the boy in tow, rushing on pure vertical sidewalk nightlife air without the need to pull any ripcords. They careened from dive bar to pool hall to trendy neon dance-club with half-wit doormen only too happy to let the drunken blonde female slip past the line while her pseudo-jock sulked on the sidewalk, withering from lack of attention.

Alexis couldn't be bothered now, though. She dove in with both hands, inhaling more cigarettes, more people, more weird little stories. It was too bad she forgot to bring a paper and pen because all this crazy personal narrative stuff was why she wanted to be a reporter in the first place. Stories. It was all about stories. Everyone's got one and they're all fucking brilliant.

By the time Alexis' wild orbit brought her back home, the roommate was awake and slurping up a bowl of cereal. Orange sunbeams poked through the slats of the Venetian blinds. The roommate said nice top—meaning, ugly top—and then wondered aloud where Alexis had been, how much she'd drank, where she'd slept. And didn't she have an exam today?

Alexis did have an exam. Not psych, but Poli-Sci 115, *International Economic Partnership Life Issues*. It was just a matter of really thinking about the different systems at work, knowing the big players and getting interested, sincerely interested, in those serious issues so she could toss in whatever she'd scanned recently in *The Globe and Mail*, *The New York Times*, PBS, the CBC or wherever it was they manufactured consent.

She launched herself to school like a paratrooper hurling free of a jet plane. The day streamed by like rainwater. Back home, the roommate said *oh, gawd, not those earrings*, and asked how the exam went while Alexis slapped on war-paint for another night of hitting the town.

"Aced it."

She did, too. Meanwhile, there was that bar and—hey, look—she found her pseudo-jock again. Bradley, Barry, Buddy? He was sulking in a corner while Alexis chatted up the bass player for this crazy glam rock band who did all these fantastic *T-Rex* covers and were looking for an equally glammy chick to wear a black

turtleneck and sing back-up while rattling away on a tambourine.

In between talking to the bass-player, ordering obnoxious cocktails and taking trips to the ladies' room, the pseudo-jock boy stopped her in a corner. *Slut*, said Bradley/Barry/Buddy, hands in pockets and bottom lip trembling. The word hanging like a slap in the turgid tavern air.

What about last night? he asked, voice trembling with accusation. She saw a glistening tear in the corner of his eye. She could hardly believe it. Tears? Get over yourself. It was, like, one night. Not even. How could she have ever imagined him being cool or confident? That's what happened when you admired people from afar.

The man with the notepad, his pen scratching against the paper, wants to know about that wild night, too. He wants to know her sexual habits during this period. Who, where, when and how often (but never *why*).

All Alexis says is that she told him to grow the hell up and then went to the bathroom for a good long pee, humming "Bang a Gong" the whole time.

Tell me more, the man with the notepad insists, his pen now paralytic.

But the rest of that night is one glorious, stereophonic, rainbow-coloured blur.

Alexis tells him about the first time. First time meaning suicide, not sex. Like everything else in high school, the attempt was pretty sloppy. She came to in a hospital with a broken arm, a five-alarm concussion and the first onslaught of questions that would continue for the rest of her life.

Alexis couldn't explain, so the doctors did it for her. They talked about too much dopamine sloshing around inside her brain. Some of them dropped vague terms like "free-floating anxiety", "school phobia", and even "chronic vicarious trauma". Alexis said nothing. She knew better, but knowing better didn't do much good. Daily life became an endless one-way dialogue with psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, and psychometrists. They wouldn't call it a suicide attempt. They called it a "suicidal gesture".

"I walked in front of a bus," Alexis noted.

"Nevertheless."

Thin smiles smothered all debate.

They blamed the medication. The same medication she'd been given months earlier, which they now admitted had been based on an erroneous diagnosis. The anti-depressants had exacerbated her "situation", thereby triggering the bus "episode". She was on something new, something more difficult to pronounce and, therefore, better. It seemed to be working nicely, wasn't it? She was so much more relaxed, more level. Finding the proper balance of medication can sometimes be more art than science.

"Making me the canvas," said Alexis.

More thin smiles. Yes, more relaxed.

Alexis spent ten days in the hospital. The worst part was the long, unraveling hours of nothing in the psych ward lounge. A large TV always switched on. Half-

hearted attempts at euchre or Scrabble. Mental health slogans slapped on taupe cardboard, drawn in elaborate calligraphy script wrapped in faux-wooden frames.

*Think, Think, Think*  
*Easy Does It*  
*First Things First*  
*Live and Let Live*

The psycho-hospital people were quick to anchor her “gesture” to the fact that Mom and Dad were dead. Tell us about your parents, they all asked.

Yes, agrees the man with the notepad. Tell me about them.

Tell me about their deaths is what they meant. Alexis won’t do that. Their deaths are hers and no one else’s. So she coughs up a memory of earwigs.

She was ten, maybe eleven and—according to all the big thinkers—not sick yet. This was an age before buses, boys, and balconies. New ideas blossomed every second in the sun with a well-thumbed Madeleine l’Engle paperback on the back porch. Probably Sunday because Mom and Dad were both in the yard. Mom kneading soil, turning black earth with the tender, insistent jabs of a sharp tool. Dad pulling weeds. Both gardening away what would be the last two years of their lives.

Alexis hesitates. Their faces are growing blurrier ever year. That’s awful, isn’t it? Forgetting what your parents looked like? After six years? The photo album pages grown flat. Just a collection of pictures, memory gone cold.

Faces fade, but sometimes the sunlight provoked a memory so clear it was wrenching. Mom’s fingers and elbows light green from spilled chlorophyll. Dad’s wide hands stained jet black with earth. The smell of soil and torn root.

They hunched and squatted in the dirt under blue-rinsed sunlight while Alexis wriggled toes from the lawn chair and turned pages of another book. Ten, tanned, happy. Not Sick Yet.

“Look Alexis.” His voice a jovial, sun baked rumble as he picked up a pail. “C’mere. Gettalookat this.”

Strange and shiny, like a cross between a worm and a scorpion. Legs moving all round and two pinchers pinching, caught and helpless between her father’s thumb and forefinger.

“Earwigs,” Dad chuckled. “Creepy crawlies.”

Alexis had heard the word before. Jane Cecelia at school called them earbugs. Greasy brown with hard bum pinchers and folded wings they never used. Jane Cecelia said at night when you were sleeping sometimes one would creep into your ears and lay eggs in your brain. Dad said that wasn’t true. Real earwigs laid their eggs under a stone. If she ever found an earwig in her ear, it was only because it was very lost and very confused.

He raised the bug closer. “See one, you see a thousand.” He turned to study the garden. “Wanna find out how we’ll catch them?”

The orange bucket was filled to the rim with soapy water. But all Alexis

could think about was the earbugs, lost and confused with nowhere to lay their eggs. She felt a little sorry for them as Dad worked to bury the bucket in the middle of the garden, deep enough so the rim was flat with the overturned topsoil. Pausing to evoke a shriek from Mom with his dirty fingers, Dad returned with a gleeful smile.

“Tomorrow morning, look in that water,” he advised.

Alexis couldn’t wait. She thought about the earwigs and their eggs and the buried bucket all through dinner and Sunday night TV. A great weight growing in her chest until she lay rigid and breathless. Still imagining those earbugs.

The backyard grass was painted silver with moonlight when she crept outside with the flashlight. The bucket still buried, the water a bumpy glimmer until she clicked on the beam. She thought she saw shells, or floating marbles, or little black wood chips. But they were earbugs, locked together in great chains, twisting and pinching, all trapped silent in the soapy water.

Alexis imagined Dad chuckling when he found out, but understanding why, with both hands and shoulders straining, she heaved the bucket out of the ground and tipped it onto one side. The water spilled in a wide wave, breaking the chain into a tide of segmented bunches. He would understand. The earbugs dead, mostly, but free.

There was only one more exam. *Global Economics and the Life of the Consumer*. A bird course, the other students called it. A laugh. She should have been laughing. She was almost free.

Instead, she woke up the day of the exam and could not move. Daylight shone through the bedroom glass like an unconquerable burden. The world outside smelled cold, harsh, hating. Every day, for weeks, she’d been running, running, running. There was nothing left. Her body was a prison. Locked up in quiet despair. Her final exam at 1:30 p.m. Who cared anyway?

From beneath a duvet, Alexis squinted at the progress of the glowing alarm clock.

If I leave now I’ll make the exam just in time.

If I leave now I’ll only be fifteen minutes late.

If I leave now I’ll only be one hour late.

If I leave now . . .

Time passed. Time was up. Time waited for no one’s weakness. The exam was missed, the course flunked. Abject failure was supposed to be like death. It was supposed to be a nightmare except it had come true and, suddenly, wasn’t scary. Just a placid, nagging itch. Failure was like a deep sleep. She curled into a tight knot under the duvet and wondered.

Is this what I’ve been afraid of?

When daylight had burned away, Alexis emerged. Unshowered, she pulled on tight clothes and went to the nightclub where all her shiny friends waited. She tried to smile, laugh, and be fabulous, but they’d all gone ugly somehow. So Alexis sat at the bar alone and ordered small doses of hard liquor.

The pseudo-jock was sitting beside her. Bradley/Barry/Buddy. Eyes low as

he apologized for, well, the “slut thing.”

“I was wasted,” he said, “and bitter.”

“I’m free,” said Alexis.

“No one’s free.”

“I am,” she said. “Absolute pure diamond daylight free.”

“Freedom’s an illusion,” he said. “Everyone’s gotta eat. Everyone’s gotta breathe. Everyone needs somebody. No one’s free.”

They went back to her place and sat together on the couch against the wall across from the balcony doors. Bradley/Barry/Buddy drank the roommate’s beer while Alexis stared out at the rising sun, searching for a mutual high.

She tried talking about parachuting at sixteen. The flop-sweat anxiety during training. The crushing stomach tremors as the plane ascended. The irreversible launch through a sky-blue doorway. A sudden drop and a swing-set sensation of leaving her insides behind. The joy of surrendering stomach and guts to hard cloud and earthy square patches 30,000 feet below. Just like a giant map. One mile equals one mile.

Her delicate, discarded boy listened with dead eyes and disinterested swigs of beer. Who cared anyway?

“Let’s dance,” Alexis said.

He laughed and reached for her breasts. Fumbling buttons, hopeless with hooks. She pushed him away.

“I can take my own clothes off, thanks.”

Suddenly she wanted to be naked. It felt good. She was young, tall, tight. Why the hell not enjoy this ass, these tits, while they were still in their prime? Nothing ever lasts, after all. So she stood up, glided toward the balcony doors and undressed herself, dancing by herself, singing to herself.

The boy watched, uncertain and scratching his neck.

As she sang louder, Alexis’s body grew hard, marble-white and glowing strong with confidence. Her arms weren’t arms anymore. Instead, they were a shimmering pair of feathered wings, unfurling in the wind. The wings were made of rainbows. They were made of the light that shimmers off a lake’s surface at sunset. They were made of poetry.

“Alexis,” he said. “Alexis, what—”

“I’m going out for a sec.”

And she stepped onto the diamond horizon of the balcony. Being naked outside felt good. Wooden planks beneath her feet and the chill sky biting with a lover’s teeth. She stepped atop the railing and looked out at the stars in the sky, dimmed to a milky haze above the city lights.

Who cared anyway.

The man with the notepad puts his pen away. They both know the facts. Alexis plunged nine stories, falling through empty December wind until her progress was impeded (and her life saved) when one arm became partially impaled on the slouching branches of a thirty-foot spruce.

The man with the notepad wants more. He wants insight into the decisive moment. The sensation of falling and the reasons why. He wants the truth.

Instead, Alexis brings him straight down to the cold ground at the base of the tree. There was no pain there, only panic and confusion. Something inside was broken. And outside too, but that was okay as long as she didn’t look at herself and kept her mind focused on the swirling stars above. The sky, clear. Her mind, cloudy.

Time passed. People came to look. Nosy people. The paramedic wouldn’t stop with questions and commands. Wouldn’t let her sleep.

“Where are my wings?” she croaked.

He didn’t answer. Much like the man with the notepad, who administers the questions but never has to respond to any himself. Alexis won’t let him in. She won’t let him peer into those precious seconds when she was in control.

Here in his office, or back in the patients’ lounge, or sprawled broken on the cold ground, she will cast her mind upward to remember the wind lashing her naked thighs on the balcony. Balancing above the city on cheap lawn furniture with snow and ice chunks moistening the soles of her feet. A pause before she moved to the rusted railing in one clumsy, unladylike hop. Climbing from wood, to plastic, to thin, crumbling metal. Ignoring the shouts, following her heart through the sky-blue doorway and leaving her insides behind. A final step into air, where no one else can reach.