The first time you saw me, I was one hour old. You were old enough to have courage.

Fifty, maybe.

It was at St. Justine Hospital. I had just come into the world. I already had a big appetite. I drank her milk like I make love now, like it’s the last time.

My mother had just given birth to me. Her daughter, her firstborn.

I imagine you entering the room. Your face round like ours. Your dark eyes heavily lined in kohl.

You enter unapologetically. Walking confidently. Even though it has been twenty-seven years since you last saw my mother.

Even though twenty-seven years ago you ran away. Leaving her there, teetering on her three-year-old legs, the memory of your skirts lingering on her fingertips.

You walk calmly toward us. My mother’s cheeks are red. She is the most beautiful thing in the world.

How could you just walk away?

How did you not perish at the thought of missing her nursery rhymes, her little-girl lies, her loose teeth, her spelling mistakes, her laces tied all by herself, then her crushes, her nails painted then bitten, her first rum-and-Cokes?

Where did you hide to avoid thinking about it?

Now, there is her, there is you, and between you, there is me.

You can’t hurt her anymore, because I’m here.

Does she hold me out to you, or do you reach your empty arms toward me?

I end up near your face. I fill the gaping hole in your arms. My newborn eyes search yours.

Who are you?

You leave. Again.
The next time I see you, I’m ten years old.

I am perched at the third-floor window, my breath melting the lacy frost on the pane.

Rue Champagneur is white.

On the other side, a woman falters, her long coat no longer enough to protect her.

Some things children can guess, and even though I don’t know you, I sense you in this waltz of hesitation.

You cross the street in long strides, your toes barely landing. A water spider.

You dart, you head toward us, leaving no trace of yourself on the ground.

You slide a small book into the mailbox before slipping off, yet again. But right before you disappear, you look at me. I promise myself I will catch up with you one day.

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The train is heading to Ottawa.

I’m twenty-six years old. Beside me, my mother is reading a magazine to keep her mind off things. I like peering over her shoulder at the pictures of girls in dresses.

We have a mission in Ottawa, a city we don’t know. We are both looking forward to the end of the day, when we can wander and lose ourselves in neighbourhoods off the beaten path, the sort we love.

But my mother has had an idea. We are going to go see you. If you are still alive, you live in a tower near the Rideau Canal. At was the last place you sent word from.

We can’t call because you’ll tell us not to come.

We have to show up in person.

But I don’t know if I want to. I don’t love you.

I’m even a little afraid of you.

In the end, I preferred it when you didn’t exist.

***

My mother is still afraid of being abandoned.

Even though a mother is not someone who can be abandoned, we have to be careful, because it’s not all that clear to her.

I ask her whether she is sure she wants to go.

She says yes.

The day goes by, and we find ourselves in a taxi, on our way to you.

Ten identical towers reach toward the sky. A caretaker is in the foyer. The names of tenants are listed on the wall, each one with a little buzzer for visitors to announce their arrival.


We slip in with a neighbour. Outlaws.

We don’t talk in the elevator.

***

Fifth floor. This is it. We walk down the long corridor. We are stationed in front of your door. My mother knocks. We wait. Footsteps. I’m scared.
You open the door.

My young woman’s eyes bore into yours, which are stony.

You smile.

You don’t miss a beat. You hardly seem surprised.

And yet. The last time we were all together, I was just born.

You open the door a little wider. So we go in. And you ask us to sit down.

My mother and I sit side by side. On alert. Ready to make a run for it if need be.

You are facing us. You must be eighty years old. Prominent cheekbones, thin lips, ebony eyes.

You look like us.

Then you start talking. You look mainly at me. And you wink.

It’s the three of us. It’s so natural it’s disturbing. As if we could just sit in silence and flip through women’s magazines together.

In a resonant voice, a voice younger than your years, you tell us about the neighbourhood, which is quiet, safe. The fellow tenants who don’t bother you, and Hilda, a neighbour with whom you eat sometimes. You tell us an old woman’s tales, but your voice and your eyes are twenty. Your smile too, animated, intense.

Your old-lady words shield you. You string them together while I search for you somewhere else.

Your apartment is small and bright. Books are scattered on the floor, as if forgotten mid-read. They, too, await your return.

In the kitchen, the sink is filled with dirty dishes. You eat alone.

If you had wanted, we could have come to eat with you sometimes. We would have brought quiches, fruit, smoked salmon. My mother would have set the table to avoid tiring you out. She sets the loveliest tables. But you’ll never know.

***

Now you are talking about your brothers. One of them just died. If you are sad, you don’t show it.

My mother tells you that she heard from Claire. Your sister who’s a nun. You laugh. Your teeth are white and straight, except for one. A rebel. Claire doesn’t seem to interest you, but she makes you laugh.

All three of us have the same crooked tooth. Have you noticed?

Then my mother asks why you left.

You don’t want to answer: No! Not that. Not today.

My mother doesn’t insist. We are cloaked in a thick silence. But you, you glide above it.

Impenetrable. I look at you one last time.

You have big breasts. Not us.

You have armour. Not us.

We are together. Not you.
We haven’t inherited everything.

My mother decides to leave. She would rather make a break for it before you can hurt us. You never know. Goodbye, Grandmother.

You wink at me one last time.

We’re going skating on the canal. We’re on holiday.

***

It’s cold. We skate holding hands because I’m not a good skater and because we need to. The canal is long and empty. The smooth ice belongs to us. The cold is biting and brings us back to life.

My mother’s phone rings. It’s you. You tell her not to do that again. You tell her you never want to see us again. Ever.

My mother hangs up. It’s not the first time she has had to swallow rejection. All the past ones are still there. Stuck in her throat.

She has learned not to choke on them, but just barely.

She doesn’t say a word, but she doesn’t let go of my hand. We hold on to each other.

I hate you. I should have told you so to your face.

On the train, I fall asleep against my mother, who is smaller than me.

***

Then, one day, you die.

Five years later. In the same small apartment where you annihilated me with seven winks.

We are nestled away in the country, this family my parents built, that is nothing like you. A close family.

Claire, the religious sister you would no longer see, calls to tell us you’re dead.

My mother leans against the wall. Her stomach is Hiroshima. She is finally rid of your absence.

Maybe she’ll start being normal. A woman with a mother who is dead and buried.

But the soft voice at the other end of the line tells us that a few days before you died you wrote your will, and our names are in it. The names of my mother and her brother, then mine and my brother’s.

We are your sole heirs. So, finally, you are inviting us over. We have to go empty your little apartment.

We set out into winter to meet you. Through the storm. Archaeologists of a murky life. Who were you?

***

We are on our hands and knees, searching.


I can’t help but plunge my nose into the fabric. Smells are usually so revealing. But here even they are furtive. Subtle, faint, hard to pin down. An accidental blend of incense and the sweat of days spent not moving. A subtle note of alcohol, perhaps?

In a shoebox there are pictures of us: me and my brother, at every age. You kept them. And my mother kept sending them to you year after year.
Our ages are written on the back, traces of time lost, wasted, slipped away. It’s your loss.

My mother is sitting in your rocking chair. Gently, she touches you. Rests her hands where you rested yours. Rocks to the rhythm of a lullaby, the one she never heard.

I find your red red lipstick in the small bathroom. And short sticks of kohl, which you lined your eyes with, giving them power. I draw a line under mine.

My mother finds a piece of furniture, made by her father a long time ago. We take it down to the car. She takes the rocking chair too, carrying it on her back, and my father lashes it securely to the roof.

We’re leaving soon. I’m in your room. There is a small green plant in the window. It is leaning against the pane, drawn by the day. Books are piled by the foot of your bed. I read a few passages at random, suddenly greedy for clues about you.

I find a yellowed cardboard folder between two books on Buddhist zazen.


A gold mine, which I stuff into my bag like a thief.

We are leaving. I slip a worn copy of Thus Spoke Zarathustra into my pocket.

We close the door behind us, forever.

***

We drive slowly through the storm. On the roof, the rocking chair cuts through the wind, heroically. I don’t know it yet, but I will rock my children in it.

I flip through Nietzsche, yellowed with age. There is a laminated newspaper article stuck between two pages.

The picture of a burning bus.

1961, Alabama.

In bold type: Freedom riders: political protest against segregation.

Around the bus are young Black people and White people, in shock, refugees from the flames. A young woman is on her knees.

She looks like me.

You had to die for me to take an interest in you.

For you to turn from a ghost to a woman. I don’t love you yet.

But wait for me. I’m coming.