

KATIE ADDLEMAN

## Sami Works at Night

IN OUR BEDROOM THE curtains are always shut. There might as well be no windows in here. It's 5:00 AM and the room is dark except for the red light blinking on the radiator. Sami has put the air conditioner on too and it hums along. He always has both machines on. This is the only way to get the temperature right, he says. It's been snowing for five days. Mornings, before we go to bed, I peek out the window. The street is clean and perfect white. Empty, like it was in the country at my parents' house. When we wake up in the evenings the street is a brown polluted river. I leave the curtains shut.

Sami is on the phone and pounding his fists on the desk in front of him. He is talking to someone in India and they are yelling at each other in Hindi. It's about money. There's a pile of amphetamines on top of his math textbook. His voice gets louder and I put my hands over my ears. I try to make it look like I'm just tired, holding my head in my hands. He's very angry now; his black eyes are huge and popping and his eyelids are fluttering hard over them. He has beautiful eyelashes. I wish they were mine.

I want to open the window because the wall-to-wall carpeting is new and smells of rubber cement. I get up from the swivel chair that has been designated as mine. I don't make it to the window, because when I pass him Sami grabs my hand and pulls me onto his lap. He buries his face in my neck and shouts the foreign words into the receiver through my hair. I don't try to get up. He's been so sad lately; I try not to make it worse. I hate Sami, but if he died I'd kill myself.

So when he tells me he loves me I say it back,



We met in a nightclub. I slammed my shoulder into his chest. "Move!" I cried. I was running to the bathroom to throw up (which Sami never does. But sometimes I find him shouting at the wall in our bedroom, or lying twitching on

the carpeted floor, his fingers forming claws). The club was one huge room and built like a barn, with a pointed roof and metal rafters running along the ceiling to which they'd fixed a thousand flashing coloured lights. Giant speakers hung from chains over our heads. People blew whistles and pushed by me, shoving me into strangers' sweaty skin. Hands grabbed at me and I smacked them away. I tried to find some space. I covered my ears and felt much too hot, there was sweat pooling everywhere, in my bellybutton, between my toes. My skirt was damp and clinging to my knees. The blonde girl in front of me tossed her head back and I got a mouthful of her hair. I had to get to the bathroom. I fixed my eyes on the floor and charged forward. Sami was in my way.

"Move!" I screamed, and then disappeared. He followed me to the bathroom. When he came in I was looking at myself in the mirror like all the other girls and rinsing out my mouth. He stood behind me.

"You're not French," he said, because we were in Paris and I had not said "bouges-toi." There were girls standing all around holding mascara wands and tubes of lipstick, licking their teeth and dabbing their nostrils with water and talking about bikini season. It was only two months away.

"No I'm not fucking French. I fucking hate the French."

"That's a new one."

"I need to get out of the city. I want to go home." I must have sounded frantic.

"I'll take you home," said Sami. *Yes. Please, please do. Get me out of here.* We went back to my apartment and ate oranges and chocolate pudding in my bed and he told me stories about Montreal that made me laugh.

—*My neighbour's fucking crazy.*

—*What's his name?*

—*His name's Guy. He lives across the alley from me, on the second floor.*

*He's into white power.*

—*What do you mean?*

—*He yells out shit about black people. "Send the niggers back!"*

—*I don't believe it.*

—*I swear to fucking god, it's true. And he throws potted plants out his window.*

—*He says "nigger" loud enough for people to hear?*

—*He sticks his head out the window and yells it. He's got a beautiful tattoo though. An angel, on his chest. But I still fucking hate him.*

I fell asleep with my clothes on and my tongue in his ear.

In our dark bedroom Sami finally hangs up the phone. I'm still sitting on his lap. He reaches around me for his math text book. It's the pile of white stuff on top that interests him.

"I'm going to kill him," he says, his head bobbing, his eyes wide with conviction. He takes a credit card out of his pocket and cuts the powder up into lines. "Useless people!" He waves his free hand around as he talks, thumb and forefinger pressed together, like an Italian. "This guy does nothing, and we still have to pay him. He wastes so much time, it makes me sick. He should go back to India and live in his parents' house, the worthless piece of shit .... Get up, sweetie," he says and shifts his weight so that I have to stand.

"Was he mad at you?" I ask, looking down at him. I feel I should say something.

Sami's head is bent over the book. He snorts loudly and then throws his head back. He puts his fingers to his nose and snorts again.

"I don't give a fuck. He loses money. I mean he actually misplaces it. He's an utter waste of space on this planet and I fucking hate him." He hands me the rolled up bill he's been using and smiles. "Here you go, sweetie."

"I want to go back to the country, Sami. I really want to get out of here," I blurt out, almost without realizing.

"I know, you tell me every day," he snaps back.

I've upset him. I didn't mean to.

"You should just leave me now and get it over with," he says.

I bend over the white lines he has made. He had looked like he might cry, but now he goes on talking. "You know one in five ten-dollar bills in Canada have trace amounts of cocaine on them? Isn't that hilarious?"

I inhale and watch the crystals disappear neatly into the paper tube, I'm remembering the time that Sami called me about the rats. I was doing our grocery shopping. I had forgotten again to take a basket from the front and was waddling down the fruit aisle balancing coffee and yogurts and a bottle of Perrier against my chest. When my cellphone rang I dumped everything onto the shelf next to me. I squashed all the strawberries.

"Sami?"

"There's rats in the apartment! At least two, maybe more. Wait ... I just caught one by the tail and smashed him against the wall. I don't know what to do with him. What should I do? I'm gonna put him in a Ziploc bag and throw him out the window. Ok? Ok, bye sweetie." When I got home he was sitting quietly on the couch. He stared at me. There weren't any rats.

Last night Sami invited me out for sushi. We went to the restaurant in our neighbourhood with the big paper fish that hang low from the ceiling and are all lit up inside. He ordered for us and then started talking about his family, whom he hates. First he hates his father, he said, who's a narcissist and an alcoholic. Then he hates his mother, who's a psychiatrist. He told me that he had had a little sister who died of malaria in India. The waitress shuffled over in baby steps and lit the candle on our table. Sami smiled at her. *Thank you.* Then again as she left, *Thank you so much.*

"I never knew you had a little sister," I said. "What else don't I know?" But then the food came so we talked about that instead.

When we got home we got into bed and I asked him again, "What else don't I know?"

"Plenty," he said. I turned onto my stomach so he could unhook my bra. "I'm already on like chapter five or six of my life."

"Where am I?"

"Chapter one."

I turned back towards him. He slid down the bed and peeled off my socks. He kissed my toes and tickled them. His other hand moved up my thigh. He didn't really answer my question but I didn't ask him again.

*—I'd like to put you in a cage.*

*—Would you take care of me?*

*—Then you'd always be here. I'd come home and you'd be here, waiting for me.*

"Sami," I said later. We were lying in bed. It was just starting to get light outside; the gap between the curtains was glowing faintly, horribly. Sami lay on his stomach holding his pillow tightly over his head. I lifted up the corner of it. It was hot under there. "I want to go to the country," I whispered.

"I know you do. I said we'll go."

"When?"

"Sweetie, please." And he fell asleep.



Sami was born in Bombay to the son of a Zoroastrian millionaire and the daughter of a Sikh taxi driver. After his sister died the family came to Canada where his parents realized how much they hated each other. His father moved into one big house and his mother moved into another. Sami started elementary school. On his first day he sat one of the long lunch tables in the cafeteria and Michael Silver, the fat boy, dared him to drink a litre of grape concentrate. So Sami grabbed the bottle and knocked it back.

He wiped his lips. *Yum*. Everyone wanted to be his friend.

Sami joined the school band and played the drums. At the Christmas concert he lost both his drumsticks; they flew out of his hands during “Love Me Do” and hit the piano player, who stopped and grabbed her head. Sami didn’t stop. He played with his bare hands, pounding rim and skins and symbols with his hands until they bled. He bled all over his drums. He got blood on the bass player who stood next to him on stage. The auditorium went crazy, the kids were screaming. Teachers rushed around forcing everyone back into their seats. The conductor cut the air with his baton and everyone else in the band went silent. They sat up straight in their rows of folding chairs, their instruments held quiet on their laps. But Sami wouldn’t stop. His eyes rolled back in his head. The principal had to get on stage and remove him. He was dragged away from his drums by the armpits. The kids in the audience were shouting his name. He smiled and threw his bleeding fist in the air and disappeared into the wings.

“You’re effing crazy,” said Michael to Sami, after the concert. They were best friends then even though Sami always yelled at Michael for being fat.

“The show must go on,” said Sami. He was nine.

A few weeks later he got a bruise that wouldn’t go away. It got bigger instead of smaller. Sami’s mother took him to the doctor.

*Sami, take your shirt off and sit up here. Breathe deep Sami. Here, hold onto Mr. Ribbits and squeeze him if this hurts. Do you like lollipops? Does this hurt, Sami? Cough for me Sami. See you in a week Sami. Goodbye Sami. Hello there Sami. The tests are back thenewsisBADleukemia leukemialeukemialeukemia go and lie down, Sami.*

He went into the hospital. They put him in a clean room with two other little boys. One had been there for a month already, the other a week. Neither of them had any hair. This was quarantine. No one could come into the room unless they wore a white hospital gown and blue hospital gloves and masks on their faces and caps on their heads. Sami didn’t see his mother’s hair for a year. It went grey in the meantime.

Sami couldn’t leave the room. His father bought him a computer and he learned to take it apart and put it back together. He also read books. He read Joseph Conrad’s collected works and Don Quixote and the Bible, both testaments. He watched “Thundercats” and “Star Trek” and “Miami Vice” on TV. He was addicted to morphine. He asked his mother for a book on chemistry and learned how to make crack cocaine. Both the other little boys died.

If I had known Sami then, I would have dressed in the clean hospital whites and blues and watched “Thundercats” with him. I would have sat on the edge of his bed and held his hand, listening to him talk about chemistry or computers or religion, understanding only that I liked the sound of his

voice. I would have gone into the bathroom to cry.

Sami's family came over from India to stand around his bed with their bodies all covered and fight. They shoved papers in each other's faces and in his face and told him to sign. *No medical experiments will be performed on this boy. Let him die as a human and not a god damn guinea pig.* They told him to be happy that he was dying because he was going to God. *But who will get the money? Where will the inheritance go?* Sami didn't want to die. He hadn't even had sex yet. *Let go, Sami, don't be scared.* When he spat in their faces they would leave the room.

His mother was the only one who wanted him saved. She came with medicines the doctors wouldn't have allowed. She put hot liquids in plastic thermoses that she hid under her quarantine gown. She put a chair against the door. Sami drank a thermos full every night for a month while his mother stood by and hissed at him to hurry, the doctor was rattling the doorknob, the chair was shaking. *Finish it!* He drank as fast as he could, but it tasted foul.

Sami got better. He left the hospital and grew up. He started making crack in his mother's bathtub and selling it at school. He bought a three-thousand-dollar African Grey parrot and taught it to say "I love you." He lost his virginity in a bathroom, on his lunch hour. He was sent away to boarding school in British Columbia. He got his grade ten class addicted to cocaine. When his mother called he'd ask her to put the bird on the phone.

When he was nineteen he came to France and got me.



While Sami is again hunched over his math book I pull back the curtains to check if it's still snowing but all I see is my reflection in the dark window. I'm getting wrinkles; here I'm seeing them again. Normally I check on them in the rear-view mirror of Sami's car when he runs out to buy computer parts or drugs. In the freezing cold he leaves his car idling half on the sidewalk, half on the street the smoke from the exhaust billowing out onto the asphalt in wispy clouds like cotton balls being torn to pieces and dragged underwater. He has to keep the car running or I'd freeze to death.

I hope the wrinkles aren't too noticeable. I'd like to stay pretty. A pretty girl doesn't have to say much; she can sit at a birthday party, or in a staff room, or at the dinner table in silence, and people will say of her afterwards that she is charming or nice. So I straighten and dye my hair, and paint my nails twice a week. I wear high heels, even in the winter.

The drawers in our bathroom are filled with coloured eye pencils, cracked squares of powder blush, tubes of lipstick, eyebrow crayons, jars and pots of lotions and gels, tweezers and tiny scissors, fluffy pink brushes, perfumes that were my mother's. Sometimes I open the drawers and sit on the edge of the bathtub and look in, wondering where it all could have come from. I worry that one day I'll open these drawers and have no idea what to do. For now I understand it all. I only talk to Sami, and everyone else likes me well enough.

"Let's go to bed," I say. It's 6:00 AM now. Sami finally leaves his desk. We get under the covers and make naked spoons. I'm on the inside and high as a kite. We can't keep still. My feet are moving on their own and Sami's teeth are chattering. I want to have a conversation.

*—When I was a kid and my parents were still alive they said, "Darling, don't yell out everything you're thinking. Loud people are classless people. And people who can't be quiet look foolish, and what else?" "Cheap," I'd say, because that was the right answer. But they were wrong. You're supposed to be chattering all the time. All people want is to yell, and be yelled at. Because it's entertaining. Because they're afraid of being bored. Because they're afraid of not filling every available second with anything, no matter how stupid. Because they're afraid of death, and how quiet it'll be.*

*—I love you, sweetie.*

*—I love you too.*

Sami thrusts his knee between my legs and kisses me between the shoulder blades, I'm not in the mood, and tonight I tell him so. He pushes me away and turns his back to me. *Just leave me now and get it over with.* But I can't go anywhere in this snow.



The night I met Sami in the French nightclub was the two-year anniversary of my arrival in Paris. All that time I had been looking after a little girl called Emilie. She was seven and small for her age. She had long blonde hair. I was in charge of combing and braiding it. Her parents gave me a room in their attic and I had my meals with them. They wanted Emilie to learn English, but not from an English girl because they hated the English.

*—They think it's them and then everyone else. They think they're better than everyone, even though their food is disgusting. I wouldn't feed it to a dead dog. The Canadians, though, are nice. They speak French and live underground in the winter. Their land is beautiful and there are many wild animals there, for example bears.*

*—We don't think we're better than anyone.*

—*Pardon?*

I had come because my parents had always wanted me to, and now they were dead. It seemed like the right thing to do.

Emilie wore sweater sets in either light blue or brown, to compliment her hair. Her skin was so white that I could see the blue veins in her forehead. We did English worksheets together in the afternoons. In the sunny dining room we would spread the brightly coloured pages all over the table, making a mess.

“Find a green marker,” I’d say. She would clamber up onto her knees, unzip her pencil case, hold it high her head and turn it upside down. Pencils, pens, erasers and glue, tape and whiteout and a pink plastic ruler and markers and crayons in every colour would rain out, bouncing off the table and rolling onto the floor. Then she would stay as she was, on her knees, her arms held high above her, and shake the case and pound it with her fists. Pencil shavings would float down, the lead shards sparkling. She never laughed but just looked at me and grinned. Because we were being naughty.

“Here,” she’d say, sitting back down and picking out what I’d ask for from among the wreckage.

In spring people opened their shutters. The trees blossomed everywhere, in white or pink. I sat on a wooden bench in Montparnasse with a drawing pad, sketching a cartoon family for Emilie’s next lesson. A splinter of wood tore through my stockings. Men whistled as I bent over and reached up under my skirt to peel them off. I stuffed them in my purse. *Jolie mademoiselle, vous pouvez faire ça chez moi.* I picked up the drawing pad and labelled the characters: Mother. Father. Big Brother. A man wearing a thick gold chain sat down too close to me. *Qu’est ce que c’est ça, ma belle?* The paper was shiny with grease patches because I’d been eating a quiche Lorraine. Mother had a big translucent stain on her dress. She was ruined. I picked up my things and ran.

That night I met Sami and let him take me home. We climbed the stairs up to the attic holding hands. Our mouths clamped shut, we breathed through our nostrils, trying not to disturb the monsieur who owned the house. We heard a door open on the landing below and paused. Here he came, shuffling into the hallway in his slippers and shorts, his gut leading the way through the doorway of his bedroom. It was getting light outside. He stood in the hall and peered out the window at the drizzly morning and snorted. The stairs creaked. He turned and looked up at us. He cocked his eyebrows, rubbed his chin, and sneered. I pulled Sami quickly after me.

The next night at dinner he asked me politely not to bring any more Arabs into his house.



“Sami isn’t Arab,” I said. “He’s Canadian.”

“I understand,” he began, mopping the last of his salad dressing up with his bread, “that you do not know what they are like, because you come from Canada. Here in France we have many Arabs. They cause problems, like wife abuse.”

“Really?”

“*Ah oui. Ah oui.*”

I brought Sami a pot of chocolate mousse, leftover from dinner. He had been hiding upstairs. I told him what the monsieur had said and we laughed as we packed up my things.



I wake up in the late afternoon and Sami is back at his desk. He hears me sit up and turns around.

“Good morning, sweetie,” he says slowly, smiling, and comes over to the edge of the bed. It’s January, but he’s wearing his favourite summer outfit: a thin, white, cotton suit that comes from India and looks like expensive pyjamas. The shirt has buttons up the front and a Chinese collar, which I iron down for him sometimes. Against the light coming through the curtains behind him I can see the outline of his body perfectly under his clothes. “I’ve been waiting forever for you to wake up. What do you want for breakfast?”

“Come here,” I say. I’m thinking of my attic bedroom in France, of sitting alone and cross-legged in the middle of the bed, smoothing out the wrinkles in the blanket. I’m thinking of Emilie colouring the worksheets I’d made for her, her face so close to the paper, terrified of making a mistake. I’m thinking of my parents and of trying not to think of them. I’m thinking of lying in bed with Sami that first night, telling him that I wished I could just go home, holding onto him like he might disappear. I look at him now, sitting right there, holding out a cup of coffee for me, looking happy. I want to hear him say that he loves me. I want him to tell me that I’m what keeps him alive. But when I pull him towards me his expression changes. He stares at me like I’m the one problem in his text book that makes no sense. Like I’m trying to ruin him.

“No,” he says carefully, and pulls back. “I can’t get back into bed. We’ll have sex and then I’ll fall asleep. I don’t have time for that.”

“You have time,” I say. I keep trying. I wrap my legs around him. I run my hands over his black hair.

“Stop it,” he says, and he pushes me away. “What are you trying to do? I’m sorry I can’t sit around all day, doing nothing, like you.” He stands up and walks back over to his desk, and throws himself into his chair. “You live in a fucking fantasy world.” He doesn’t turn around to say it.

I lie back down and wonder if it’s still snowing. If it is the city will be nearly unrecognizable by now. When I get up I’ll leave. I’ll pull my hood up and wrap my scarf up to my nose and keep my head down, looking out for the biggest drifts. I’ll tuck my hair into my hat. No one will know me.