

JACLYN KAR YIN MCLACHLAN  
**THE NUTBAR BOOK**

SHE WAS TOWED INTO MY CRISP BOARDING-SCHOOL BEDROOM by a senior student who informed us that we were both in grade nine. As the senior stepped aside, an unusually dense ray of light cut through the bedroom window spotlighting a girl about my height with brown hair cut to her shoulders like me, greenish eyes like me, and black Chuck Taylors like me. What wasn't like me was the boldness that radiated from her.

I reached out, and in the few seconds that we shook hands I felt her dive into me, poke around, and pull out the lonely, the fearful, and the sad, breathing air into a body that I now remembered. The senior student prodded her to move on—I was just a pit stop on the campus tour, and there were more interesting things for her charge to see—but somehow I had become Lea's destination. She never left my room or took her eyes away from mine.

Our routine became well-practised in the four years that we lived at school: Lea drummed up a plan, and I played along. In the beginning we engaged in harmless activities like climbing trees and spying on people or hosting séances. Then we began setting off fireworks and starting small fires in the dark corners of campus.

Sometimes I created the drama. On a choir trip to New York City, after singing for a delegation at the United Nations, we stopped at McDonalds for lunch and then caught the ferry to see the Statue of Liberty. I popped out my retainer to eat my burger and, absorbed in conversation, forgot to retrieve it from my tray before dumping the contents in the trash. Two steps outside of the restaurant, my tongue cased my naked teeth, and I went pale. My parents had furnished me with a straightened smile, but the upkeep was on me, which is to say retainers would not be replaced, and I was in a world of trouble. I tearfully stammered my misfortune to Lea, who whirled around as if in a revolving door and stalked up to the manager, whereupon we learned that the trash from every receptacle had just been bagged and thrown into the dumpster out back. Grimly, she rolled up the sleeves on her

uniform. Seconds later, we were surfing oily bags of garbage in a monstrous container. Luckily, the bags were see-through. I thought Lea was pulling my leg when she said, “There’s your Big Mac wrapper snuggled up to both my Quarter Pounders,” but she was right. After rooting around in the bag, she held up my retainer in triumph, and I looked at her like she was a goddess.

That same day, I forgot my camera at the top of the Statue of Liberty. Lea was talking about jumping out of her crown, saying the higher she went, the stronger the pull. I had set it down because ascertaining whether she was serious or not required both of my hands to be free. It was a fancy camera—a banana-yellow water-resistant Kodak—and if my parents weren’t in the business of shelling out for second retainers, they certainly weren’t going to replace that. Shoulders slumped, I sadly scuffed my way toward the idling bus knowing we had a flight to catch. I whimpered my plight to Lea, who was adamant that we run back up the statue to retrieve it. I wouldn’t budge, convinced that it had already been stolen and unwilling to hold up the group. Suddenly she tore off and made a beeline to the ticketing agent at the bottom of the statue, who waved her up. I watched her disappear, lost inside Lady Liberty. Over thirty minutes passed while teachers paced angrily and kids anxiously pinned themselves to the bus windows. And then there she was, sprinting across the rolling green lawn happy as a Golden Retriever, a banana-yellow camera swinging from her wrist.

In our later years, Lea would plunder the nearby woods for evening smokers, bum cigarettes from peers, and demand that we scale the fifty-foot climbing wall in the dark with no ropes so she could smoke them from the top of the world. On one such occasion, she refused to return to our dormitory in time to make curfew, languidly puffing and taking her time while I stressed that two minutes late had become twenty. When we returned to the residence, she snuck up from the basement into our bathroom and sprayed my contact cleaner into both eyes, which immediately reddened, bulged, and leaked alarmingly. We should have gone to the hospital, but she steered us to our housemistress’ quarters, where she dished out a devastating story about how a close family member had died, I was consoling her, and we’d lost track of time. No punishment was issued because no one would make up such a heinous lie.

Lea eventually took her fearlessness off campus. We got driver’s licences, and I found myself an accomplice to her unnerving speed. “We’re maniac drivers!” she would yell, laughing hysterically as we bombed down the high-

way, lifting her foot from the gas, like a valve releasing, only after passing the point where we would certainly die in a crash. Then she decided that we should get matching tattoos, and we worked hard to design something that symbolized our friendship, but the minute we walked into the parlour, she leapt to another idea, and when we left her scapula bore a treble clef and I had a fish on my ankle.

After every plan that we executed as a duo, she would whip out “The Nutbar Book”—a tiny chapbook she had stapled together in the early days—and feverishly write down what we had done. As if my being part of it meant that she too had existed.

At Christmas of our final year we learned that her mother had been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which fit some of the strange puzzle pieces of Lea’s youth into place. The day her mother didn’t come home, she was found at the bottom of the plunge pool at Niagara Falls. As much as I tried to help my friend, I was woefully unequipped to triage the deep lacerations that had opened in her. She pulled away from me, making a game out of skirting my path.

With a few weeks left in the school year, she finally surfaced.

“It’s almost certain that I have it too.” Her eyes brimmed. “My brain’s going to become like Swiss cheese. I won’t remember us.”

“Yes, you will,” I whispered. “I’ll be your memory.”

I flew around her, helping her study for finals, distracting her, not leaving her alone for a minute. But the solid ground that we had taken for granted had shifted, and she and I were never on equal footing again.

Lea’s personal pied piper enchanted her through university to a degree in music composition, but it couldn’t keep her out of harm’s way when she backpacked across Europe the following year. I grinned at her funny, newsy emails from the windowless corner of my graduate school office, living vicariously through her as she stormed the continent. Nine months in, her emails became sporadic, scattered, and nonsensical in some places. She was convinced that she was in danger, as someone was trying to kill her. She was trying to ride it out, but the fear and paranoia were oppressive. She beetled around cities, switching hostels, trying to shake off the ominousness. Her last email from Europe said she was coming home, but then she went dark.

Weeks later, I received a cryptic note. Between the lines, I understood that there had been a problem with her return to Canada, the police had been involved, and she had been in a psychiatric ward ever since. But not to

worry, because she had plans to spring the joint. Then it was dark again until a few months later when an invitation to visit her at the hospital showed up in my inbox. From her monosyllabic replies, I suspected that she was on a strong cocktail of medication, but I wasn't prepared for her to be catatonic. Lea, usually larger than life, was utterly devoid of spirit. She sat on a twin bed, despondently staring at the white wall ahead of her, reminding me of how she found me the day we met. I filled the time with words, occasionally trotting out light humour in a semblance of normalcy about the situation, but I was gutted. A dry flake of skin hung off her dehydrated lips for hours, but she didn't notice or care. How many times had I brushed crumbs from her face after we'd eaten like wolves? But that day she seemed untouchable.

Things gradually improved. She found an apartment in the city and a customer service job, and she seemed to return mostly to the old Lea. The story of her Europe to Canada leg was slippery, but I pieced together that she had been hearing voices—one that told her to destroy a Starbucks booth in the arrivals hall of the airport and another that told her to steal a car, so she did both. She was arrested, diagnosed with bipolar disorder, and sent to a psych ward for electroconvulsive therapy. The airport incident was her first psychotic episode, but it could also be her last, she informed me cheerily, as the doctors had told her that psychosis was treatable.

I wondered where her personality ended and the disorder began. On several occasions Lea called me, claiming urgency, and when I showed up in my car she was desperate to go somewhere. One time it was to a bakery on the other side of town, and another time it was to a friend's house, but as soon as I pulled into the driveway she told me to turn around and head home. These time-wasting high jinks infuriated me, but Lea laughed it all off, and I joined in, despite myself, because her giggle was my weakness.

We mapped an ambitious list of career goals, but she was hampered at the gate. Her popularity and resourcefulness would land her a job promotion, which would inevitably stress her out, throw her system out of whack, and trigger an episode. Sometimes, unable to shake the numbing dullness brought on by her medications, the flattening of emotion, and the stamping out of all her creativity, she would attempt to manage the disease on her own and stop taking her meds. In either case, she would end up in a psych ward. Months would pass while she received treatment and recovered, and then the cycle would start again.

I learned to manage the eerie radio silence her episodes brought with them. I knew she needed time to repair and lick her wounds, and I did my own research to better understand what was happening to her, confident that she would reach out to me when she felt better. With surgeon-like precision, I spliced together the circumstances of her episodes to create a rubric for our expectations; pushed to the brink by stress and/or chemistry, she would lose control over her thoughts and actions, the melody in her head would become a deafening polyphonic fugue, and the only way to release it would be to act out extreme and illegal scenarios. This usually took the form of joyriding in stolen cars or vandalism—original vices that became her trusted go-tos. I knew that these episodes terrified her, that she hated being unable to remember what she had done, and that she was afraid each one would be worse than the last. We were charged by a similar current, the fear of losing her mind buzzing at her and the fear of losing her pulsing through me.

Disability cheques began to dovetail with, and then eclipse, her income, and she moved into a subsidized housing development. Some residents were lovely folks trying to make ends meet, but many had problems—addiction, crime, mental health issues—that only stoked her paranoia. In daylight, the neighbours were chummy, people from whom you could borrow milk or toilet paper, but when darkness fell and their struggles could be heard up and down the hallway, home took on a more sinister hue.

Attempting to outrun the disease, Lea hopscotched around the country and communed with nature but still landed in treatment centres. I visited her at many of them. She often called me when she had telephone privileges, and I became acquainted with her daily appointments and medications. I never knew when she would be discharged. Then the calls abruptly stopped, and time slowed down.

Once, when she was admitted to a mental health centre in Toronto, I brought her a hot lemon drink from Chinatown. She had never tasted anything more delicious. “It’s not lemon water, lemon tea, or lemonade, but something entirely different,” she marvelled. I got a frantic call from her the next morning, asking for more of it, saying that it was an elixir that would fix her. I brought it to her each day for the next three days, and on the fourth day, unprompted by her call, I showed up with the drink in hand. She was gone, discharged the evening before. I heard weeks later that she had been roaming the streets for days, homeless, so now it’s reflexive: whenever she

disappears, I look into the face of each person asking for change or sleeping on the sidewalk to see if it's her.

Forty marked a new decade for both of us. I was on fire and moving upward, Lea was razing her world and charring the earth behind her. Having endured years of lies, embarrassing public outbursts, and the fallouts of petty crimes and the odd court trial, all provoked by her worsening disease, those in her inner circle had pulled away one by one. Any who remained were burned even worse. For some reason she didn't pull the same nonsense with me, until one day she did.

We had met for lunch, and it was one of those visits that reminded me of my old best friend, as she was funny, engaging, and charming with the waitstaff. Our hangout was so positive, and my nostalgia was so intense, that I agreed to meet her again after work for dinner, but something had sharpened when we rejoined. She demanded that we shop before dinner and stomped into a nearby gift emporium. By the time I reached her, items like snow globes and windchimes—overpriced memorabilia that she didn't need—were piled high on the counter. My protests were met with a loud southern accent that spun a tale of moving to a new apartment that needed furnishing. The shopkeeper's eyes gleamed as Lea reached for more useless items, the register already north of \$200. Patrons gave us a wide berth. As the charges approached \$500, money that I knew she didn't have, I put my foot down. That's when I got a face full of what Lea had dished to others for years. Where my friend had stood was a demon spitting the most hateful things I had ever heard: that I was the most despicable person she knew, that I deserved every misery that came my way, and that the best thing I could do for humanity was to rot in hell. In shock, I ran out of the store and all the way home.

Months passed. The ice melted, and we continued on. Similar outbursts arose—sometimes online when she messaged my partner to tell him that I was a rat and he should leave me because he could do much better—and each time I contemplated ending our friendship but forgave her even more quickly.

Lea rode through the pandemic as gracefully as she could, but by July she was showing signs of stress. The restrictions were grinding her down, and she worried that she might slip, which was her code for having an episode. We spent time outside, near nature, and I bought her food, as I often did to relieve the pressure on her bank account, but she was noticeably

worse by August. Irritated, fidgety, and impatient, she was clearly trying not to strangle me as I asked about her meds. Finally she walked away, saying she was done with this meeting.

In early September she called me from her apartment. She said that she was scratching herself raw from bedbugs, which must have come through the walls from the tenants surrounding her, and that cops were at the door, but she wasn't going to let them take her alive. I tried to calm her down, and it worked for a bit until she was steaming again. For thirty minutes we had stretches of lucid conversation punctuated by surges of white-hot anger. I didn't believe the police were there until I heard the knocking. They identified themselves and calmly asked her to open the door, saying they had received a worried call and wanted to confirm that she was okay.

"Over my dead body!" she screamed. Then she asked me what she should do but didn't listen to my answer. And so it went with them ordering her to come out and Lea shouting obscenities while I tried to be heard through the line of a phone that had long been forgotten. When the shouting reached a fever pitch, a thunderous bang sounded, and the line went dead.

I replayed the call in my head, haunting myself on a loop. Was this it? Was this the day I had feared most since her diagnosis, or, if I'm honest, since the minute we met, when I knew I couldn't return to the monochrome world I'd lived in before her? I clung to the belief that I still felt the current running between us—that she was still with me on this earth. I resumed combing the streets for her, rushing across an intersection in the downtown core to gently roll over a woman swaddled in a sleeping bag over a subway grate because her hair looked just like Lea's. It wasn't her, but it could have been.

A single photo posted to her Instagram account defibrillated my heart into beating again. It was the façade of a mental health centre I knew well.

My pen hovers over the tiny pages of the "The Nutbar Book," anticipating our next adventure, eager to record us and keep her memory alive. Because her being part of it means that I too have existed.