

REBECCA BABCOCK

Of All the Places in the World

I NEVER WOULD HAVE thought of leaving Canada if it weren't for Aaron. Leaving Edmonton, yes. That, I would have done on my own. I could have taken my Bachelor of Arts degree to Vancouver or Toronto and been another secretary in another city already brimful of over-educated secretaries, or I could go with him.

"I don't want to go without you," he said to me.

"What would I do in England?" I asked him.

"What are you doing here?"

It was a good point.



Before I left to live with Aaron in his London flat, I had a key cut for him for my Edmonton apartment. But I couldn't get him a key for the front door, and a few times he tried to surprise me, or he came by before I got home, and he had to buzz my crazy next-door neighbour to get into the building. He told me that she would always wait for him in the hall, her apartment door slightly open. She wanted to talk to him about England. She said she could tell from his voice that he was English.

"Offered me tea," he told me. I listened, but the edges of his accent were usually so smoothed over I couldn't believe that Miss Mundy could pick them out over the intercom. "I declined, of course."

"I hope so." I was irritated that she would ambush my boyfriend in the hallway like that.

"Are you jealous?" he joked, drawing his thick biceps over my collarbones, pulling me into a backwards hug. The top of my head fit just below his chin, and even though he was behind me, I could feel his grace and steadiness.

"Of course not. Ick—Can you imagine her apartment? Not in a million." My mom had been to Miss Mundy's a couple of times. She'd told

me enough about the place that I could picture a hospital green kitchen cupboard door, dirty cushion covers, grimy teapot, snagged old bathrobe slightly open, offering the kinds of little glimpses you can't avoid.

I was nervous in those days when he first had a key to my place. I hid tampons behind stacked rolls of toilet paper under the bathroom counter. I poured out the dregs of old bottles of cheap liquor, mostly leftovers from parties past. I started wearing makeup after my evening bath, and I threw out my granny underwear. One weekend, I got sick with the flu, and Aaron insisted on coming over to take care of me.

"Please go home," I begged. "I don't want you to get sick."

"I don't care," he said, kissing my clammy forehead. "I want to take care of you."

"I don't need you to." I did not want him to watch me throw up. He'd never been seriously sick since I'd met him, but I already knew that I would never watch him throw up. He would never let me. He's good at keeping things like that out of sight.

"I know," he said, and stayed.

I waited for him to go out to rent movies before I ran myself a bath. I had the chills, and my stomach was cramping like my period was about to start, and I wanted more than anything to stew my quaking body in hot water. I lay in the bathtub and stared at the ceiling above me. The heat was easing the cramps in my muscles. I sucked in the steamy air and wished away the achy pain at the base of my skull.

The heat had just gone out of the water when I heard the apartment door open and close. I rubbed my face with a washcloth, then sat up. On the bottom of the tub, just between my legs, was a clotty little spot of blood. As I stared at it, I heard Aaron moving around in my apartment. Suddenly panicky, I pulled the plug. I stood up, fighting the thudding in my head, and turned on the shower, swishing the little spot of blood down the drain with my feet, terrified that Aaron would walk into the bathroom and see it.

That evening, as I lay on the living room couch watching TV, a heating pad tucked under my lower back, Aaron first told me about his plan to move to England.

"There are no teaching jobs here," he said. "Especially not for music teachers. My dad's found something for me just outside of London. Why don't we go?"

I closed my eyes. "I can't think about this right now," I told him. "I have a headache."

Aaron kissed me on the forehead and reached for the bottle of aspirin that he'd put on the table earlier that day. He picked up my left hand, hold-

ing it between his finger and his thumb, and shook the pills into my palm. Three pills fell out. “Not that many,” he said, releasing my hand to drop one back into the bottle. Then he pressed my fingers closed as he reached for my orange juice. He was so gentle, I could have cried.



The night before Aaron left for London, we sat in my apartment, surrounded by his clothes. He had already sent some of his things off to his father, and sold most of his furniture. We were sorting through what clothing he wanted to take with him, and what I would drop off at Goodwill the next day.

Aaron had been living with me at my place for over a week. He had already let his place go, but his flight wasn’t until the middle of the month. He wasn’t working, and he got up every morning to make me breakfast. He was a good cook. That week, he made a lot of muffins, and froze the leftovers for me to eat after he’d gone.

“That’s something my mom would do,” I said the first time he did it.

As we sat and sorted through shirts and pants and socks, Aaron talked about going to visit his mother’s family in Trinidad when he was little. I had heard some of the story before, but I didn’t stop him.

“What was England like, visiting your father?” I asked, when he finished.

Aaron frowned slightly. “Different,” he said, tossing an odd sock into the trash can. “It never felt as much like a holiday, going to England. It felt more normal. That’s why I could never go and live in Trinidad.”

“Because it isn’t normal?”

“No, I suppose it’s normal for my mother and my aunts and uncles. My cousins all live there, and we used to spend the whole summer together. And we always had so much fun, my mother and I. In England, it was always just my Dad and me, and sometimes his adult friends. He’s like me, an only child. Going to England was a trip, a visit with my father. Trinidad was more like a holiday. It was harder to leave, but easier to come home after being there. It’s not a place I could just settle down and live. Can you understand that?”

I remembered visiting my father when I was little, the way he offered us things to make the trips to his various houses seem fun. Coal oil lamps, like we were camping. A pony to ride. “Yeah,” I said to Aaron. “I can.”



That July, I got my mom and my brother to come with me to the airport. We were all quiet the whole drive out there. Mom sat in the passenger seat, sniffing every now and then, and Michael stretched out his legs on the back seat. I didn't say anything, because I'd already told him he could have the car. Let him deal with mud on the upholstery.

As I parked the car, Mom asked me, "Did you tell your father you were going?"

"No," I said. "I think he moved again. I don't have his phone number this time."

"You should have gotten hold of him," Mom said. "He might have sent you money for the trip."

"Do you think he would?" Michael asked.

"Probably," Mom replied, getting out. "If Katie had asked."

I didn't know what to say. Dad hadn't so much as sent us birthday or Christmas cards in years. It had never occurred to me to ask.

They hugged me goodbye just outside the security checkpoint, and we all cried. At the last minute, Mom rummaged through her purse and handed me a package of pretty flowered writing paper. I was surprised; I couldn't imagine her buying anything so fancy.

"I want to know everything," she said, hugging me so hard I could barely breathe.

"Okay," I said, and kissed her cheek quickly, as the security guard waved me through.



I couldn't find Aaron at first, at Heathrow. I had been off the plane only a few minutes, and already I could feel the cold creeping through my clothes, a dampness that clung to me like honey, or spider webs. As I hauled my over-packed suitcases through the airport, I watched faces, hoping to see Aaron's. I could tell just from looking at people that they weren't Canadian. Clipped accents and foreign languages buzzed past me. The thick £ symbol in the windows of the duty-free shops caught me by surprise, made me stare hard as I tried to interpret the price tags. And the building smelled strangely old. It made me crave the antiseptic cleanliness of office buildings and airports back home. Panic crept its way up from my throat, settling in tears just behind my eyelids. I sat down on a hard plastic bench and looked up at the ceiling, blinking quickly.

Someone sat down next to me. I knew, without looking, that it was Aaron. I turned my head, grateful for his familiar face, glad that he hadn't changed his hair or grown a beard since I'd last seen him. I slumped against him, relieved. He leaned over and kissed the top of my head.

"I've missed you," he said. I nodded to tell him that I had missed him, too. He picked up my suitcases and carried them out to a waiting cab. He held the door open for me as the cabbie loaded my bags. I settled into the back seat and tried to subdue the panic that prickled my throat and my eyelids. I didn't say anything until after the cabbie pulled away from the curb.

"I don't like it." My voice was squeaky and petulant, but I didn't care. I breathed in his rich, sweet scent, like vanilla and sandalwood. "I don't want to stay."

He drew his arm around me. "Okay," he said, sounding to my ears more Canadian than he had ever sounded at home. "We'll give it a chance, and then if you still don't like it, we'll go."

I could tell he was disappointed in me, and I loved him for not saying so. I nodded and pressed myself against him, wishing I could just disappear into his warm body.



We stayed in London just over a month. I hardly left his flat. The closeness of the buildings, the narrow sidewalks, the smallness of the shops along our street, all made me feel crushed. I missed seeing empty lots, and streets with wide shoulders. The dampness in the air seeped into my clothes. I was cold all the time.

"It's not normally this chilly in the summer," Aaron told me, his face flushed with apology. "When it stops raining you'll see how nice it can be." He pulled a blanket over my shoulders and kissed me on the mouth.

I was bored, restless. Aaron didn't have a TV, and I didn't like reading because I could feel the dampness in the pages of my books. Their spines didn't crackle anymore when I opened them; they just sagged and yawned, offering their moistness to my reluctant fingers. So I slept instead, pulling the warm, rustling duvet over my head.

The first week I was in London, Aaron's dad took us out for lunch. He was taller than Aaron, and his skin was translucently pale under his limp, dark hair. He was thin, and he moved like a top-heavy sunflower in the wind. He and his son shared a lot of the same graceful gestures, but on Aaron's father, they seemed put-on, unnatural. He reached out to shake my hand, clasping mine in both of his. When Aaron did that, it was

a quick, firm motion. He made you feel that if you didn't squeeze back, your fingers might be crushed. His father's hands barely touched mine, but his arms seemed to move too wide, too slowly as he reached out, and then again after he let go. And except for the sharpness of his jaw and the way his chin jutted out beneath his lip, he looked nothing like Aaron. His eyes were bland, offering no clues to his mood. I could never have picked him out as my boyfriend's father.

I had always liked letting Aaron order for both of us when we ate out. He spoke to waitresses with an ease and a confidence that made them smile shyly at him. We sometimes got a second dessert that never appeared on the bill. But when his father ordered for all three of us, I was the one who blushed. He insisted on pronouncing the French words in a flowery, awkward accent, and he touched the waitress's hand limply as he handed back the menus. I watched her recoil.

He called me Katharine. "I hear you're a librarian, Katharine," he said. His voice had the same fluid warmth as Aaron's, but the corners of his accent were sharp, where Aaron's voice vacillated between Englishness and Canadianness.

"Actually, I don't think we'll stay long enough for that." My eyes were on Aaron, who was staring out at the street.

"I hadn't heard," Aaron's father said, his eyes going to Aaron. They were both quiet after that. Following lunch, he clasped Aaron's hand, and pulled his elbow in with his other hand, a sort of handshake-hug hybrid. He looked at me for the briefest moment, as though trying to determine what to do with me. Finally, his hands on my shoulders, he brushed each of my cheeks with his, making a faint kissing noise on each side. "Well, then," he said by way of goodbye. Aaron half-smiled and nodded before he slipped his fingers between mine, squeezing my hand to tell me it was time to go.

The next day, Aaron called the library where I was supposed to work and told them that we'd had a change in plans, that we would be leaving too soon for me to start there. I sat next to him on the couch, listening to the faint female voice on the phone, not quite able to catch her words.

"Were they mad?" I asked, picking at a ball of lint on his sleeve. I don't know how, but his sweaters never felt damp the way mine did.

"Doesn't matter, does it?" He sounded weary, but when I looked at him, he was smiling a little, as though it were funny, him calling to quit for me.

"No," I lied. "Can we go to France?"

He was surprised. He pulled away from me a little, his hand still resting on my leg. "I thought you wanted to go home."

“I never said that.”

I started writing letters to schools and libraries and newspapers all over France. Once a week, I would pull on a sweater over a long-sleeved top and walk, shivering, to the library up the block. I would search the Internet for anyone I thought might hire a Canadian university graduate and a music teacher with dual Canadian and British citizenship. And I would almost run home, my bag pressed against my leg, to enter names and addresses into the form letter that I'd saved on my laptop. At night, when Aaron got home from teaching, I would hand him letters to sign, and then I would seal them in envelopes and tuck them into his bag for him to mail the next day, before he left for work.

It didn't take long for a private school in Vichy to offer us both teaching jobs: music for Aaron, and English for me.

Aaron clicked his thumbnail across his front teeth when I showed him the letters. He was sitting at the kitchen table, going over his lesson for the next day. “Do you think that's a good idea? To work together all day, then to come home and spend all evening together?”

“We'll be on different campuses,” I replied, showing him the letter. “We won't really be working together.”

He took the letter out of my hand and pulled me to him, pressing his face to my chest. I pushed my fingers into his hair, breathing in the clean smell of his shirt.



Even at Roissy, I could feel the friendliness of the France air. It was still damp, compared to the flat dryness of Edmonton, yes, but the moisture wasn't invasive, cloying. I hugged Aaron.

“Here we are.” He tucked his hand into the back pocket of my jeans, squeezing my backside slightly.

Where the narrowness of English streets and the sharp stinginess of English sidewalks had seemed constricted, French streets were slender, the close buildings cradling, not claustrophobic.

One afternoon, when Aaron was out picking up supper for both of us from the McDonald's on the Avenue Clemenceau, I sat down on the hotel bed and called my mom.

“In France?” she repeated, sounding dazed. “You're in France?”

“I didn't like London,” I explained, already feeling foolish. I waited for the rebuke.

“Why didn't you write me?” Mom sounded small and hurt. All of a sudden, I felt guilty.

“I didn’t want to tell you I wasn’t happy. I wanted to wait until I was somewhere I liked.”

“Is Aaron with you?”

“Of course.”

There was a long pause. “Write me a letter, okay?” she said at last.

“I will,” I said. “I promise.”

“Katie,” Mom said just as I was about to hang up. “Was it really your idea to go to France?”

“Yeah,” I replied, puzzled. “It was.”

“Okay, then. I love you.”

We’d been in France just over a week when I found us a little house in a village above Vichy. The rent was cheap, because the place was removed from the shops and bus routes of the village, but I had bought a used car outside of Paris with most of the money I’d saved back home. Aaron and I had been staying in a dirty and expensive hotel in town, and we were ready to settle down just about anywhere. I didn’t expect to be so charmed by the place. Everything about it, from the woven-bottomed dining room chairs to the shuttered windows, felt remarkably, endearingly French. Aaron and I stood on the tiled kitchen floor, staring out the window, past the laurel hedge, to the sheep grazing in the field below.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

Aaron rested his hands loosely on my waist. “I like it. Do you like it?”

I closed my eyes. “Of all the places in the world,” I said, turning around and kissing him, my tongue meeting his, “I couldn’t be happier than I am right here.”

It was late summer when we arrived in France, and I had a couple of weeks before I had to start working. Aaron meticulously unpacked his few boxes, arranging the house to suit us. I started taking long walks in the lush, sweet-smelling forests. I loved the way they embraced the little trails that crossed through them, and broke suddenly to reveal farms and villages. They seemed not to know their dark Northern Albertan cousins, which stretched jealously for miles and miles, forever sometimes. But they knew me. I felt welcome there.

Aaron didn’t much like hiking. He had a bad knee, he said, and he preferred swimming. I was surprised. He had never mentioned any leg injuries to me before.

Often, when I left for an afternoon hike up the round-topped little mountain behind our house, he would climb into our second-hand Volkswagen and drive to the swimming pool in Vichy.

“I’ll see you in a couple of hours,” he said one afternoon. “Unless you feel like joining me.”

I looked out the window at the enticing greenness. Soon we would both be working, and my afternoon hikes would all but stop. “I don’t much like swimming,” I said.

He kissed quickly, just missing my mouth. “Thanks anyway,” I called to his retreating figure. I don’t think he heard me.

Once school started, I dropped Aaron off at the *collège* every morning, before continuing on to the *lycée*, where I was teaching for the first time in my life. We kissed each other goodbye in the car, and then, at five, I picked him up again for a *bello* peck on the mouth.

“Let’s go travelling,” Aaron said one afternoon, as we drove up the long drive to our house. “Let’s go to Germany for the November break. Italy over Christmas, maybe. What do you think?”

I laughed. “We just got here,” I said. “Why not see some more of France, first?”

He shrugged and stared out the window. “If that’s what you want,” he said.

Our first days in France, we had practised our French with each other, breaking into giggles as we caught our mistakes. Later, when our French was spent on the French, fumbling for words with each other seemed less funny. We felt depleted, our minds and our mouths exhausted by the effort of curling our tongues around the unfamiliar syllables. So the drive home from work was usually quiet. At first, we would ask, *How was your day?* Soon, though, we knew to expect *Fine, thanks, how was yours?* I caught on to the French more quickly than Aaron did. For a while, I tried to keep practising it with him on the way. *Que veux-tu manger ce soir? Comment ça va au boulot?* English words had begun to feel strange in my mouth, and it was stranger still to share my accented, imperfect French with him. He would answer me in clipped English monosyllables, sometimes sounding irritated, sometimes exhausted. It was so much easier to drive quietly, listening to the mix of English, French and Spanish songs on the car radio.

I saved my English for long letters to my mom. I didn’t tell her about things that Aaron and I did, or about my job, or about the people I met. Instead, I described everything—our house, the green forests, the narrow sidewalks, the buildings, the parks. My bulging envelopes surprised me. I had never been much of a letter writer before.

For Aaron and me, though, French and English both gave way to silence. It was a creeping kind of silence, like the creeping wet-cold of England. Pretty soon, it had leached its way into both of us.

I'm surprised now that we could breathe, with so much silence dulling the air in that house. It sat heavily between us, and we moved through it, gathering it close, careful not to snag its hems with our heels. It was the most polite kind of silence we could conjure. We said *Good morning*, asked *How was your day?* even said *Good night, I love you*. But that seemed to be all we could manage. We still held hands when we went walking in town, and draped our limbs over each other at night. And when our hands and our mouths found each other, it was always in silence, always in the dark.

That fall, I had got to know some of the teachers that I worked with. I liked them. We would often sit in one of the little pubs just off the *Place de la Poste* before going home to a late-evening French meal. Those days, I would call Aaron, and he would walk from the *collège* to pick up the car and drive up to our little rented house alone. I would follow later, dropped off by one of my new French friends. And then I would sit down and describe them for Mom.

She called once, and I tried to tell her that Aaron and I couldn't seem to talk to each other anymore. But the only words I could find were, "It's so quiet here, Mom."

"Sounds nice," she said dreamily.

I told her it *was* nice.

The evenings I stayed home, Aaron and I watched TV together, went to movies or dinner sometimes, cultivating a crushing polite silence that slowly overruled hand-holding and kisses, that eventually drew a forbidding line down the centre of our bed. And we both knew that I could wipe it away, like steam on our bathroom mirror in the morning, and we both knew that I wouldn't.

It was nearly Christmas before either of us could bear to meet it head-on. Aaron had draped strands of lights over the windows—on the inside of the house, so that they wouldn't get caught in the shutters. One evening, we were sitting in our little French house, bathed in the faint red and gold glow of the Christmas lights. We had finished eating dinner, and neither of us had said anything since we'd stopped eating. We were sipping on a slightly vinegary regional red.

"I love you," I told him without hardness, "but I don't want to live with you." I had ruled out *can't live with you*, knowing that it wasn't true. I could see us ten, fifty years later, still in the same house or one like it, perhaps no longer holding hands at parties, but still folding familiar limbs into accustomed curves of each other's bodies each night, becoming to each other like the dents in the cushions of favourite chairs. I knew that these things could easily come to be, and I fought them like I fought the lines

that had started to form at the corners of my eyes, with magic potions and angry defiance.

Aaron didn't answer. He let out a tired sigh. I wished I could see his face more clearly, but the red-and-gold glow revealed only the contour of his chin, a warm darkness to his skin, and deep black hollows where his eyes were. I noticed that his stiffly leaning posture hardly changed in his chair. I called one of my teacher friends from school and asked her if she wanted to go for a drink in town.



Aaron was awake when I got home that night. I kissed his mouth hard, knowing that I tasted of stale wine. He kissed me back, pushing my shirt up, off my back and over my head. I dug my fingers hard into his hair, and pushed his face into my chest. His mouth felt hot on my night-cooled skin. I pushed against him, my hip bone digging into his. His hands pressed hard against my back, then slid down across my hips, between my legs. I came, then I let him pull me forward, on top of him, and when he released me, I slid over to my side of the bed, my fingers just grazing his thigh. I realized that neither of us had said a word.

“Your mother called,” he said into the darkness.

“Okay.”

“What was your father like?” he asked suddenly.

“Why? I asked, suspicious. “Did she say something about him?”

“No,” he said. I could tell he was lying.



“I'm going home,” Aaron said the following night as he made supper. He was frying onions in a pan, and their sweetness clung to the air. He was making liver and onions, which I hated. I was curled up in an armchair just off the kitchen, reading a book I'd assigned to one of my classes. “You can come with me, or you can stay.”

I didn't say anything for a moment. I could hear him breathing, and my own breath sounded unusually loud in the little house. We were both drawing the thick, oniony air slowly in and out of our lungs, and I knew that he was trying not to sound unsettled. “Home where?” I asked. “When?”

“Edmonton. Next month.”

My chest loosened. “Okay,” I said. “I'll think about it.”

“Katie,” he called behind me as I climbed the stairs to our room. “It’s cold here. It’s as cold here as it was in London.”

I didn’t answer him.



One afternoon, I sat in a classroom long after all the students had gone home for the day. I could see my car parked across from the school. I sat at the window, watching the street until Aaron appeared between the buildings. He walked slowly up to the car, looking up and down the street. He stared at the front of the *lycée* for a long moment, leaning his thigh against the hood. Finally, he dug in his pocket for the keys and unlocked the driver’s door. I watched him ease down the narrow, car-lined street.

I went to the post office and bought a phone card. There was a pay phone outside the building.

“Why are you phoning?” my mom asked. “It’s so expensive. And I love getting your letters.”

“You never write back.” I felt like I was going to cry. I turned my body so nobody could see my face.

“Nothing changes here,” she said. “What would I write?”

“I don’t know.” I took a deep breath to keep my voice from shaking. “Anything.” I wanted to ask her to describe my old bedroom, to write down the exact colour of the living-room carpet, to tell me what the wide, round-edged sidewalks looked like. “Just write anything.”

“Oh, Katie.” Mom sighed my name, drawing out the *a*. “You’re homesick.”

I pushed my thumb along my lower lashes, rubbing away the beginnings of tears. “Yeah,” I lied. “I am.”



I had dinner alone in a Moroccan restaurant along the river. Then I walked as far as I could towards home. I used the last few minutes on my phone card to call a cab from a pharmacy on the edge of Vichy.

The house was silent, lit faintly by the porch light, which Aaron had left on for me. I took my shoes off at the door, a Canadian habit that I never could break, and shuffled down the darkened hallway to the bedroom. Aaron was in bed asleep, curled up on his side—so polite, so considerate, even in his sleep. I stripped down to my panties and curled up next to him, my skin opening up to the stillness of his sleeping form. Without waking, he dropped his arm around my waist, fitting it in above my hip bone. I

wished I could curl right into him, and as I lay there breathing his warm scent and the friendly French air around us, I knew that no place in the world would ever be so good, or so safe.