

JOCELYN CULLITY

## Minnows

**A** TUESDAY NIGHT IN FEBRUARY: Toronto's all shades of grey, like the people who take the subway with you south to Queen Street from your job at the Key Connection in the underground mall at Yonge and Bloor.

Pay the doorman the annoying cover charge, and sit alone in the Queen's Mum Café sipping a hot rum toddy, amongst the groups of women and men drinking red wine and Jack Daniel's. The window behind your chair has miniature stars of frost on it so you keep your coat on. You still hang solo, even though you moved from Vancouver almost a year ago. You thought a move across the country might help you come to know what you want to do with your life. Your parents don't really object because they support their only child unconditionally, even if they are incessant lip-biters. Real-life experience in a variety of places will build your future, they say. Recently, the phrase *the future is now* has been going through your head with a peculiar regularity.

Drink the toddy slowly, the rum warming your insides like hot water on cold pipes. View the little band in the corner playing a bluegrass number that keeps the heads around you twitching gaily. It's an intriguing trio: a bassist, electric guitarist, and a ukulele player.

The ukulele player is intent on catching your eye.

Think: Cliché move, buster.

Wonder if you look sad and alone, neither of which you feel. Sit up straight. Show your profile as you smile at the waitress and order another toddy. The ukulele player wears a vest woven with orange and red thread. Look down at his feet. He's got two pairs of socks on, and Birkenstocks. Murmur, "Holy Moly" into your drink. You've got a pair of PayLess boots on that at least keep

your feet dry. He wears a cap that says "I'm Canadian" that they sell at the Beer Store. Your eyes meet again. Realize he's been watching you check him out. You wonder what expression you had on your face.

Later that night you coincidentally both wait on the same side of the road for a streetcar. Hunch your shoulders in your coat and kick at the crispy-brown maple leaves in the snow. He carries his ukulele in a leather bag loosely over his jacket; one would never guess he just got off stage to resounding applause. Notice his Canadian cap actually has flaps that he's pulled over his ears. Pretend while you stand there that you weren't in the same club, weren't one of those people who got shiny eyes during his solos. Look at the dimple in his cheek that flashes now. Snuggle your slightly crusty nose into your collar and stare at the slush on the black street.

On the streetcar, stand at the back holding one of the steel poles and observe the other riders staring out the windows into the night. Little lights wink from late-night restaurants in Chinatown. You shopped at the market there only yesterday, fantasizing about buying slim, purple aubergines for two. The ukulele player wanders down the streetcar and grips your pole.

Finally, glance up. Say, "Nice show." Even give him a small smile.

"Thanks." He grins, showing off a set of straight white teeth that reminds you of skiers out West. "Nice to see sweet faces in the crowd," he says.

He makes you feel shy, a quality that usually does not inhabit you. Let the feeling happen. He asks if he can give you his card.

At Queen and Jameson in the west end, shoot him a backwards look and say: "Bye," fingering his card in your pocket. Get out with two other people and take an almighty leap across the dirty snowbank that separates you from the sidewalk. Skirt a group of prostitutes dressed in thin evening wear. The ukulele player, his face in shadow, peers downwards at you as the doors close. Become aware of the fact he's going up to Hyde Park, the next stop, the end of the line, an old Wasp neighbourhood with big houses and wide parks. Walk past the streetcar. It's stalled, the driver politely waiting for two drunk men to move from the middle of the street. They are hitting each other with plastic swords.

When you get to your bachelorette, a small loft made smaller by the slanted roof, you lock the two deadbolts, and chain the door.

You don't phone him. But you do phone the Queen's Mum and find out they play every Tuesday night. You plan your exit with precision this time and, at the streetcar, he asks if you want to stay for a coffee at the diner nearby. This is how you start to see him.

The ukulele player's name is Tom and you think, I'm seeing a man named Tom? This is something you've not foreseen in your life. Tom, Tom, Tom-Tom. You think Thomas would be a better representation for a ukulele player. You're immediately mortified when you blurt this out. He laughs a husky laugh. Tom lives at home to save money, teaches ukulele at the University of Toronto Conservatory twice a week, and is building up a repertoire of gigs.

Two dates later, he suggests meeting you for a coffee near your job. He has passed the Key Connection, vaguely recalls it, as people do about a kiosk with glass display cases filled with gold pens in burgundy holders, specialty licence plates, and a key-cutting sign in the middle of a mall. Tell him, "You might have stopped to tie your shoe there once."

Find yourself squirting down the counter tops with Glass Plus, making all four sides of the kiosk glint. Clean the keys on the cash register, getting rid of your predecessor's finger smudges as well as your own, something you've meant to do for a long time anyway. You've got three keys to cut and you get those out of the way early because you don't think you look so hot bending over the clamps, and the machine makes an awful racket. Lay out your inventory book on the counter, ready to note the number of sales you've made that day (three keys; one "Boss" nameplate engraved in Greek Font; one key chain with "Bad to the Bone" inscribed in Old English). Behind your ear, lodge a gold pen you particularly like, even though you can hear your parents all the way from Vancouver say ten-karat gold isn't good enough. They think this

because their booming dry-cleaning business (which attracts Americans who clean their suede across the border for a great exchange rate) has allowed them to put in one bathroom sink with a fourteen-karat faucet. You check the angle of the pen, give it a small pat.

Helga doesn't miss a trick. A woman in her fifties (you've actually no real idea how to gauge her age), she hustles over from the Clinique counter at Holt Renfrew across the way, her white coat shimmering, gold pumps squeaking across the mall's tiled floor. "Ariel, what's all the cleaning for?" she asks, her powdery face leaning over the counter, her nails clicking on your shiny glass.

"The beau's dropping by." Look into her blue eyeshadow, up to her blonde-streaked hair. Smell her hairspray mixed with Clinique "Happy" perfume. Helga escapes from Clinique to talk to you even though there are a dozen other women working at the cosmetic counters around her. You're mildly flattered. Her colleagues treat you like a camel out in the middle of the mall. Helga's vaguely worried about you but you avoid topics that might implicate you in her plot to find out you don't really have your goals straight yet (or, god forbid, have none), and instead you slip statements into your conversations like, Time is on my side, I'm an open-minded person, Spontaneity's superior. She *did* approve of your decision to stop dating the Hallmark man when you found out he liked sitting in the front row at movies.

Wish this once she'd go on break in the cafeteria on the sixth floor at Holt Renfrew. Instead, she produces from her pocket a paper cone of cold Wendy's fries, pulls one out, and nibbles it. A couple of granules of salt land on the counter. It's most unlike her. You wipe at them.

"Mmm," she says, making wet little chewing noises. "We get a glimpse of the new man."

Turn from her and get the Back in Twenty Minutes sign ready to put up. Regret having bragged about a new guy.

Leave the kiosk and go outside to inspect the displays from the customer's perspective, from Tom the ukulele player's perspective. The gate swings shut and locks automatically behind you, something you do regularly by accident.

Curse. Say: "The key-cutter is locked out without her keys."

Helga groans. Back up and lift your Sears' skirt a little, it's short anyway, and take a stupendous leap. Picture gymnasts straddling low beams, your legs sprawling momentarily. Stumble on the other side, the pen behind your ear shooting to the ground, and know this is the exact moment that Tom will be standing there. Turn around and there he is. He grins as if he's just seen something he likes in you.

Helga visibly looks him up and down. Tell by her face she's not impressed. Feel betrayed. She is, however, a terrible prude about dress. Tom looks like Tom in his Canadian cap and coloured vest. He leans on the counter, looking down at the chrome licence plates with "Born to Ride," and "Live to Fly." Try to look at him through Inspector Helga's eyes. Waver. Decide she's a snob. Frown deeply when she slides over to the counter farthest from Tom and beckons you to her.

"Go to college," she hisses, as if finally finding the right time to say this. "Do accounting," she adds, as if this will solve your bad male decisions. She rubs her hands together briskly, a salty encore.

Don't ask why Helga didn't go to school. Instead, deflect your eyes like you do when your parents ask what comes next, after this Assistant Manager job.

In Starbucks, around the bend in the mall, out of sight of the Key Connection and the Clinique counter, Tom sits, legs crossed, listening to you as if you are the serious centre of all things. Notice wide thumbnails on his very gentle looking hands. Concentrate on trying to throw the conversation back on him, but he's keenly interested in who you are, how you came to be. So you tell him about getting a car mechanic certificate in Vancouver and how you worked in an outfit that did brisk business in Chevies. You were a Chevie expert.

"Quirky," Tom says, his eyes shining.

"Quite," you say. He reaches over and takes your hand.

Tell him how you wanted to go east, even if everyone else was going west. Car mechanic jobs were sparse in downtown Toronto when you arrived and, besides, it was too damned cold half the year to lie on your back in a garage. Describe the temp job at the Key Connection that became permanent. There's a thread there. Now you sell Chevie key-chains, cut Chevie keys. You like the hustle of people shopping in the mall, on their way to the subway. You learn about their curious aspects by what they choose to engrave.

“What do people choose to engrave?” he asks.

“Gone Fishing,” “Work is for people who don’t know how to fish,” “It’s a free country.” Sigh.

“Curious,” he says, smiling.

Figure you might as well use Helga’s line and continue: “I’m planning on applying to the University of Toronto for accounting.”

You don’t even know where the University of Toronto really is.

Tom keenly looks at your face. “You’ve got bedroom eyes,” he says.

In the Food Court, he kisses you right in front of the “Taco Bell: Canada’s Number One Choice” banner. Put a hand to your long, thick hair and pull it back from your face. His lips are soft, as lips are in the Harlequin you’re reading on the streetcar to and from work, a brown paper jacket judiciously camouflaging the cover. His kiss lingers. Feel a surge of power in your chest, a breaking loose like a cannon ball that busts out of the Food Court and plants you for the first time firmly in Toronto.

This kiss immediately leads to fantasies about seeing an up-and-coming artist (you dismiss your original thoughts about musician clichés as fearful and immature). Imagine guest-lists at the door that get you out of costly covers. Dream of Tom greeting you when you arrive. He hails the doorman, a man who’s usually meaner than a junkyard cat, with, “Dan, this is Ariel.” Picture said doorman turning into a pudgy-faced pussycat before your eyes, repeating “Ariel” as if he’s known you well for years. In your mind, Tom walks you to a seat he’s carefully considered, in the shadows but near the front, the light from a small candle leaping around on the table, where you can sit and watch quietly, undisturbed.

You do get on the guest lists and the doormen *do* call you Ariel as if they’ve known you for years, even though it’s only over a month since you’ve been coming—count, a total of five times. Tom, however, doesn’t come to the door. You find your own seat, waiting to meet him between sets as planned.

Make out in one of the backstage bathrooms in between sets. Tom is tender. His hair is damp from sweating under the stage lights. Your hair becomes damp. Ask him if bathroom sex is *his* quirk. “Not until now,” he smiles, kissing your face. Crazy, you want to believe this.

During the final set, gaze at him in a stunned way while he plays a sorrowful Hawaiian solo in the room full of breathless patrons. His head is down, showing the top of his "I'm Canadian" cap, his wide thumbnails particularly useful for picking at the four strings. Or so you think. You have no idea how to play an instrument. Your children will. Stop yourself cold. Since when do you want children? Just a hyper hypothetical, you tell yourself.

At work you put up the Back in Twenty Minutes sign, and check that the cash register is locked. Wave listlessly to Helga, who is watching you while she folds orange gift boxes at the Clinique counter. In the public restroom in the mall (which, strangely, no one is ever in), look at yourself in the mirror, muttering: "The lighting in here sucks." Move forward and away from the glass, maintaining intense focus on your eyes, practicing the bedroom look, whatever that may be. You pop the Pill, which you've been on since you were sixteen for health reasons, then walk past ten stalls and check for bogeymen under the half-opened doors. Inside the eleventh stall, lean against the door and gaze up at the concrete wall, into the yellow-white light, a squibble of something flashing across your stomach which you identify as both excitement and fear. "I'm Ariel," you murmur into the cold air. "For two months I've been dating a Tom with monstrous charm." Look down at the small tiles on the floor and add: "I don't know you any better than Tom, Dick, or Harry." Squeeze your eyes shut and imagine walking hand in hand, striding into the future—a sort of gleaming, immense, white space.

On the streetcar going home from work, close your Harlequin and rest your head against the window. Contemplate the people on the sidewalk in rush hour, like minnows darting closer and farther from each other as they move in a school towards a cavernous mouth of stairs going down to the subway where they all squeeze together and shimmy down. At Dundas and Yonge, a beggar's Mecca, a man in a dull-green coat cups his hands, blowing on them, then extends one to the passersby. Observe the side of his face, grateful, when a woman in a parka gives him some change. Spy a man walking along in pajamas and Wellington boots, a thick

hospital band at his wrist, holding a cardboard sign that says "Help!" The cold of the window suddenly feels good against your forehead. Stare out. Wonder what makes them there and you here.

They didn't plan this. Their parents, probably long dead, didn't plan this.

This could happen to any of us minnows.

Wait for Tom as agreed at the streetcar stop at Queen and Straughan. Jump from one sidewalk square to the next to keep from freezing to death. Bob up and down on toes you can't feel until he dashes out of a streetcar an hour late.

Tom's buddies, David, Lucinda, and Rowan, live in an old warehouse turned into low-rent studios with do-it-yourself plumbing and other fix-it jobs. Meet them on the freight elevator, which reminds you of one of those murder movies, the elevator creaking and droning, slowly but surely bringing the killer up to the top floor.

David, Lucinda, and Rowan show off stuff they are moving up to their rooms—an old claw-foot bathtub, a bust of some man, and a chrome stand-up ashtray. They say, "Hiya!" and shake your hand. Feel slightly uneasy because something about their co-friendly routine tells you that they've known a few of Tom's previous girlfriends. Like them nonetheless.

Tom gestures at them and tells you they're graduate students. David and Rowan are in music; Lucinda's in English. Rowan does gigs with Tom from time to time. They co-ask what you do. Lower your voice an octave and tell them you are Assistant Manager at the Key Connection. You're applying to the University of Toronto for accounting. You just need the application forms. That last thing, you realize too late, is not what to say.

In the shared bathroom on the top floor, someone has expertly installed a pink marbled countertop, *circa* 1950. It would go well with the bathtub, which Lucinda has now placed in the middle of her enormous room. On top of the toilet is a candle that smells of lavender. On the back of the bathroom door someone has put up a notice written in black magic marker: Don't steal the toilet paper.

You are on the counter and Tom gently moves your elbow to rest on the soap dispenser in the wall.



"This is different," you foolishly say.

Over his shoulder, through the window, there's a white-bricked abandoned building across the road. He's up against you moving his hands on your stockinged thighs. Your tights itch.

A steady, pulsing beat comes from Lucinda's room down the hall, party central. The glass in the bathroom window reverberates.

Wonder: How on earth did I get here?

Tom is removing one of your boots. "What are you thinking?" he asks.

"Whether I have a hole at my toe."

He smiles, his dimple appearing.

Put on what you think are the bedroom eyes. He hasn't actually mentioned them for a while. You've already decided that's good; it proves you've got past a certain superficial stage. Why oh why, then, are you batting your eyelids now?

Peer at his face. Ask: "What are *you* thinking?"

"That you look pretty up there."

"Like a peacock."

"A pretty peacock."

"I feel more like a muskrat."

"A sleek otter."

"You oughter be quiet."

"Cute." He strokes your face.

Murmur: "Work is for people who don't know how to fish." Lean forward and put your arms around his neck. Whisper, carefully, into his dimple: "What's going to happen with us?"

Tom rubs his face against yours. "We'll see," he says sweetly. "We'll see, my inscriber of all things."

He doesn't give you time to think about this.

One night you see a cat at the glass balcony door off the kitchen of your bachelorette after a day of boredom at work (only one key, an AT&T logo on a trophy, Helga was sick). As the Five-Minute-Alfredo boils on the stove, regard the meowing cat pacing back and forth in front of the door. Strain your neck and gauge the distance to the fire escape. Flick the back of your hand in its direction, saying, "Off with you." Sip your tea and muse over the paint chips that have been sitting on the table for three weeks. Look back at the cat.

It's half-grown, and black, like a million other west-end cats that peek out of bushes in the dark. The new immigrants in the apartment block down the road stare at them in shock, as if they never expected starving animals in Toronto.

Let one cat in and the dam would break. You don't even like the things. And you certainly don't have the cash to take a cat to Purty Paws Veterinarian Clinic beside HMV in the mall.

It's sleeting outside, and a faulty street light blinks on and off, briefly lighting the cat up, fur wet and jagged, like an electrocuted-comic-strip-cat. It raises its front paws on the door and starts to scream. Scream! Swallow hard, take a sheet and hang it from a picture hook above the door, spreading it out, and turn up Tracy Chapman.

Say, "Go away, cat." Stir the soggy noodles. Croak, "Sorry, tom-cat."

At the party for Lucinda's new bathtub, you arrive with Tom. Or more correctly, Tom arrives with you. When you get off the murderous elevator, he walks ahead, up the hallway. At Lucinda's door he stops and waits for you to catch up, giving you a grin and a soft punch on the shoulder. Smile demurely.

People you've never seen before and other people that you've seen once or twice at the Queen's Mum file into Lucinda's studio wearing expensive-looking coats. Their boots thud across the wooden floor to the carefully centred bathtub. Everyone surveys it. A long hose, taped across the floor, reaches the tub from a low tap on one wall. Lucinda tells the crowd the ins and outs of filling the tub. Her hand curls around at the room, reminding you of wisteria. Tom, already sipping a glass of red wine, is in deep discussion with Rowan and David.

Join the tour group and listen dutifully to tour guide Lucinda. When someone in the group asks about her bookshelves, trail along to look at them beside her waterbed at the very other end of the room. The bookshelves consist of plywood propped up with bricks.

And so the party goes. Eavesdrop as a woman describes how she found her second-hand dress in a store in Kensington Market, an area of town you still don't know. Look at your new Gap jeans you saved up for. Pour yourself a large glass of white wine from a bottle you find on a garden table. Stand strangely. Go

back to the bathtub and examine it as if it were an Egyptian tomb. Lucinda glances at you while talking to a man with thick black glasses and curly sideburns.

Your hands on the bathtub, say with fake excitement: "This is just so neat."

Lucinda turns back to Mr. Sideburns. Look at the bathtub's feet as if still entranced anyway. Then somehow start moving across the room, your legs not sure of where they're going.

Feel Tom's fingers at your elbow. Ah, his warm hand on your arm.

He holds an almost empty bottle of red wine in his other hand, and smiles with faintly red teeth. "How are you doing, Mademoiselle key-cutter?"

The woman with the Kensington Market second-hand dress is standing there too. She also has faintly red teeth. You stand your ground even if you feel it's quicksand.

Wave your empty glass at him and exclaim: "Fine!"

The contents of your jean pockets, a five-dollar bill and a chapstick, look like alien specimens on the cardboard box that doubles for a night-table in Rowan's room. Rowan's staying in Lucinda's room. Tom has hustled up his bed for you both and you lie on the futon looking up at the warehouse ceiling, steel beams way above your head. The streetcars have stopped running so there are five guys from the party strewn on the floor like old paper bags. They all have their coats on. Some of them snore.

It's very late. You are both quite drunk. Tom pulls up the covers, layers of sleeping bag and grey flannel sheets that smell faintly of mothballs. Prop yourself on one elbow and get ready to holler what exactly did he mean by calling you a key-cutter like that, and who is the dame he spent the night talking to? It's well worth waking up the paper bags. Close your eyes and tell yourself it's only proper to have this conversation when you haven't had anything to drink.

Tom hugs you to him, oblivious of the catastrophe that's just been averted. As you sink into the sheets, think how awfully strange it is that you've never been in a bed with him before. You're not used to lying down with him. Manage to stay up for another hour together.

Wake with a feeling of dread in the morning. The room is empty but there are fully-awake sounds coming from other rooms. Your tongue is stuck to the roof of your mouth; you know your hair is bird's-nesty. The fact that Tom's gone shouldn't be surprising. You have a propensity to sleep both deeply and late. Figure he had to have left since he practises Sunday afternoons. Do waterless, mirrorless ablutions as fast as you can to get out of there. Notice the five dollar bill you put on the cardboard box is gone. Consider this. Stare at the box and around it and on the bed. Decide one of those snorers scooped it, the last one out the door.

Try to resist the birdie in your head. Battle it.

Feel yourself give in to its irritating tweeting noises. Cross-examine: Did you not think your fair lady needed that money?

Conclude: What's mine is yours.

Don't go further than that.

But as you cross the road, walking straight through the snow-bank up onto the sidewalk, you get that the end is in sight. As you trudge the three kilometres home, slowly understand it was sighted by everyone else last night.

Three whole years later; rush hour: People stream to the subway, past the Key Connection where you are now Manager and still cutting keys. See Tom, and duck, your hands on the shelf beneath the cash register. You used to duck all the time, thinking you'd seen him. You never did. You decided he kept clear of the underground mall, just as you've avoided the Queen's Mum ever since.

You haven't met since he formally broke up with you at the kiosk. He'd said he felt a necessary spark was missing. He added, softly, that he wished this wasn't the case. You gave him the finger as he walked away.

Peep up so your eyes are just above the glass counter top. Tom's by himself. He's not wearing a hat, but it's spring after all. He moves across the rushing minnows to the wall next to Holt Renfrew. At the Clinique counter, Helga is steadfastly applying eye-shadow on an unwitting teenager who looks into a large mirror.

Glimpse Tom in the short spaces between people. He bends down to tie his shoe. Resist yelling, "Told ya! Told ya!" Feel the dead weight of your jaw. Tom pulls out a cell phone and answers it, still crouched down, tying his laces.

You had too much dignity to let him know anything more about you. As far as he knows the Pill worked as it should. Having the baby was the last thing on earth you'd thought you'd do. But you followed your instincts, sado-masochistically querying on occasion if they'd started working yet. On the good pregnant days you thought you were doing the right thing and praised yourself. On the bad days you held Helga's hand in the mall bathroom and cried. You had urgent flashes to phone Tom's house. But you separated your thoughts in your brain, even though they felt stuck together with Crazy Glue, forcing yourself to think logically. If the relationship was over then why would you want to discuss something so delicate, so precious? The wide thumbnails are hers now, not his. Your parents helped with money. After all, you're *their* baby. You've swung it—barely. Your parents want you both home.

Tell yourself ducking is beneath you. Continue to watch him from your squat, refusing to meet the eyes of the elderly gentleman who is looking at you with a concerned face as he passes. Shuffle the dud keys on the shelf, and rustle the envelope you put there that holds your application form to the University of British Columbia. Hold up a dud key as if you've found what you're looking for.

"Hi, Ariel." Tom is standing there peering down at you.

You stand up, feeling as if you've just received a blow to the back of your head.

"How've you been?" he asks. His voice is gentle, like he's interested.

"Extremely well," you say.

"Still see bands these days?"

"There's not a lot of time for that." You pause, watching him carefully. "Not with a child." The light glances off his eyes as his expression changes. "Really? You married?"

"No. Well, maybe."

He tries to make sense of this. Regardless, you maintain a poise you used to practise in your mind over and over.

"Gotta lock up early," you say. "I need to get some boxes. Moving back to Vancouver." You stare at him, feeling wildly reckless. "I need to collect the boxes before I pick up your child at daycare."

You see confusion, then blind fear cross his cheeks, his eyes. You understand this feeling. Wonder what the hell you are doing. You don't even want him around at this point.

“Just kidding. You know how key-cutters like to kid.” Your lip curls.

“You’re joking?” He looks at you like you’re insane.

Nod with a jerk of your head and lock the nearest display case, your hands sweating.

He looks around, a pink colour coming back into his face. But his lips are pale.

“I really have to go,” you say, and turn away.

“Okay,” he calls after you, his voice uncertain. “Maybe I’ll see you out west sometime. I ski.”

Shrug with your back to him. Don’t answer when he says, “Bye.”

When you turn back around, you watch with one eye as he walks slowly to join the minnows again. Pretty soon you can’t tell which one he is from the backs of the coats mingling and moving away from you.

Experience how extremely odd this is, given the circumstances.

From the kitchen, a mass of boxes stamped with faded Canadian flags, watch your two-year-old, Anna, out in the spring sunlight. She’s standing barefoot on the tiny balcony of your bachelorette, overlooking a huddle of rooftops. Green-tipped branches thrust themselves upward from amongst the buildings. A distant billboard flashes, “You are Canadian,” on and off and on again.

Your girl holds your half-full teapot in front of her, elbows tight at her sides, thinking, no doubt, you can’t see it. You’d pretended not to notice her climb onto the kitchen chair, spittle on her bottom lip, and take the pot off the table. You’d let her do it to see how far she’d go, to see whether she’d stop herself while you rinsed your cup in the sink. The tea in the pot is still warm. Too warm.

Your sweet daughter grips the teapot. Anna bends her knees, and from where you stand in the kitchen, you think she’ll put it down. The siren of an unseen fire engine starts up below and she looks up, letting go of the pot.

The lid smashes first, then the teapot, chunks of wet china on the balcony floor. You know her feet have been hit. For a moment, everything seems silent, the city mute in front of you.

Then she screams, a throaty scream that slices straight through the landscape. As she turns toward you, her arms reaching out, you are already running. Sweep her up and into the kitchen, gripping both her heels, keeping her feet under the ice-cold tap water as you fervently whisper: "Baby, baby, my dear little baby." She twists in your arms, her face wet with spittle and tears, her mouth perfectly round as she refills her lungs and shrieks again and again.

Push at her cheek with yours, her hot wet cheek, her angel breath, your own throat closed up. Scrutinize her feet and see, with relief, they'll be fine. Wonder if you'll ever know the right moves. Hold your daughter tight, rocking her, saying firmly, as you always will: "It's okay. We're okay."

Lean against the counter.

Feel your cat's tail brush against your leg.