



RYAN TURNER

WHAT WE'RE MADE OF

At the farmer's market, a flood in the walkway. Those passing the window walk tightrope on the stone wall. Old women rise up, lift their pant legs and stare at their feet. From where we're standing we can't see the water. They're children with energy to burn.

Lochie: I'm in love with her, Benjamin.

But have you told her?

I look at her sometimes and the look is supposed to say it and she thinks I'm hungry or bored.

We've been friends since peewee hockey, but it's the first time we've shared the same walls, the same toaster, the same squeeze pump of organic soap. We're looking for a roommate. It's a three bedroom, and Lochie's girlfriend, Tamara, is two weeks late for her period. Every day that passes makes him think more of the unclaimed room.

When Tamara finds us she's been down to the Celiac bakery, has a bagful of carob chip cookies. She just likes them. She's not allergic to wheat or yeast.

Lochie: Shouldn't you leave those for the people who need them?

I lost one of my shoes, she says. It came off and there was a crowd.

You just left it?

Lochie looks at me, says, That's what she does. She just leaves things.

He says it with a tenderness that shakes me. I've made a pledge to remain this year untethered. To let myself float freely and see where I land.

When we start back there's an announcement about the shoe. Someone has brought it to the fish man. To the old Chinese owner. When we get there he doesn't believe her. He makes her take her other one off and hold it up to compare.

I just bought something from Steph Ginn, says Tamara. Do you know her?

Me: I used to be roommates with Mark Ingram, her ex.

Steph works at the market. She makes things from old records. Puts them in the oven and then folds the vinyl into handbags, chip bowls, the kind of earrings that art students wear. Mark's out of his apartment at the end of the month.

You should ask him, says Tamara. I'm reluctant. She asks if it's because of the rumour and I ask, What rumour?

Mark and I lived together. A four-month winter sublet. Our apartment split in half with the kitchen and bathroom in the middle. The thermostat on Mark's half up so high I had a fan in my window on New Year's Day.

When he moved in it was early December. His father took his shirt off lugging furniture in from the pick-up they'd borrowed. He was a man who should

never take his shirt off. We stepped in the elevator beside an old couple. Me with recyclables for the bin in the alley, Mark's father with his blue nipples stretched. The woman, nodding to her husband: Thirty years ago this place had class.

What do you do for a living? asked Mark's father, and I said, Nothing. And he said, You can't pay the bills with nothing. And I said, I was teaching in Thailand for a year and paid off my loans and now I'm trying to figure things out. He liked that I'd been to Asia. He'd never been there himself, but he sold a line of spicy hot sauce to restaurants in Alberta and there was something he admired about a man who could handle his spice.

I said to Mark later, Why Alberta? Why not Nova Scotia? And he said, It's law or something. Every piece of food you eat has to travel at least a thousand miles.

Mark was a commerce student at Dalhousie. He was short and stocky, dead against public transportation. He said it was a communist invention, and I told him I was pretty sure it predated communism.

I'm half-American, said Mark. History's different down there. You drive? Yeah.

Imagine a world where everyone survived. No leisure. No art. No starvation or disease either. Just work and eat and sleep. Scrimping by.

I said, They asked a thousand people if they'd give up pineapple to save the planet and thirty percent couldn't decide.

Pineapple. How about no trips to the Caribbean. No television. No NHL.

When we finished and his father had gone, the place was littered with cardboard boxes. We sat amongst them like giants surrounded by buildings made tiny by comparison. Like there were little people working at desks in a thousand windows. We made stir fry and added suicide hot sauce. Our noses running. Beads of sweat on our foreheads. Tears in Mark's grey-green eyes.

By the end of the month we're desperate. Lochie can't bring himself to ask Tamara to move in, saying it might ruin them and that what they have is too good to be thrown into that kind of alarm. Tamara suggests Mark again.

The rumour, I say. What is it?

She shakes her head. She's not the type to propagate lies.

Mark sounds put out when I tell him. Like he's doing us a favour. He says he can pay now, but he won't be able to move his things in until the second week of September. I tell him it's just the money we're interested in and that there's no need for him to move in at all. I smile when I say it and he says, You're very funny. And I think, It's strange the people we end up with. Not just roommates, but friends and partners. People we open our lives to and then years later pass on the street and hardly say hello.

Mark's room is down the hall beside Lochie's. It's big and empty. There's a mattress on the floor in the corner. His small wooden dresser with one leg broken, the word IDENTITY painted in block letters above the rounded mirror. It's half

smudged like someone tried to erase it. He told me that he painted it there when he was eleven, then three years later tried to sand it off.

I said, My stepsister used to chew on her headboard. There were big gouges, teeth marks like an X-ray from a dental exam.

Mark: I'm going to fix it. I'm going to build a crib for the baby.

He bends down, and I stare at a bottle of Elmer's glue on his dresser. I wonder if Elmer is the face on the label. If they used Elmer's hooves to make it. The name a kind of thank you to the sacrificial bull.

I have a daughter, says Mark. You know that.

I thought you'd decided against it.

Mark holds up a display of baby pictures on his dresser. Ada in kerchiefs and bonnets. Three frames tall by three frames wide. Like contestants on Hollywood Squares.

On Lochie's birthday we throw a party but he never shows. He's started a new band and their first rehearsal runs three hours late. He comes in when everyone's leaving. He thanks me. He says only he would miss his own birthday. But we can tell Tamara's fuming. She left fourteen messages. She says, Don't even think about touching that cake.

On the couch I'm wedged between Mark and his ex. She has a baby monitor and we listen to little Ada snoring.

Tamara to Steph: So how was Kingston?

Okay.

You back long?

She spent the summer waitressing. Her hair dyed the colour of a number two pencil. She says about a treeplanters' party: My friends were going and I asked if they'd all look like Jesus. I had the biggest crush when I was kid.

Tamara: When I was a kid I could get an orgasm by rubbing my legs together in a pool.

Steph slides into me. She's flirty when she's drinking. I remember this. Her in long T-shirts without pants on, never knowing if she was wearing underwear. It reminded me of nude beaches in the French Riviera. Talking to girls, concentrating on looking them straight in the eyes.

Tonight I bait her. I've been drinking and can't resist the temptation of testing a limit.

Me: There's no talking.

Is there at least a wall between you? A stall or something?

I shake my head. If we really wanted I could see his and he could see mine.

Mark is off in some other room with Lochie and the guys from his band. She says, Benjamin, Give it, and Tamara gives me a look when I make Steph reach across me for an empty glass.

She discovered she was pregnant in the months Mark and I lived together. I'd hear them fighting. She'd come into the kitchen and right in front of him tell me

she was in love with my eyes. She said once, They change colour. They're green with spots of gold in the morning and then at night they turn a kind of blue. Mark looked at my eyes when she said it like he wouldn't just take her word for it.

By three in the morning, she's on the floor with her daughter. Mark half asleep with his head in her lap.

I flick a light off in the hallway. Hostility in the way my hand makes contact with the switch. I'd envisioned spending the night with her and it makes me nauseous. I feel an irrational sting of betrayal.

Ben, says Mark from the floor, and waves me over. One eye open. His shirt unbuttoned showing a thick trail of hair. Steph says, Can you hear them?

I move in closer, hold my breath and Steph giggles. It's Tamara from the bedroom. Oh Christ! Oh Christ! over the creaking bed.

I get up early. It's mid-week. Tamara, leaning over the bodum in the kitchen. Lochie, strumming something on an acoustic guitar.

I've sent my resumé into actuarial firms. If I get hired I work full days and then study for a series of mandatory exams for two to three hours a night. Mathematical models calculating insurance premiums. I've also left resúmes at all three pizza places on Grafton and Blowers. As I came out I could hear the Harbour Hopper guided tour, the girl on the intercom saying Halifax and liberalism, state-of-the-art waste management, fair-trade coffee, the new express ferry station being built along the harbour beside the drive-thru bank machine.

Me: How's the band coming?

Lochie: It's coming. How's the writing?

Tamara: I saw one of your stories at the bottom of *The Coast*.

I think, Failure is like death but worse. It doesn't take the place of death but is coupled with it.

Mark's in bed. He was up late last night. Steph dropped Ada off at six, then came for her at eleven. They spoke in whispers in his bedroom. Ada asleep in the crib Mark built from scraps of an old kitchen table. I heard them this morning. A rhythmic sound. Long and slow. I wonder, would it be wrong to give earplugs to a child.

I can't imagine having children. The strain on my own ambitions. I say this without thinking and Lochie and Tamara pretend not to hear it.

I think, A foetus is a parasite. After birth, it's more metaphorical. I don't believe this. I want children. I want them to observe me. To document. A selfish thought, I know. There was a study in *MacLean's* saying that one child will cost you nearly eight hundred thousand American dollars before the age of seventeen.

I think, Children are great, but wouldn't I rather buy an island somewhere?

Mark's away at his mother's in Michigan for a three-week work term. He took Ada with him, and Steph has temporarily moved into his room.

She wakes up at 2:30 in the afternoon, stumbles into the washroom

while I've been out job hunting for seven hours. She's taking something part-time at NSCAD. She leaves her underwear on the floor of the washroom, leaves dirty Kleenex between the cushions of the couch.

When I got to the toilet this morning, a bowl of yellow. The shower water to my ankles and all the hairs just floating. Steph's longer ones clogging the opening until I reached down to stir them with the sharp end of a plastic comb.

Tonight she has art students for dinner. I think, People from NSCAD are flaky. They wear erratic combinations of clothing. A girl asks if the apples in my fridge are from New Zealand, if I use more than four squares of toilet paper when I wipe my ass.

There's a chance, says one of them. There's always a chance that God's an all-knowing, all-seeing white man. But there's just as much chance that He's a lawnmower or an onion ring or that he's shaped like the letter 'Q'.

Steph: I don't think it's possible to eat God.

The others scoff at this. This, and her faith in monogamy.

I get up and move to the kitchen and Steph comes in for a bowl of olives. She's dyed her hair darker. Her eyebrows three shades too light.

Mark wants the baby, she says. He wants custody, and I might give it, though he never gave a damn before.

She wraps brie in a sheet of plastic, pulls the compost from the freezer, flicks leftover bits of cracker crumbs. I picture Ada wrapped in Mark's arms like a chunk of cheese.

He wanted nothing to do with her until a month ago, says Steph. When she was born, nothing. Eventually, I sent an e-mail saying, Your daughter's name is Ada Grace. Her big toe's shorter than the next one, like yours.

Steph bites an olive, says, I've been trying to make it work, and I love her, but I miss past lives. I've made sacrifices, haven't I?

I think of pineapple and NHL hockey.

At the end of the night, she sleeps with a boy she can't stand. She whispers to me in the hallway as she passes to her bedroom: I'm an idiot. I know.

The rumour is this: Mark found his roommate dead in his closet. Self-strangulation. Mark had spoken to him minutes earlier so when the phone rang he walked in, found him face down on the hardwood floor. Mark moved back home. Slept with his parents for six months. Begged Steph to move back to Nova Scotia from Kingston with the daughter he'd never seen.

Steph: You know what I hate?

She's made nachos, poured wine into Styrofoam cups. Her body under a blanket and her legs across me. There's a commercial. She's grown somehow obsessed with make-over shows and I assume she's referring to them.

The redundancy? I ask. The hours wasted?

I hate that I don't stand for anything. You know? I argue but I don't believe.

Me: It's good to doubt.

But I'm inconsistent as a character.

I suspect she's dropped out of school. She talks of moving back to Ontario to sell the melted records she's still designing. There's a bigger market for the giant earrings, the chip bowls – which we discovered weren't dishwasher-friendly. She's living off money her parents send.

She says, Jeff's got me into a form of asceticism.

Who's Jeff?

A guy. I'm going to stop washing my hair. I'll still use soap. I'm just not going to use it on my head. Did you know heroin addicts are aquaphobic?

I say, It seems strange to be scared of what you're made of.

Tamara's started her period. She feels sadness mixed with a larger sense of freedom. I think, The sadness is little slivers of metal, dust mites; the relief, a gasp of cold air.

For Lochie there's only relief.

I don't want a child, says Tamara, but I fear the wrath of my older self.

Lochie: I know a fifty-two-year-old who had a daughter. A friend of my mother.

Me: She'll be pushing her mother around in a wheelchair at twenty-one.

On the fridge, a note from Steph: I'm not accusing anyone, but I often have less orange juice when Tamara's around.

Lochie crumples it, throws it in the plastic bag for paper recycling. He often picks through the garbage for bits of compost and paper that Steph's tossed in the wrong place.

Me: Mark'll be back next Tuesday.

She's manic-depressive, he says. I saw her at a coffee shop and she threw a tantrum when I couldn't stay for a drink. That baby can't live here. The three of them can't live in that little room.

Me: They just need time to straighten things out.

The peacekeeper. When Lochie's not looking I steal an onion peel from the garbage that I tossed there in a moment of weakness. I think of my own parents asking what my plans are. My mother saying, When you were a kid I always thought you'd be so successful. I was so sure of it.

I think, Just give me another year

Lochie awakens to Tamara's fingers on his bare back. I need to talk to you. He rolls over and she says, I can't take it. I love you, okay?

I love you too.

Were you ever going to say it?

I did.

You said you thought I was loveable.

I was scared it was too early. That look I give you—it's me saying it in my head.

What is it you love?

You're so giving.
 Maybe I want children. Not now, but ...
 I don't *not* want children.

When you see them at a restaurant we change seats. You get as far away as you can.

Digestion requires tranquillity.

Lochie tells me how she laughs at this and I think, She loves me for the same reasons. Our absurd neuroses. How he delights in touching her calves. How I spend ten minutes in the doorway deciding what coffee shop to go to.

She asked me once what I look for.

Temperature, lighting, noise level, music, pastry selection, bathroom cleanliness, satisfactory ratio of patrons to chairs.

When I said this, I could see an intensity in her look. With Steph there's mild flirtation. With Tamara it's deeper.

The truth: I'm able to get through my own bouts of loneliness with the secret assumption that my friends' girlfriends are in love with me. It's a view from a lookout we share. A steep path we look down but can never take.

It's my seventh apartment in five years. I used to love the feeling of waking without memory. Skinless for a few seconds. Now it follows me.

Mark: What does it take to change us? Disaster?

Me: We've lived so long in the moment. It's been preached to us.

Steph's gone off to melt records in Toronto. Ada's gone with her, and Mark's back to living in the third room. We do singles things together. I've discovered the whole appeal of the single life is a longing for its opposite. Mark points out women. We strike up meaningless conversation with a bartender, a girl waiting for the bus. She tells us the bus driver is her boyfriend. When he arrives he flicks the digital sign to OUT OF SERVICE. She leans in to kiss him and they drive off in the empty bus.

I say, There's no joy beyond the initial impulse. That moment you realize one thing is over and you accept your new place.

Mark disagrees. He says he could live alone forever. On the drug of the possible.

If you could have your family, I ask him. Ada and Stephanie. If you could go back.

I expect defence. Denial. But he nods.

For me singlehood is a storing, a building, an anticipating some future point of action. Though I desperately want to, I can never finish the statement, "I am ..."

Mark looks at the woman next to us. She's older. She's studying the "psst" section of the paper where people post things like: *You, blonde with white capris cut bread at the Sobeys on Queen. Thin, perfect slices. You saw me watching. I dropped a Petro Points card. Did we have a moment?*

Mark says to her, I'm selfish.

She glances over, eyes his tattoo. Chinese lettering.

I'd like to be less selfish. I'd like to err on the side of the selfless.

Why's that?

I'm a father.

She smiles when he says it, turns back to her paper. The pride in his voice.