

LEAH JANE ESAU
RICH LIFE

THESE DAYS IT IS CUSTOMARY for Claire to be upset every five minutes. Someone cuts her off, or bumps into her, or glares at her. *Maybe they weren't glaring at you*, she thinks, unconvinced. At the bank, one machine is out of service, the other occupied, and a line forms behind her as she stands at the third machine: men in well-tailored suits, on lunch. She regrets banking downtown at this hour. The man at the head of the queue glances at his watch and rolls his eyes. He blames her, the stupid woman, the housewife, for taking her time at the machine. *She's* not in a rush, *she* has nowhere to go, *she's* not important. Of course this is all in her head: who knows what he's thinking? Maybe he thinks *nice ass*, but either way, she feels eyes on her neck, and not at the other machine where a man has been standing longer than she has.

The man at the other machine is making deposits. Claire wishes she had dressed better today. She notices how differently she is treated when she wears her blazer, her \$300 shoes, the clothes left over from her CEO days. Another life. Someone in the line clears his throat, which makes Claire nervous and she pushes a wrong button, but still she finishes before the man at the other machine. *Ha!* She leaves the bank triumphantly.

Claire *is*, in fact, in a rush to pick up Leo, who has come across an ocean, now that his friends are dead. She is taking him to a dentist appointment—a specialist, something about his jaw. He's been waiting to see the specialist since his arrival on the continent a year ago, and she knows he'll want to be early.

When she arrives, Leo is standing outside his apartment, waiting on the sidewalk. He is a tall man, still dapper in his old age. He's dressed in clean khakis, a light shirt with the sleeves rolled to his elbows, a Tilly hat and a thin grey backpack. His white beard is neatly trimmed, and he smiles at her kindly when she comes around her car to greet him.

“Sorry. Traffic.”

He nods, and they do the awkward kisses on both cheeks because he is French. She'll never get used to it: she was raised by an older British couple. They were wonderful parents, but you were lucky to get a handshake. A hug? She was hugged once by her mum. She got a few pats-on-the-back from her dad when he was especially proud, like when she graduated from Yale.

Claire opens the door and takes Leo's elbow as he hoists himself into the SUV.

"Do you like this car?" he asks.

"I do."

"It feels very safe."

"It does, doesn't it?"

She drives a Mercedes M-class SUV bought by David. She likes that she sits higher than everyone else, and she likes how quickly it accelerates.

Leo fiddles with the radio and tells Claire about the book of poetry he's just finished reading. Before, she was afraid of Leo, but now not as much. They have almost surpassed the awkward formalities of in-laws. Now they are friends, but she still doesn't admit that she hates poetry, especially the modern stuff: can't read it, not even lyrical passages, those beautiful lines. She doesn't tell Leo this, because she doesn't want him to think she's uncultured.

"I loved the book so much," Leo says, "that I emailed the author. The poet."

"You did?"

"And she emailed me back! For the past month we've been discussing literature." His eyes are sparkling.

"You don't email her every day," Claire says uncertainly.

"No, no, of course not. About once a week, sometimes twice if she responds quickly."

"How'd you get her email?"

"Her website."

Claire is impressed by his cyber sleuthing.

"She suggested other books," Leo says.

"Well, there's a bookstore near your dentist," Claire says. "We could go. There's time."

Always so much time, she thinks.

Leo's specialist is across the street from the bookstore. Claire drops him off and circles the block to find parking. She remembers why she never comes downtown: already there are dirty men staring at her, asking for spare change as she puts coins in the meter. They follow her up the street, or block her way—thrusting their cups, or hats, or hands at her.

"Pardon me," she says.

"Hey *lady*," they call, "you dropped this."

They hold out a piece of garbage—a bank receipt—that she certainly *did not drop*. They snicker as she walks away. They click their tongues as though they are clucking chickens, and they make lewd movements: pumping their fists in front of their crotches. *Hey lady*, they call.

Why don't the police clear these men out? Doesn't she pay her taxes? And what about the businesses: it must be hard for them to have vagrants stooped in their doorways, jeering at customers.

While Leo is at the specialist, Claire browses the bookstore, which isn't really a bookstore anymore. She examines the stationery, the kitchenware, the scarves and purses and scented candles. She wonders, briefly, if someone could steal her financial information from an ATM receipt.

Then she remembers that she knows a writer: Tara got published in a magazine—what was the name? Claire has completely forgotten until now, and is strangely excited: she has a mission, a task.

She approaches a woman with a thin gold nametag over her left breast.

"Hi. My friend is published in a magazine."

Is Tara *her friend*?

Tara is David's secretary—not very good at administration, but excellent in diplomacy. Tara knows whose calls to screen, what information to hide from whom, how to relay sensitive information.

"I don't know the name of the magazine," Claire says sheepishly.

The young woman smiles patiently.

"Is she a journalist?"

"No," Claire frowns doubtfully. "I don't think so. She's a writer."

"Did she say it was a magazine, or a literary journal?"

Claire is suddenly embarrassed. She can't remember. They'd been at a party for David's work. At the party, Tara wore a blazer that seemed too small in the shoulders, but too wide through the waist. She had bangs newly cut, and parted slightly, and with her straight blond hair and pronounced cheekbones

she looked like Joni Mitchell. She struck Claire as a woman who didn't quite fit in the corporate world. They have that in common, she and Tara.

Behind them, someone important had arrived, and David shook his hand, and the hand of the important man's wife as they glided into the room. At that moment, Tara had asked Claire about her new gym, and Claire realized that Tara had been tasked with keeping her away from the party. Claire left her empty wineglass on the marble windowsill and took another glass of red from a waiter's tray, noticing how the waiters avoided the corner where she and Tara stood, where wineglasses were piling up faster than the busboys could retrieve them.

"David tells me you're a writer," Claire said.

"Oh, just a hobby. I'm surprised he mentioned it," Tara said.

Her cheeks were red, and Claire wondered if she was blushing, or if they were just flushed from the wine.

"Do you have a book out?"

"No, not yet. Just stories, in some journals."

Yes, she'd said journals.

"Literary journal," Claire says now, to the woman in the bookstore.

The woman leads Claire to the back of the bookstore where rows of magazine racks stand in a maze.

"Probably here. Do any of these titles ring a bell?"

Tara had said the name of the journal, but Claire can't remember it now. She remembers the bright room with marble columns and the green and gold carpet with its pattern of leaves. She remembers Tara leading her to the hallway, where vast alcoves had been turned into sitting rooms. They'd sat on a vintage divan. Across from them, there was a pastoral painting with a little dog in the lower right hand corner. Tara might've said the name of the journal a second or third time, and still, Claire can't remember it.

"I'll find it," Claire says sheepishly, "thank you."

Determined to find the story, Claire looks at the table of contents of each magazine, but after an entire row she starts to think she's in the wrong section. Maybe they don't carry the magazine. Maybe it's not out yet: maybe it's in the next issue. Maybe she should give up, like she does lately when a task becomes too difficult—so unlike her, or the woman she used to be, anyway. Claire often wonders what happened to that woman.

Claire wanders upstairs to the café and gets a cup of coffee and sits by the window where it is grey and looks like it might rain. She thinks of Leo in the dentist's chair, glancing at his x-rays, discussing surgery. He has two cysts in his jaw that have to be removed. Claire has seen the x-rays: two empty spaces where there should be jawbone, black like the spaces between his teeth.

Leo's friends died in an attack, in Paris, and Claire tries not to be selfish, she tries not to talk about how lonely she feels. Her parents adopted her when they were old, and they're both dead now: her dad when she was in her mid twenties, and her mum when Claire was barely thirty. Leo is only in his fifties, and she envies David, because he still has his father. And even though she has David and the baby, Claire feels overwhelmingly alone in the world. But how can she feel this way when Leo's friends were murdered? When Leo moved across an ocean, to a city where he knows no one, where nobody speaks his language. How can she complain when there is real suffering all around her?

At night, her agitation is worse. The hours after dinner, before bedtime, are difficult and she paces around the house like an animal in a cage, feeling like she should be doing something. But what? There is nothing to do. The baby is fed and put to bed by the nanny. The house has been cleaned by the housekeeper. David has stayed at work again: a meeting. But Claire wonders if he's with Tara. She has no reason to suspect this, except the normalcy of it: isn't that what happens eventually? People get tired of their partners, bored of the routine. And with Claire's attitude, who can blame him? She has become lacklustre, without hobbies, with few plans for the future. She has become the opposite of the woman David met, before the baby. She feels as though she is a con artist. She seduced a man, then drastically changed.

Claire puts on a sweater and tells the nanny she's going out for a walk. She walks around the neighbourhood, but there are still people on the street and she fears running into someone she knows. She knows everyone, though. What is she afraid of?

Can they tell that she's agitated? Can they see it in her body? The sternness in her face, the stiffness in her knees, this regimented stamping of the pavement every night. As soon as she walks past the stop sign at the end of the block she knows she's made a mistake: she feels like crying. She

wants to go back inside but it seems too late—she can't just turn around in the middle of the street, with all these people looking at her.

No one is looking at you.

Did she say that out loud? Is she talking to herself?

She walks past the pet shop and the bakery—closed at this hour. She loops around the block, making it look as though she has a direction, a purpose.

She runs into John and Gabby Anderson, walking their Doberman.

“Oh how *are* you?” Gabby says pleasantly enough.

“I'm well,” Claire says with all the acting she can muster, “just enjoying the evening.”

“Where's David tonight?”

“Working late. They have a deadline coming up.”

“We haven't seen you around the club,” Gabby says. “I've been looking for a tennis partner.”

Claire hesitates: if she tells Gabby about her new gym, Gabby will want to join, and then she'll have nowhere to escape for a few brief moments of peace.

“I hurt my ankle last week,” Claire lies.

“Oh no! What a shame.”

“Nothing serious. It should be back to normal soon.”

“But you're out walking.”

“Oh yes—my physiotherapist said it's good exercise.”

“Well you could come do a few walking laps with me and the girls. Or have a massage. It's really not the same without you.”

Claire hides her annoyance with a laugh, “I'll swing by next week if I can,” she promises.

She asks about the Andersons' summer home on the coast: when are they leaving? Isn't it time for their annual family reunion? She listens for a polite amount of time, and then they say goodnight. As she turns down the street, she pauses to tie her shoe. Bending down, she is now out of view of the Andersons, covered by the wall of hedges around the yard. She hears Gabby say, “Did she look all right to you?”

“Perhaps something's going on with David.”

“With their marriage?”

All of this, Claire hears through the hedges.

Claire sends the nanny home and gets ready for bed. It's barely ten, but there is nothing to do. She goes upstairs to the nursery and there's Caroline, asleep in her crib, in what looks like the most uncomfortable position possible. Isn't it funny the way children sleep? The baby's head is wedged in the corner of the crib, her blanket wrapped under her so she appears to be half-sitting, her butt in the air. Claire puts her hand on the baby's back and feels her breathing, and decides to leave her like that.

Claire has never felt maternal, but she had the baby because it seemed like the thing she was supposed to do. Wouldn't it make her complete? But when she held Caroline in the hospital that first time, she didn't feel anything except fear, monumental fear, and the weight of her responsibility: she would be a good mother, she promised. She would not abandon the baby as her birth mother had done.

She hears the clank of the garage door, and she goes downstairs to greet David. His eyes are bloodshot from exhaustion, but he smiles and takes her into his arms, wearily. His shirt is wrinkled but not too wrinkled, he has loosened his tie, taken off his cufflinks and rolled up his sleeves—both those things he does around four o'clock unless he has a meeting. He smells like himself: his sweat, his deodorant. Maybe there is nothing going on.

"Is she asleep?" he asks.

"Yes. Gloria says she's maybe sick, a small cough. I'll take her to the doctor tomorrow."

"Gloria can do it?"

"Sure. But I'm sort of bored."

"Are you?"

"Yeah."

They open a bottle of wine.

"You thinking of starting something? A new business?" he asks her.

"No. I don't think so."

"Why not?"

She shrugs. "No good ideas."

Claire asks about his work. She knows some details of the project he's working on. She updates him about Leo—the surgery has been scheduled. She mentions the poet Leo has emailed, and then says she tried to find Tara's work at the bookstore.

"It's in *Wrought Iron*," David says without hesitation.

Claire nods and a pause passes between them. She regrets bringing up Tara. How did he know the name of the journal?

“You know what just happened actually,” Claire says.

“What?”

“I went for a walk and ran into John and Gabby. I said you were working late. And then I said goodnight and turned down the block, and I heard them talking about us.”

“About us?”

“Gabby asked if I looked all right, and John said ‘something must be going on with David’.”

David frowns, and finishes his drink. He puts the drink on the coffee table, and his eyes meet Claire’s defensively.

“It just hurt my feelings,” Claire says.

David briefly looks away.

“And I couldn’t believe they would talk like that while I was still within earshot.”

“I can’t really believe it, either,” he says.

Claire straightens.

“What do you mean?”

“Claire: are you *sure* you heard those things?”

This was the woman who graduated top of her class at Yale in business. She was the only woman that year, and it never bothered her at the time, though there were rumours. They posted the students’ grades in the hallway every semester, thought it was good competition she supposed.

“Talk about a *pity mark*,” this man named Bryce said, leaning against the wall, looking at the white piece of paper.

Claire had been seeing Bryce for a few weeks.

“She must be banging him,” he said, meaning their professor, and the others laughed.

Later, she broke it off with Bryce.

“I heard what you said. In the hallway.”

“Can’t you take a joke?”

She lived for twenty years without thinking of that incident. But now this memory floats in and out regularly, three men, leaning against the

stairwell looking at her name at the top of a list. Suddenly Claire wonders if they really *were* pity marks? Not real grades she had earned, but handed to her because she was a woman.

After graduating, she sold her first business to IBM for a million dollars. Her dad died. Her second business was risky and she was overconfident, and the thing went bust. Her third business was another success, but she couldn't shake the feeling that it was luck, nothing else. She sold it eventually to AT&T. Her goal had been to make money: she'd made money. She was living the life of the rich. What now? Make more money? Her mum died. She married David and they bought a yacht and sailed to Hawaii. She retired at the age of thirty-five. She had the baby. They renovated the house. Every night she went to bed and stared at the ceiling and thought: *shouldn't you be doing something right now?*

Only recently has she become so self-aware. For a woman who wore very little makeup, she suddenly can't leave the house without it. She globs on a layer of foundation so thick it covers her freckles, the mole in the corner of her face, the bags under her eyes. She wears \$500 jeans, even if it's just to take Caroline to the doctor, or to the playground where she pushes Caroline in the baby swing, the black rubber basket that looks like a diaper. Caroline cries at first when Claire tries to push her legs through the holes—Gloria has to help, and when Gloria takes the baby, Caroline quiets. She doesn't know her own mother.

Caroline laughs and screams with joy, and holds onto the chains as she flies through the air. Later, in the privacy of her bathroom, Claire cries for nearly an hour. She stops going for her evening walks. She does not return to the health club to visit the spa or to play tennis.

Claire loses her shit in the pharmacy. Leo's surgery was the day before: more complications than they thought and they had to break his jaw, which means he is in the ICU and Claire is preparing for his release: meal supplements the doctors have recommended, icepacks for his face, a child-sized toothbrush. His prescriptions will be written tomorrow. If all goes well he'll be released in a few days.

Claire stands in the line.

"Next," the cashier says, and Claire steps forward.

The man behind her pushes past as though she is invisible. He lays his items on the counter. His basket is full—it's not as though he only has one item, and Claire is too shocked to realize what has happened. The young cashier doesn't even blink, she rings him through.

Claire slams her basket onto the ground, and walks up to the man as he tries to exit.

"Excuse me, Excuse me!" Claire says, her fists balled. "Did you not see me standing *right in front of you?*"

The man says nothing: he is smiling, *smirking*.

"Oh please, *go ahead*: your time is *sooooo* much more important than everyone else's. *I'm* not in a rush, *I* have nothing to do, *I'm* not important at all! Please go ahead since you're *so much better than everyone else!*"

He walks towards the exit. There are last-minute items on display near the counter and she hurls them at him: a bar of soap hits him square in the shoulders. He ducks and covers his head with his hands, but Claire is fast: the breath mints hit his head, the batteries bounce off his knuckles—*that's got to hurt*—a lint roller hits him in the face. He backs out of the store as Claire advances: throwing anything she can find, setting off the alarm as the items fly through the doorway. She is hitting him everywhere: *what excellent aim!*

The man leaves and Claire swivels back to her basket: expecting a security guard or a manager but no one comes. There is silence in the pharmacy. So she picks up the basket, and gives her items to the cashier and says, "It's extremely rude to cut in line."

"Yes, I understand," the cashier whispers, but she doesn't apologize either, though Claire feels she should.

"Maybe he doesn't understand English," Claire says, "You know, he doesn't know what 'next' means."

The cashier puts her bill in the bag and she doesn't say *have a nice day*.

A few days later, after Claire picks up Leo from his surgery, David finds her in the bathroom, crying.

"There was a kid in the hospital today with leukemia," she says. "A little boy. He's six."

David nods.

"I'm worried about you."

"Yeah."

Claire wipes the snot from her nose, into her sleeves. She has already used all the toilet paper. David returns with a box of tissues.

“Remember when Kay Smith went to Germany a few years ago?” he says.

Kay and George were friends of theirs. They lived at the end of the block.

“Yeah.”

“Three years ago now, I think.”

“I remember.”

“Well, she wasn’t in Germany. She was at a facility in Vermont.”

“A facility.”

“A retreat: more of a retreat. You have your own cabin and facilities—”

“Facilities.”

“Like a lodge: a dining lodge: five-star restaurants, organic grocery store, gardens, golfing, pools, a spa. But there are people there, to talk to. Doctors, I mean—”

“Doctors.”

“Psychiatrists.”

“No.”

“Just think about it: people you can talk to. Lots of people just go for a few weeks to get away, like a vacation. Do some guided meditation and stuff.”

“*Guided meditation?*”

“That’s one of the things they teach you. George told me about it.”

“You mean he *confessed*. Confessed that his wife has been to ... this retreat. In Vermont.”

“Yes. It’s confidential. I’m sure you understand that, I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that.”

“And how did this come about? You were talking about me to George obviously.”

“He approached me, Claire. He saw you at the pharmacy.”

Claire hears only her own heartbeat in the stillness that follows.

“Is it true?” David asks.

Yes it’s true, Claire wants to say, but suddenly she has a vision of herself throwing bars of soap at the man at the pharmacy and she can’t hold back the laughter. She laughs and laughs and can’t stop laughing.

It really is very funny.

The place is called “The Valley.” It isn’t called “The Valley Resort and Spa,” but it isn’t “The Valley Hospital” either, which Claire appreciates. It has a green and gold sign at the edge of the road, and from the outside, Claire suspects that no one would know. They are given a tour by a male orderly who wears beige trousers and a pink polo shirt. No one looks like a doctor. Claire has her own cabin, which is somewhat secluded, with a view of the lake.

“You’re a Stage One customer, so you get your own cabin,” the orderly explains.

“What does that mean?” Claire says tentatively.

“You can come and go as you please,” David interjects. “If you hate it, I’ll come get you. I promise.”

The cabin has its own washroom, a standing shower, but no bathtub. The orderly explains that there are baths, but that Claire must ask permission to use one.

They walk the rest of the grounds together: there is a golf course, a spa, a pool with a hot tub and sauna, three restaurants, as well as a dining hall. Further up the road is a bigger building, with the Stage Two and Three.

“Best to avoid it,” the orderly says, “but you can go in if you want. They have a library.”

The orderly leaves them on the porch of the dining hall. Inside, Claire can see the chefs preparing a gourmet meal.

“Will you stay for dinner?” Claire asks.

“Yes, absolutely,” David says, and squeezes her hand.

The gravel crunches on the path below, and they look across the lawn. A man makes his way through the garden below, holding a towel. It is dusk, and the light is dim, but they can see him clearly in the lamps along the garden path. He opens the door to the pool.

“Was that” Claire trails off, she can’t remember the name of the movie star.

“Yes. It was him for sure.”

“Is this a rehab centre?” Claire whispers.

“No,” David says.

“Will you stay with me tonight? In the cabin?”

David hesitates.

“Do you miss Caroline?” he says.

“No,” Claire says—she doesn’t.

He takes her hand.

“I can stay but they don’t recommend it. They say it’s better for you on your own: to sort out your feelings.”

But what feelings does she have to sort out? What thoughts?

“I want you to recover,” David says. “Okay?”

There is a breeze coming off the water. She nods but she knows that she can’t: her old life is gone: the life before the baby, when her parents were still alive and she was successful. That life is gone, and cannot be recovered.

Years later, at a party, Claire will speak to Tara about her experiences as a new mother. How she didn’t feel connected to Caroline. Tara will be pregnant, and Claire will suspect the baby belongs to Tara’s husband, Derrick, a software engineer from Minnesota. Either way, it doesn’t matter who the father is, in the grand scheme of things. Tara will admit that she is scared.

Claire will tell a story she’s never told anyone. Once when she was eight or nine, she read her dad’s journal, which he kept on his desk. One of the entries said, “*we are having trouble paying for Claire.*”

“Paying for you?” Tara will say.

“You know: the swimming lessons, toys, food. They were also putting money away, in a college fund.”

“They did well,” Tara will say.

Claire will nod, but look at the floor. Part of her is sad her father didn’t live longer, to enjoy all the money she made. Part of her is thankful her parents died when they did, while she was successful, that they did not live to see what happened after.

Guests at the party will also include Leo and the Poet who have moved in together to everyone’s approval: they are a lovely couple. At one point, someone will introduce the Poet to Tara and they will have a long and passionate discussion about writing that will culminate in an argument about Bolaño. The argument will be terminated by Claire, actually, who will lean against the wall and sigh, and say,

“I wish I were like you.”

She’ll mean both of them, and they’ll give her quizzical looks and she’ll go on to try to explain, but she won’t be able to explain. What does she mean? Why?

She doesn't know. She is thinking that icebergs are melting faster than she can love.

Icebergs are melting faster than I can love.

When she looks at them, she sees rich lives, carried out exactly as they were meant to be.