

SHARON BALA

## LORD OF THE MANOR

THAT NIGHT, MAYA ASKS HIM: So what's he like? Your mom's new man.

Julian objects to the phrase "new man."

Man friend? Fella? It's a little late in the day for a boyfriend.

He's a Christian, Julian says. He lays his watch on top of his wallet on the bedside table and peels back the blanket.

Not one of those born-again? Maya crosses her arms in front of her and pulls her sweater over her head. Did he try to convert you?

He said a prayer before we ate.

Mack had bowed his head and closed his eyes before lifting a spoon, discreet but definitive. Julian hopes he is not one of those force-feeding Christians. But his sister Hadley had found the silver lining. There's one good thing about this believer business, she'd said. No sleepovers.

Maya does a little shimmy when she takes off her pants. The movement is unconscious, just the way she undresses. Which Julian thinks is funny, because in most other ways, Maya is not graceful. He budgets fifteen minutes for snow shoveling and uses two thumbs to set the alarm on his phone.

What else? Maya demands lists. One thing is never enough.

He drives a pick-up.

Julian had seen it that afternoon when he went to his mom's for Sunday brunch, the flatbed filling up the foreshortened driveway, rear wheels butting onto the sidewalk. A yellow ribbon for the troops and a fish for Jesus.

Maya puts on a little nightdress. It is cotton and short and has some kind of built in elastic that pushes up her breasts. She has a collection of lingerie. Sometimes she wears satin and, other times, corsets with complicated clips. But Julian likes this little cotton number the best.

She goes into the ensuite and runs the water, then stands in the bathroom doorway, toothbrush halfway to her mouth. What does Mack do?

He took a package from the plant. GM. In Oshawa. He asked a lot of questions about Seth and Ben. Hadley thinks he was just trying to score points.

Maya's words are garbled, but Julian knows what she's asking.

No, I think he was sincere. He's got grandkids. He seems ... doting.

He can see the bottom half of Maya as she turns to spit in the sink. The nightdress hikes up, rounding over her bum, then down again when she straightens and turns.

Hadley really hates him, eh? Maya's electric toothbrush makes a whirring noise as it moves back and forth along her bottom teeth. When the toothpaste foams out the sides of her mouth she looks rabid.

Mom deserves to be happy, Julian says. Anyway, I don't think it'll last.

Every family has its own creation myth. Other people's parents met in university. Julian's mom and dad were introduced at a peace rally. Later, they lived in a co-op where the rooms were called ashrams and the girls wove flowers into their hair. They attended seminars with draft dodgers and communists. Free education for all in a clothing-optional environment.

Mom and Dad collected signatures, dropped acid and saved vegetable peels and eggshells to make their own soil. Marriage was a false construct; the suburbs had no souls.

Growing up, Julian was dogged by a vague sense of shame—for the compost rotting in the backyard, the teachers' confusion about his mother's last name. All the Saturdays they spent parading down Yonge Street. Julian drifting to the sidewalk, trying to blend in with the shoppers, baseball cap pulled down low over his eyes. And Dad with a bullhorn, egged on by the crowd. *Freedom is an illusion. Capitalism is slavery.*

Later, in university, it was something to be proud of: his family of activist trailblazers. That his sister had never come out. When she was fourteen, Mom walked in on Hadley giving the girl next door a hickey. We're having stir fry, Mom said. Stay for dinner.

Are you bisexual? Julian asked his sister, the Christmas she brought home the art collector with the goatee.

What's your obsession with labels? Hadley said.

Hadley was always Dad's favourite. He seemed pleased to walk her down the aisle when she married Ellen.

The co-op has been turned into seniors housing. Eighteen concrete storeys looming over Bloor Street, a severe, imposing patriarch. When Julian walks by, he always looks up. This is where it all began. His entire life story.

Contraband begins to appear in Mom's house. Things they never had growing up. Kraft Dinner. Cable.

It's a show about pathological collectors, Mom explains. You should see the houses. They're being buried alive in there.

Mom! Hadley points to the little blue tag sticking up against the back of her neck. Is that sweater from The Gap?

Hadley thinks it is Mack's influence, but Julian doesn't agree. Mom's been acting odd for a while. A month after the funeral, she changed her last name. Hadley thought that was bizarre, but Julian said he got it. Everyone grieves in their own way.

Sometimes Julian feels guilty about these debriefs with his sister. All his life it was parents versus children, but with Dad gone, it seems unfair, like they're ganging up on Mom. To make up for it, Julian takes his mother on dates.

At the Rainbow Cinema, his mother's back is turned and he almost doesn't recognize her.

Do you like it? She puts a hand under her bob and pushes the hair up. Your father preferred it natural, but I'm a widow now and there's no need to be grey on top of it.

She says this with such fierce conviction that Julian laughs. He can still hear Dad in his head, preaching against women's magazines and double standards. You look great, Julian says. Ten years younger.

She takes his arm and they walk to the ticket booth. I always knew there was one sensible man in the family.

I'm not worried about your mother, Dad had said to Julian in a moment of clarity, one of the last lucid conversations they'd shared. She'll be fine. Thank god she was never one of those little women.

*Little women.* Code for soccer moms. Women who didn't drive if there was a man in the car.

The cat is called Gazhaag. He arrived, a rescue, three weeks after Julian said in passing that their children would be cute. Brown-and-white striped babies, he had said. We'd make beautiful ones.

Here. Maya unloaded the bundle of fur into Julian's arms. See how you make out with him.

Behind the house, Gazhaag and the pigeons play a game. He stalks along the fence posts and the pigeons scratch at the paved ground below. Each pretends not to notice the other. The cat is on patrol. Lord of the Manor, guarding his turf.

Julian and Maya live in a garden flat. The "garden" is a paved square of concrete bordered by the backs of the neighbouring fences. The last feeble stems of a neglected house plant poke out of the parched soil in a cracked plastic planter.

The pigeons are grey with green necks. They have bloodshot eyes. One is missing a leg.

If Peg Leg ends up dead on my doorstep, I'll barf. Maya stands looking over Julian's shoulder. Sometimes it seems to Julian that she has conjured herself out of thin air.

Julian had first spotted Maya at a party, hectoring an older man about affirmative action and his white privilege. He'd asked her out that same evening, emboldened by her unapologetic declarations, by the idea that his father would have approved. Later, she'd confessed: Oh, I don't really believe in quotas. I just wanted to shut that blowhard up.

Julian and Maya speak Indonesian to each other, rudimentary words. She corrects his pronunciation, tells him to flatten his tongue or open his lips just a little. Or else she points to her shoes and says "sepatu" and Julian repeats in a clunky accent, his tongue twisting over the vowels, folding up into itself.

Why? Maya had asked when he announced his intention to learn. You know my parents speak perfect English.

But Julian insisted and now there is a stack of homemade flash cards on the coffee table.

Julian listens to Maya when she speaks on the phone to her grandmother in Jakarta. He is fascinated by the cadence of the language, how her voice sounds both foreign and familiar. Maya is in possession of secret information. He wants to be in possession of her. Like those cannibals who believed they could absorb the skills of their enemies.

Later, he thrusts in and out, one hand gripping her shoulder, the other proprietary on her waist and thinks of his own grandmother to stop himself

from coming too quickly. His grandmother flies a kite in a big field of sunflowers. She died before he was born. This memory is not from a photograph. It is an image he created. Purpose-built for this moment. Maya comes in a series of small cries and the field evaporates. Julian lets himself go.

Fantastic, Maya says, collapsing onto the carpet.

Her face is turned away from him. The skin at the top of her thigh is puckered. Julian notices the dimples for the first time. He leans over to kiss them and tries not to think of the ex-boyfriend who lived here before him. In the summer Maya will visit her grandmother. Julian has not been invited.

Mack becomes a regular at brunch. One day, Hadley brings the kids and Mack gives them airplane rides. Careful, Hadley calls. But Julian can see she is softening.

Mack has brought two remote control cars. He shows the kids how to manipulate the joysticks and they stand on either end of the hallway, engineering spectacular crashes.

ROWR! Seth yells, his fist clutched on the controls.

RRRRRR! Ben calls back, his car zig-zagging haphazardly on a collision course with the wall.

Whew! Mack returns to the adults and eases back into the cushions beside Julian. That'll keep them busy for a few minutes.

Mom is in a book club. They are working their way through a list of censored books. Humbert Humbert is a narrator who gets into your head; she doesn't like the way he tries to seduce her.

Julian read Nabokov in undergrad. What he recalls best is the playfulness of the language.

Mom sits in lotus position, feet resting on opposite hips. When Hadley was younger she'd balance on Mom's lap with her legs pretzeled and Dad called them his babushka dolls. Now Hadley is beside her, holding onto the underside of one foot with her hands, chin on bent knee.

Hadley thinks *Pnin* was better. I'll lend it to you, Mom.

Mack runs his hand in a circle over his head like he's about to perform a magic trick. The habit reminds Julian of Seth, who, in unfamiliar surroundings, sticks both thumbs into his mouth and sucks urgently, eyes darting left and right.

Mack asks Julian if he saw the game last night. Think our boys have a shot this year?

Mack is a paunchy man, mostly bald with invisible eyebrows and an un-ironic moustache. There's been a catastrophe and all of his hair has gathered here at the pre-arranged meeting point under his nose.

The Leafs? Julian says. Not a chance. He turns toward Mom and Hadley on the adjacent loveseat. Is *Lady Chatterley* on your list?

Over-rated, Hadley says. Give me *Bovary* any day.

Mack offers to show the kids his shadow puppets.

It can't last, Julian tells his sister.

He keeps her company while she has a cigarette. The thin layer of snow that fell overnight has frozen to the brown grass. They stamp their feet in a patch of weak sunlight.

Hadley blows smoke out the side of her mouth. Her free hand is tucked under her arm pit. Why do you keep saying that?

They have one thing in common, Julian says. Eventually, grief gets old.

Hadley rolls her own cigarettes. Every few moments, she picks bits of debris off her tongue with a thumb and index finger. She says, Sometimes I forget. Like today. The boys fought in the car all the way over. By the time we got to the door, I was on autopilot.

Julian says, I know. I still expect to hear Dad's voice on the answering machine.

Hadley lets the cigarette butt fall and grinds it viciously with the toe of her boot. I wish Mack wouldn't answer the door. It's not his house.

Julian turns his head. The weathered Muskoka chairs face each other like an old married couple. Julian was sitting in one of those chairs when his father taught him how to roll a joint. And also, years earlier, when they looked at the stars and made up their own constellations. And more recently, when Dad said: Now remind me. Which one are you—Hadley or Julian?

When Dad began to lose his memory, he relied on reminders and lists. Post-its turned up everywhere, stuck to the coffee table, on the walls, fallen and forgotten, tracked on the bottom of Julian's shoe to his bachelor apartment and rediscovered in some unlikely place. *Peter Mansbridge: botox*. An enigmatic cipher.

One afternoon, the whole family went around the house pinning notes to surfaces and recalling their favourite memories. Julian slapped a post-it on the spice rack: *shop class, Mother's Day*. Hadley stuck one on a carton

of milk: *this is not a cup*. Dad scrawled something on a post-it and stuck it on Mom's head. *Love of my life*.

Julian had watched them, feeling like a voyeur. Dad ripped off another sticky note and pressed it to Mom's cheek. *Amie de ma vie*.

Hadley had laughed. Smooth one, Dad.

Marry me, then, Mom said.

And they had all laughed.

Hadley asks about Maya. She brings out an orange from her pocket, turning it in her hands, an old smoker's trick. Julian is still thinking of his father, but says, She's going to Indonesia. In June.

Hadley gives him a look, like she's searching and knows exactly what she will find. You're new to this, she says. So let me give you some advice. Don't rush. Go at her pace.

Who says I'm not—

Hadley doesn't wait for him to finish. Doesn't sound like Indo's going to be much fun, she says. If you ask me, Maya's doing you a favour.

They return to the house. At the back door, Hadley stops. I really miss Dad. Her voice splits in half. Especially when I bring the boys here.

Julian puts his hand on her shoulder and squeezes. He kisses her temple. These moments, when he gets to be the older brother, are rare.

Inside the house, a child is in hysterics.

Hadley springs at Mack, yanking Seth out of his arms. What have you done? She turns her son away, his head in the protective crook of her elbow.

Mack holds up his hands and Julian sees that he is a man caught in an impossible situation.

You're alone with them for five minutes! Hadley is livid. All the goodwill of shadow puppets and airplane rides has disintegrated.

The boys are screaming. One is red-faced, in more shock than pain. The other is awestruck and envious, yelling to be heard over the tumult as he explains the game that led to his brother face-planting off a stool and onto the linoleum.

Mom appears from the bathroom. What happened?

Hadley has sat Seth on the counter. Her palms are on either side of his face.

Julian makes Ben calm down. Ben wants to re-enact the scene. And then ... and then ... the stool went boom and Seth falled down!

Seth has stopped crying. He breathes quietly through his mouth as Hadley wipes the blood from his nose.

Mom goes straight to the stool and gives it a smack. Bad stool, she says, making both boys laugh. Naughty, naughty stool.

Mack stands with his palms still raised and turned out, the only one without a preassigned role. Julian thinks Hadley ought to apologize, but knows that she won't and a small part of him is glad.

Some of the pigeons are regulars. Emperor Pigeon struts around like an over-fed despot. Adonis is smooth and long-necked. Pig-Pen has unkempt ruffled feathers. Recently, a new bird has appeared. Its wings drag behind like a bridal train.

Emperor Pigeon's head jerks back and forth. He coos as he chases after the newcomer. His neck puffs out.

Come look at this, Julian calls to Maya. The word for pigeon is *mer-pati*. He repeats it quietly to himself and watches Emperor Pigeon do a little dance, turning in circles and bowing his head.

Maya rests her chin on his shoulder.

The newcomer is unimpressed. She walks away and Emperor follows, curtsying and pirouetting. The Emperor's gone mad, Julian says. We should call him Caligula.

He's not mad, Maya says. He's on the make! Gross! She slams her palm against the glass. The pigeons are unfazed.

Maya pushes a broom into Julian's hands and slides back the door. Cold air rushes into the warm kitchen, rustling the pages of the wall calendar. Get rid of them!

Julian wields the broom like a light saber. His breath puffs out like smoke from a dragon's nose. The pigeons take flight, their wings flapping hard in the blue sky.

Maya has her hands over her ears when he comes in. Her knees pump up and down like a marionette doll. Eeeeeeeeee, she cries. I hate those disgusting things!

Julian leans the broom against the wall. How long have you lived in the city? Isn't it time to make peace with the wildlife?

He teases but Julian secretly relishes this role, knight in shining armour.



Filthy creatures, she says. Where's that good-for-nothing Gazhaag? The cat is coiled up on the welcome mat. When he hears his name, he slinks away, ashamed.

Maya walks to the living room and Julian follows. You know where they don't have pigeons?

Maya arranges the sofa cushions into a fan. Where?

Oakville. It's quite civilized out there. Julian gives the word civilized a British intonation.

Maya holds up last month's *Economist*. Are you done with this? Then puts it into his hands. Recycling. Oakville! I'll take my chances with Emperor and company.

A few years ago, Julian's friends began the slow migration to the suburbs. Now he's the last hold-out. The lone child standing by the net after everyone else has been called in for supper.

He sits on the piano bench and says, You could charge more if we lived out there.

She shoos him away and lifts the piano lid. A long red cloth sits across the keys. I'm not doing this for the money.

But you could be. The piano is an upright. Its dimensions are not made for this small room. You could quit work and teach full time, Julian says. I thought that's what you wanted.

The doorbell rings. Maya is opening a book on the stand; she looks up, bemused. Where did you get that idea?

Julian keeps waiting for Mack to have the talk with him. The one about personal saviours and John 3:16. But when Mack suggests they meet for a beer, it is for a very different kind of talk.

My mother isn't the marrying kind, Julian says.

They have met on Mack's turf—a bar in Oshawa with faded carpet and pot-bellied men lifting bottles of Coors Light from table tops to laughing mouths.

You know my parents never married, right?

Mack looks like he's about to say something then thinks better of it. I know, he says.

Julian arrived half an hour early. He's already one beer ahead of Mack. Can I be frank?

Mack turns up a palm as if to say he'll accept anything Julian wants to dish out. It is big and calloused, different from his father's slim hands.

You've known my mother what? A couple of months? Don't you think it's a bit soon for all this?

I'm sure to a young man like you, life seems long, but your mom and I are a little closer to the finish line.

Your mom and I: Julian does not like the way it sounds coming out of a stranger's mouth. He wants to ask about what happens after the finish line, about Heaven and Hell and wouldn't Mack prefer a wife who wasn't damned for eternity. But maybe it doesn't matter. Mack already has a woman on hold upstairs.

*Young man.* The expression grinds away at Julian. I'm thirty-eight, he thinks. Julian realizes his bottle is empty. He tells himself to play nice. He glances at Don Cherry, the orange pendant light hanging over the pool table, the word stake mis-spelled in chalk, searching for a subject that might be coaxed into joining them, like a neutral third party.

If Hadley were here she'd say something snarky. Does he want a wife or a maid? Julian has seen what Mom turns into around Mack, the way she never lets him stand up from the table, how she pours his coffee and takes his plate to the sink.

The waitress arrives and Julian asks if she's got anything from Quebec. La Fin du Monde, she says, hatcheting the pronunciation. Julian says, Yes. That sounds about right.

Mack is still nursing his Bud Light.

Hadley wanted to join us, Julian says. Ellen had to work late.

I really admire her. It's a brave thing—bringing up those boys like that. She's no braver than any other parent.

The boys will have questions as they get older.

What are you implying? Julian's dad had a name for people like Mack.

Mack's beefy palm takes a tour of his head. Nothing. Only that it's not easy to be different.

Julian looks at Mack and thinks: sheep. He says, When it comes to love, *our* family doesn't discriminate.

That's not at all what—

We've never been very good at following convention. Our parents raised us to think for ourselves.

Mack's face is all forehead and chin. The skin between his eyes is creased. Give me one reason, Julian thinks.

I know I'm not the man you would have chosen for your mother.

The waitress brings Julian's pint and he puts a folded bill on her tray, a couple of coins on top as paper weights. You don't know Mom like we do. She's a strong woman, an intellectual. She needs someone who can keep up with her.

She's no shrinking violet, that's for sure. When Mack raises his bottle, a ring of condensation is left behind. He presses the bottle down, lifts it up—interlocking circles. He smiles at the table. That's what I love about her.

There is a loose thread on Mack's blue checkered shirt. It hangs off one sleeve, begging to be yanked.

You know how my parents met—what they were like, what Mom has always been like?

I've heard the stories. Mack glances at the TV. Intermission is over but the Leafs are losing too badly for anyone to care.

I'd have thought a man like you would want a different kind of woman. Level with me Mack: doesn't it bother you?

Everyone has a past. Especially at our age. Mack smears his hand across the table, wiping away the Olympic rings. But life goes on. Values change.

The beer has an aftertaste, a spicy effervescence on the back of Julian's tongue. Coriander popping in hot oil. He feels the weight of the glass, cold and heavy in his hands. He says, People don't change, not really.

Sure they do, Mack says. Just look at me. He raises two fingers to signal the waitress. Never thought I wanted kids, did I? I was like your dad that way.

Mack asks the waitress if she's got any chips. After she leaves, he starts talking about his dead wife. The wife was a homemaker (Hadley, in Julian's ear, sneers, *that figures*). She directed the church choir. Mack talks about chemo and surgery, tumors that died and rose again. He stares at the strips of label hanging off his bottle. They had forty beautiful years together. Forty years, he says. That's something.

Julian feels sympathy like a clammy embrace. Like his father's grip on his shoulder. *Sit down, son. I have bad news.*

He stares at his hand, in no-man's land between the two beers. The hand on the table is his but it belonged to his father before him. It is the hand

he remembers from childhood, holding up a protest sign, curled around the gear stick. The hand that, impatient, waved away paint-by-number dinosaurs.

He says to Mack, I'm sorry. It's clear you really love her.

I do, Mack says. I do love your mother. Very much.

The waitress interrupts before Julian can say that is not what he meant.

The travel agent has reserved a ticket. Maya says she will sleep on it and buy it in the morning. Her voice comes from behind the fridge door. She holds up a plastic container, ghost of leftovers past. Disgusting, Maya says. She steps on the pedal and the lid of the stainless steel bin stands at attention.

Julian taps on the keypad of his computer. He cues up an Aretha Franklin song and sings along. Baby, baby, baby. He has both hands over his heart; his shoulders sway. The melody on the keyboard is simple. A slow drum keeps time. Julian hits the high notes in an off-key falsetto. I've been loving you for so long. And I'm guilty of this crime.

Julian walked in on his parents once. Eyes closed, head on Dad's shoulder, Mom looked asleep. Or dead, her feet scraping across the carpet. Joni Mitchell was on the record player and his father was leading his mother in a box step. It is one of Julian's earliest memories and he'd never seen a repeat. He wonders now if the incident even happened, if it wasn't some other couple he saw, a friend's parents or actors on TV.

He dips and twirls Maya, waltzing, the way he imagines his parents did, between the fridge and stove. He pulls tortured faces to feel her body vibrate against his when she laughs.

Maya asks if his mother will get married in June. I'd hate to miss the wedding.

So don't go, Julian says. Stay with me.

Maya rubs her nails up and down at the nape of his neck. She says something in Indonesian. And then: You'll have Gazhaag for company. I'm the one who has to spend a month in the motherland making nice with a crazy granny.

The song ends and Julian twirls her around in the silence. He wonders if his mother would change her name again. But no, what is he thinking? Mom doesn't believe in marriage.