

ANNE STONE / from *Delible*

—3— (Lora)

My sister looked at the world with her eyes open. Unflinching. For weeks after Mel saw *The Day After*, she had nightmares which she'd describe to me in graphic detail, so I could picture the radiation wounds opening in my skin. I started calling her the Prophet of Doom and, on sunny days, I'd eat my cereal alone on the patio, the glass door shut. In our house, the TV was *always* on, and at her worst, recounting dreams inspired by made-for-TV movies, it felt like Mel was always on too.

The morning after one of Mel's nightmares, we were eating our Cheerios and Mom said, "You know, Lissa, you're looking at the glass like it's half empty," and Mel looked at Mom like she was completely insane and said, "The end of the world? Half empty? What do you mean, half empty? That glass is completely fucking empty. We're all going to die."

"Not this morning you're not," Mom said, making her point with a butter knife, "not if you watch your lip."

Mel shrugged and said something about mushroom clouds and silver linings, and I shut the glass door and sat in the drizzle, concentrating on my cereal, trying to pin down the last little O with the base of my spoon.

The Saug may look beautiful, but over its trim lawns and anorexic gardens, there hangs a quiet. A decorous quiet that polishes some to a fine matte finish, but for others, like Mel, amounts to a shallow petri dish in which all of the world's anxieties are cultured and grown large. Night after night, tucked under this municipal silence, were her dreams of the a-bomb.

Like most of the girls we knew, Mel struggled with the urge to make *something* happen, to pitch small, sharp rocks against the mannered codes she wanted no part of, to lash out against the unavailing lawns and empty dark around us. To teenagers, the Saug isn't a *place* so much as a *state of mind*: it's boredom incarnate, with an angry edge. Even when you drink and do drugs, that aimless anger is there, alongside whatever else you happen to feel. Sometimes Mom sees it in the teenagers who live

in our co-op, and calls them *shiftless*, as if three hours behind the counter at the Tim Horton's is the cure.

When Mel was in hospital, I thought I found the answer in her left arm. The IV tube was taped down in an S, the slim plastic needle invisible under her skin. I looked at the blue veins that made maps out of the inside of her arm and thought I could see what was going on inside of her. Would she one day cut the skin, I wondered, just to see? But no, Mel didn't. She didn't *cut*. She found another way out from under those arterial maps.

When the moment was right, I'd meant to ask her, in a way that was serious, in a way she couldn't laugh off, why she'd done it. But she was gone before that time ever came.

Real people, Mel told me, aren't beautiful the way people are in books, because even if you get it right for a moment, you can't help but carry on past where a good story should end. It was only later I understood what she'd meant, that the length of a life dilutes its meaning, that if you experience a moment that's flawless, a perfect distillation of self and world, inevitably, it comes to be adulterated by the clutter of a life lived. Your stomach rumbles with a more pressing need, and before you know it, you're eighty years old, and that flawless moment is recalled dimly, if at all. Like my sister, I had a fifteen year old's vision of beauty and a conviction that nothing stays redeemed.

Mel and Mom and me lived in a public housing co-op in the McCauley Green, in one of the fifty pea-pod units that made up our concrete village. Our houses were government subsidized. If you didn't know it before you walked through the neighbourhood, you could tell it from the way old couches, blackened at the folds and felted by the wind and rain, had been dragged into yards and arranged as though they were as natural to lawns as pink flamingos. The Saug, the suburb we lived in, could only have been dreamt up in a distant cubicle by someone who owned a car. After the suburb was half built, that someone developed a social conscience, drew up plans for public housing and discharged his conscience by pneumatic post. Soon after, three or four co-ops were hastily erected between Streetsville and the 403. Our sad cluster was bordered by thousands of new houses, all of them huge by comparison, all of them semi-detacheds with two bathrooms and long rolling lawns out back, all of them with children in colour-coordinated socks. Unlike us, these people didn't go on Pogeys or pay rent. They *owned*. Unlike us, they had garage sales worth attending.

For as long as I could remember, it'd been the three of us, though Mel and me *do* have a dad, and Mom does—or did—have a husband, whether common-law or for real, she didn't say. Of course, you wouldn't know it except for the pictures that used to be around. After Mr. D'Sousa's stroke, Mom put the pictures of Dad in a box and claims she can't remember where the box got to. Mom has always been cagey on the subject of our father and waves her hand vaguely east as she says that the last she heard, he was working at the Don Jail. It's better this way, she tells us, because the best gifts he ever gave anyone in his life were Mel, me, and the Lebaron, "though not in that order," she'd say. Then she'd grin, so we'd know to taste the sugar in her words.

As for the Don Jail, this was the old days, when no one talked about what a decrepit old shithole it was, and how crowding hundreds of men into tiny cages was about as smart as trying to snuff out a fire with gasoline. At the time, it was *out of sight, out of mind and whatever you do, don't give the bastards cable TV*. Nothing made

my Uncle Dave madder than the thought of a bunch of guys lounging around a prison in button-down shirts, watching sports on TV all day long.

So we do *have* a dad, even if he doesn't exist as a proper noun in Mom's stories, but as a series of gaps, the blanks in the family album. You can tell the pictures *were* there. The white borders around the remaining pictures have dulled with age and so are now closer to yellow. But every few pages, there is a small square or rectangle marked off with tipped-in corners, signs that this page once held an image of my dad. In my mind, these gaps in the album are replaced by a series of photographs. In the first, Dad leans against the Lebaron. At seventeen, in jeans and a white t-shirt, he looks impossibly lean and young. If not for the greased-back ducktail, he could be one of the boys behind industrial arts, the ones who hold their smokes close to the webbing, so their mouths disappear each time they take a drag. Soon, the separate images of Mom and Dad give way to images of them together, standing in the drive, dressed for a dance, or out back at Grandma's, next to a massive bowl of potato salad. But it's the last one that Mel and me liked best. In the last picture, all of us are together. Dad cradles my sister in his arms and I curl up next to them, ballooning the waist of a bright yellow sundress. As with all Polaroids, this one had begun to fade the last time I saw it. The image of the dress looked dulled, as if it, too, had been laundered many times over the years.

Mel loved that photo best of all. She loved to see us all together. Like a *real* family, she'd say. Mel wanted that real family more than anything. I felt differently. All I'd ever had was the second-hand idea of Dad, so when it came to the person out there in the world, I could take him or leave him. The same way he did us.

Mel claims to remember Dad. But in her stories, Dad's eyes are gray, and on the back of his driver's license, tucked away with the papers for the Lebaron, his eyes are written up as blue. Maybe in memories, sad ones, blue washes out to ash. Or maybe Mel didn't just see things in black and white, she remembered them that way too.

Even before Mel was gone, I knew we'd never be a real family again. Still, it's important to believe in happy endings, even if you know they pretty much never come true. In spite of her dreams of mushroom clouds, it was Mel who taught me that.