

Billie Livingston / YOU KNOW WHAT THOUGHT DID

The bus is pulling into a depot. 6:30 am. It's supposed to be Montreal but it looks like nowhere. A gravel lot just off the highway. Christ. You wake Grace, her face is winced but she's still pliable; lead her off the bus and into the station.

Place is deserted. Sit her down with the suitcase on a bench, go to the ticket guy, ask about the next bus to Saint John.

Newfoundland? he asks. *St. John not St. Johns*, you bark. He says not till 10:07 am — 10:07? You say you were told 7:15. He looks at you, his French is better than his English and he's disgusted with both of yours. He says he *don't know who gived dat time you, uh? but it not de true one — Dix heurs sept*. Screw dix heurs sept — how 'bout sept heurs, quinze. You flop down beside your kid, tell her the story. *Now what*, she wants to know, *can we sleep here for a while?* Forget it. Liable to have some thief grab your bag or your kid — terrible things happen in bus stations. You stomp back to the ticket wicket, ask which way's east. He raises his lids, just enough to get you in his pupils then points.

The two of you start out, up the gravel hill to the road, you dragging the suitcase, Grace hobbling barefoot over the rocks carrying an overnighter. *Where're your shoes?* She doesn't know. *What do you mean you don't know?* She thought you brought them. *You thought I brought them?* What kind of cockamamie excuse is that? You can't keep track of everything, can't even handle travel arrangements let alone someone else's footwear. *You thought*, you say, *You thought*. *Well you know what Thought did . . .* It's the family retort to all assumptions made and the family reply when asked *What?*: He planted an egg and thought he'd grow a chicken. Grace asks, *What?*

He shit his pants. She nearly busts a gut. Ah dirty jokes, they make it all a little brighter. She's giggling and limping over rocks and you

offer a piggyback; her and her bag and your suitcase all dragging off your sickly packmule self as you lumber up the hill. Nearly twist your ankle again in those asinine boots. You'll have to change before you get to your parents'. No point walking in looking like the Jezebel who ate New Brunswick.

At the highway, you drop your bag, let her slide down your back and off your bum. She wants to know, What're we doing? *We're going to hitch ourselves a ride and blow this joint, that's what.* She gets a sly smile on her face, she likes doing bad stuff sometimes, no telling when.

Now stand there like this, hip out — provocative but not too sexy or maybe the other way around; and hold your wee child's hand. Who could say no? Thumb out . . . Whoosh, a single car careens on by, not even a glance — what was he — a child-hating queer?

Don't despair, look pleasant with a touch of *ennui* . . . not another car in sight. Grace's smile is fading, she looks blue again. *Sing me a song, old thing,* you tell her. She doesn't know what to sing. May as well go for the cheap laugh again, *I know one. Us kids used to sing this when we were about your age.* You tap your toe and take up with a southern twang:

*Once knew a lady lived out west,
she had moun-tains on her chest,
she had a bird's nest 'tween her legs
where a cowboy laid his eggs.*

She giggles, then, *What eggs?* An-n-n-d presto! Shhh-oo, crunch, car slows onto the gravel, a silhouette glances over his shoulder. There now, this is travelling.

This first guy says he's going to Lévis then over to Quebec city, in bare English, then sits with a hand on his gear shift, gripping with gusto while he fixes on your thighs. Well that's the French for you, no harm in looking. Thank god for your baby though, she puts her head up over the back seat every few minutes, every time a French version of a familiar song comes on and now and then an English one, like now, that one she likes, *I Got a Brand New Pair of Roller skates, you got a brand new key;* she's half-crawled over the seat, trying to get closer to that wiggly girlish voice. The driver is frowning at her, guess she's making him nervous hanging over his shoulder like that. You mimic the shudder in Melanie's voice: *I ride my bike, I roller skate, don't drive no*

car. Don't go too fast but I go pretty far. For somebody who don't drive, I've been all around the world. Some people say I done alright for a girl. Ba ba ba ba yeah. Oh yeah. Oh yeah-h-h-h. He smiles out of the corner of his eye.

By nine in the morning you're driving toward St. Léonard with an older man. He finds Grace's bare feet quite charming and striking to the funny-bone. His English is good. He offers to stop in Edmundston and fix her up with some shoes. Now that's charming.

He waits in the car outside the shoe store, you were hoping he'd offered to pay. He does at breakfast though, takes the two of you to some family dining place and picks up the check. Just outside St. Léonard, he invites you to stay with him for the day, before travelling on. Or come back with him to St-Jean-Port-Joli where he lives — you'd like it there he says, lots of artists, says he'll buy you a wood-carving and laughs softly. He's got heavy gentle hands and his hair is silver fluttering into black just at the nape. Part of you wonders if he takes you seriously. Or if he just wants to fuck you. Maybe either way would be ok though, feel loved for a few years or a few hours. Feel like someone wants you bad, what does it matter why? But you stand with him outside his car and say goodbye. Seems wrong leaving a woman on the highway like this, he says. And you laugh and shrug and he does too and there's a long silence before he kisses either cheek and touches at the outer corner of your eye, the curve of bone before your temple. Looks in deep as if he's soul-hunting. Feel like telling him it's at the shop. He smiles at the pavement, puts a card with his number and address in your palm, folds your fingers and kisses them shut. Gives your hand a final squeeze for punctuation.

The next guy is young. Good looking and he knows it. Tries to be even louder and more jocular into the back seat at your cowlicked girl. Tries to show he's fun for the whole family. She's not buying it though. Her laugh's a little phony. She takes her hands off the front seat and relaxes into the back, closes her eyes. He's English, anglophone, he says, says he speaks French but not that great, *I hate trying to practice in Quebec, these guys can be such assholes.* He's in sporting goods, the rep for about half of southern Ontario. Says something about being young and how it's a positive thing in this business given the market. He's not working now, just sort of a vacation to see some buddies in Fredericton. You went to teacher's college in Fredericton,

you tell him. He thinks that's interesting. Seems to think your tits are pretty interesting too.

You've been in the car about forty-five minutes when he says, *You look pretty tired. I was thinking I wouldn't mind stopping at a motel and resting for a couple hours.* You smile and look out the window. Feels nice, all this good old fashioned lust. He lets loose a grin and asks what you do for a living anyway. You tell him this and that. He asks if you're strapped for cash right now. Huh, that was pretty bold — where would you put Grace though. You could use the money. To get back or put toward Vancouver — rather swallow your teeth than ask your father for money.

I mean, we could just sleep, I could just stretch out along the bottom of the bed. How cute; your pause for thought nearly scared his preppy little pants back on. Then your kid's head and shoulders come hurtling over the front seat, *Ok, no funny business!* What does she mean? Well you know what she meant but how could she know what she meant? The guy looks startled. You both giggle. You pat her cheek and smooth fingers over her forehead, say *Out of the mouths of babes . . .* and the subject is dropped.

Some family-man sort drove you the last jaunt from Fredericton to Saint John; had him let you out down the road. It's almost dark and you've got Grace by the hand, hopefully by the ear, *We took the bus here and then a cab from the bus station, ok? Don't forget.*

But aren't they gonna to see us walking? There's not gonna be a taxi, they're gonna know.

They won't even ask. It would never occur to them.

Yes they will, they'll think it's weird, they're gonna know. They're older than you.

Oh pipe down Grace, you're making me nervous. You let go your daughter's sweaty little mitt and bring the back of your hand to your lips, dab at them for an over-abundance of red, glance down your blouse, do up another button, avoid another stumble, this time over grass growing out of the sidewalk, say out loud, *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

What do you mean?

Nothing. Haven't you ever heard that expression?

No. It's kind of mean.

Not if you don't step on any cracks, it's not. She begins making wide strides across all pavement connections before your parents' house. Your eyes coast from her feet to their door and see a face, see your daughter's woolly eyebrows on a old face. Oh shit — heart's going love and terror; a smile splits your face, *Mumma!* The screen door opens and she rushes down three steps to the sidewalk. The space she leaves makes room for Dad. Drop your suitcase and run to the ohs and my goodnesses and *How was your trip, did you take a bus from the station? We could've come and picked you up. How did you get here?* Grace checks her shoes for crack evidence, then smiles politely at an old lady, an even older man. God they're old — how the hell did they get so old, everything's white and lined like school paper, his school paper; your father moves with prepared stiff strides toward you. Greets you with that firm pat of his, his gaze eased with a nod that you try to make pass for *Baby girl, let me look at you, is this my granddaughter — she's adorable!* or something like that. Christ, run, just run before you get in that house and every stingy remark he ever made hits brick-deep in the back of your head. He takes your suitcase. Oh god, it's like falling down some muddy fucking rabbit hole. You can't go home again.

You can't go home again. You're at the train station, Monday morning with your parents. Grace is kicking the toes of her just-turned-four-day-old runners into the platform. Dad's bought your train tickets back. You tell him thank you and sorry and how you're going to pay him back and he says that's fine. Don't know what that means *that's fine* — that's fine, pay it back when you can, or no, that's fine, I want you to have it. He's not really looking at you. All this fucking effort, clean and sober, you've been sober since January, almost four months, but no that's not good enough. Nothing's ever good enough. He doesn't even seem that crazy about Grace. Your mother likes her, she taught her how to knit the other day, but Dad's too busy being whatever it is that he is — actually it was yesterday that really put the kibosh on it.

Sunday afternoon and your father said Grace could play with some old dolls of his. She took them out back. She likes to orchestrate these great bloody epic doll stories. It was some variation on Cinderella, she

told you later. Apparently the step-sisters were up to no good and it became necessary for them to beat the tar out of each other: a Cinderella fisticuffs. This doll bashing another's brains out, that doll booting the other in the arse — that was it for your father, *She's too rough with them, she's liable to break them any moment now — they're antiques.*

Dad, she's not going to hurt them, I'm sure they'll be fine.

Well what exactly is she doing out there, I think she's disturbed, I think there's something wrong with the child.

How the hell would you know, you ignored all your kids except to take a strap to them. No. What you really said was, Oh for goodness sake, there is nothing wrong with her, she's seven years old, she's doing what seven year olds do.

The train station's freezing. Mumma asks Dad, *did we lock the door?* He says they did. She says she doesn't remember locking the door. He says they did. Then he starts off on something about locks and the increase in crime, so you let your brain dawdle off somewhere else, maybe catch the gist of it toward the end. Why does she always have to say *we*, your mother, she always writes to you using *we* too, why can't she say *I* ever? It's like a royal *we*. As if there's no her. And why can't the other half of *we* bugger off and give you a moment to yourselves? Why doesn't she ever get away from him and really talk to you the way mothers and daughters are supposed to; have girl-talk.

Mumma's lifting the cuff of your father's jacket to check the time when you hear a train coming, the announcement crackles over the loud speaker. Grace starts hopping one foot to the other, starts prancing circles around the three of you, singing some song from Sesame Street, *That's about the size, where you put your eyes, that's about the size of it.* She sings that one line over and over, skipping round and round, skipping herself dizzy. Wanna strangle her and your father's casting that fishhook look again, the one about how she's not right in the noggin. Wanna kick him in the nuts, over and over in time to Grace's rhythm, belt out some harmony, sing *She's not nuts, none of us is, you tried to drive us there but we never arrived.* Your mother tucks your hair behind one ear and takes your mind off your feet. Gently takes you in her arms and says, *We're so glad you could come, we've been worried about*

you. You smile in her ear, nod, say, *I'm sorry*. She pats your back, *That's ok, nothing to be sorry about*. The train is in the station, *You'll keep in touch, won't you*. You pat back and nod again before you break apart. Then there are a lot of eyes on faces: yours and theirs and their watches. And the wells start: *Well it's about that time, Well it's been lovely having you /being here /seeing the family, well well well*. And your mother hugs Grace, and Dad gives you his stilted hug and Grace gives him likewise but doesn't kiss his cheek the way she does her nanna's because she knows her lips'll turn to stone. Everyone looks doped until you and your baby pick up your bags and climb aboard and give yourself twenty-two hours to do nothing but sit, eat Graval and think about the last four days.