

LESLIE PALLESON

## DOLLAR CASTLE

KATRINA STANDS BEFORE A DISPLAY OF FAKE FEATHER BOAS fluffing down the wall from steel hooks, a dollar twenty-five each. How much time can one spend amidst all this plastic before some kind of chemical change occurs in the body?

She moves on until she finds a wall of tin pans shimmering against red cardboard packaging. Who's to say these aren't as good as what she normally gets—used to get—at Gourmet Warehouse? Could it matter? It's only brownies they're trying to make. Stacey approaches in her dance leotard, pushing a cart that heaves with a twelve-year-old's take on essentials. Scented candles, fuzzy socks, sour gums, a fishbowl, a pink kitty stuffy. She left all her stuffies at Dad's because she didn't want them to have to move too. Too destabilizing for them, she told Katrina, proving she's spent way too much time with child divorce specialists.

“Why the fishbowl?”

“For a Beta Fish. I've wanted one forever.” Her tweeny cheeks puff out like a Disney chipmunk. “The kitchen needs something.”

The fish is a small want, and there is less than forty dollars in their cart. She decides to buy it all and give Stacey some control in how they rebuild their lives together, although she finds this vision of a small fluttering creature imprisoned in a bowl of stagnant water sandwiched between a toaster and a kettle to be unsettling.

“Do they have any bigger bowls?”

Stacey shakes her head, so they take their place in line and wind past the candy, gum, Tylenol, phone cords that likely don't work, and pregnancy tests that hopefully do. The checkout woman in her green vest and yellow nametag looks tired, running items over the scanner, sending people home with tomorrow's landfill.

Her lawyer tells her she has to apply for jobs to get spousal support.

She'd rather get a job than spousal support. Are forty-three rejections enough to prove that no one will hire her? She could easily acquire more if she applied for jobs that she had zero hope of getting. But is it healthy to devote her energy to getting rejected?

When they met, she had decided to be an artist, putting aside her business degree to rent a studio space and buy an easel. She is reminded of this during her next trip to the store, when she stops at the aisle of art supplies. She had come to get cleaning supplies, without Stacey to save money, but she finds herself adding paints, art pencils, and art pads to her cart. Now it's her turn to drop cash for dreams at Dollar Castle.

"You an artist?" The check-out woman says as she slides an art pad over the scanner.

"Not really. Just trying to keep busy."

"You got free time?"

"Well, no." They meet each other's eyes and laugh.

The woman has kind eyes. "Me neither." She rolls back her shoulders and looks down her nose, exaggerated, funny. "I'm really a lawyer."

"I'm really a corporate analyst."

"I've never worked as a lawyer."

"I've never worked as a corporate analyst."

"Anisa."

"Katrina."

Anisa holds up a water colour palette. "I started painting again when I got divorced."

"Yeah, well." Katrina looks away. A waterfall pours down outside the glass door, rain gushing over the gutter. "I'm just getting divorced."

"No kidding."

"Is it that obvious?"

"What middle-aged women comes to Dollar Castle to buy a full set of dishes, a mop, and art supplies, except someone getting divorced?"

Katrina catches sight of the blue mugs shaped into smiley dogs' heads that she spent twenty minutes deliberating over. They're tacky, but they might make Stacey smile.

"If you're buying all this, I'd guess you haven't painted for a while."

"It seems like you know everything about me."

"Want to come over and paint sometime?"

On her way out, Katrina sees a Help Wanted sign in the window. One of

the benefits is a discount at Dollar Castle.

“You got a job a Dollar Castle?” Stacey grabs a bowl from the cupboard. No amount of bananas, apples, oranges, or grapes in the fruit bowl ever gets in the way of after-school cereal.

“I get a discount.” Katrina takes an apple from the bowl and begins to cut it into slices.

“I thought Dad has to give you money.”

“He does, but I need to work too. It’s only twice a week.”

“Does this mean I have to walk home from school?” Stacey rips open the Rice Krispie box and starts to work on the bag.

“Sometimes.”

The bag explodes, and Rice Krispies fly in all directions. Stacey doesn’t seem to notice as she pours the cereal into her bowl. “Can I get the discount?”

“I don’t see why not.” Katrina sets the apple slices on the plate, eats one, and leaves the rest for the kids. Neither child can resist easy food for long, even if it’s healthy.

Stacey ignores the apple and pours the milk. The Rice Krispies crackle as they float and clump, the glutinous sticky bits holding tight. “Wait! Are you going to be there if I come in with my friends?”

Of course. Dollar Castle is Stacey’s place. Katrina hadn’t thought of that. “Maybe.”

Stacey stuffs a spoon heaping with Rice Krispies into her mouth. “Cool.”

Anisa lives in an apartment not too far from Dollar Castle with a cockatiel named Cuckoo.

“Bad choice for a pet.” Anisa waves at Cuckoo, perched on a lampshade the same yellow as the bird’s head. Anisa feeds the bird a slice of apple, and the bird leans into her hand. “Dogs die around the time kids leave home, but cockatiels live ‘til twenty-five. I got her for my son because my rental lease at the time said no cats or dogs.”

“Bad choice for a pet.” Cuckoo says.

The canvases Anisa buys at Dollar Castle fill the apartment. Vibrant illustrations of the forest. Henri Matisse meets Emily Carr. Pink trees tower over crumbling retail malls and derelict vehicles.

"Paint whatever you want." Anisa nods towards a stack of blank canvases in the corner. "I do Utopia."

"This is Utopia?" Katrina picks up a canvas from a stack in the corner showing a Walmart sign sprawled on the ground. Cedar trees grow out, like seedlings sprouting on old logs, but these trees pull colour from the sign up to their outmost fronds and have become blue towers. Beneath them, old furniture, pans, placemats, and plastic toys lay in heaps, including a doll missing an arm, splayed like dead but with green eyes that stare down the viewer.

"When nature takes over. That will be Utopia."

"How can you work at Dollar Castle if you feel that way?"

"No one works at Dollar Castle because it aligns with their values."

"Do you show these? They're amazing."

Anisa shakes her head. "I paint. I read. I swim in the river. I try to avoid other people."

"Aren't I other people?"

"I hope you're not going to try and tell me things like 'everything happens for a reason.'"

"Oh! How about 'once you find someone new your children will be able to learn what a loving relationship looks like'?"

"You might have to leave now."

"Or 'plenty more fish in the sea'?"

"Out."

"Someday you'll look back and realize this is the best thing that ever happened to you?"

Laughing, Anisa picks up a paint brush and throws it at Katrina. "Stop it!"

"Though it's true, for me anyway."

Anisa cocks her head like Cuckoo might, studying her.

"He said he wanted fifty-fifty but always makes excuses, so I basically get the kids to myself."

Anisa nods. She moves towards the window with a plastic blind half pulled revealing low-lying businesses that reflect the grey sky. "Let's paint."

Empty canvases stacked beside Anisa's masterpiece glare out at Katrina. She wants to keep talking. "Except for playing around with the kids I haven't painted for over a decade."

"I have about an hour. After, I'm going to the river to swim."

"Are you serious? It must be freezing."

"You just have to be ready for it." At her easel, her back to Katrina, Anisa strokes the blank canvas with a red line.

Katrina understands why all the cashiers slop about in second-hand jeans and crew neck T-shirts. Nothing can improve the polyester, box-fit green vest. She had to put down a thirty-dollar deposit for it. She's heard rumours that Dollar Castle never returns the money, though she's also heard that employees don't give notice when they quit. They just don't show up one day, and they're never heard from again.

She slices open the box of boas. Sorted by colour, each in its own plastic bag, the lush synthetic feathers shimmer. Who needs celestial heavens illuminating the world when the fluorescents at Dollar Castle light up every aspect of the store: the feathers, the workers, the dirt on the floor that can't be lifted with any amount of scrubbing, like the dirt of life that becomes a permanent part of oneself or the tarnish of a failed marriage that is so deep it can't be lifted.

She appreciates the simplicity of the job: carry boxes, open boxes, empty boxes, crush boxes, recycle boxes, and repeat. The cashier job proves no more challenging. She remembers being a child and watching the hot pink nails of supermarket cashiers typing in prices, but she just sweeps the merchandise over scanners, knowing nothing about how the machine works. Cashiers have to call Marta whenever a glitch arises, like when a customer decides at the last minute not to get that second package of birthday napkins, which happens a lot. It is agonizing to witness someone putting that much thought into blue napkins without being able to decide whether they're doing the right thing. Marta, who scowls a lot, always yells at the cashier when this happens.

"Don't run it until you're certain," she yelled at Anisa earlier, at the cash next to Katrina's, while a woman with two toddlers in her cart kept apologizing. Anisa stood back in silence, as if momentarily frozen.

"Don't be ridiculous, Marta. How is anyone supposed to know?" Katrina said, her voice loud and brash. Everyone looked at her, and she was thankful for the green vest, which felt like armour—a sheet of green polyester protecting her soft shaking underbelly. But the armour wasn't for Marta. It was for Anisa, whose eyes stared into her as though she'd been betrayed.

Then Marta swore under her breath, the woman cooed to her toddlers, and Anisa, breaking through the freeze, went back to the woman's purchases.

Katrina's phone buzzes. It is a text from Mark, who will not be picking up the kids for dinner because he has a real job and needs to work. Also, she must stop poisoning the children against him. Katrina stares at her phone, trying to think of a response.

Unopened canvases, paints, brushes, pencils, erasers, smudgy sticks, and sketch pads surround Katrina on the floor of the unfinished basement. As she runs her nail between canvases, breaking the wrap, she hears a door slam and her son's voice calling out some kind of greeting. She puts down the canvas and goes upstairs, even though she knows he only wants her to help him find an easy meal.

"What the fuck's with the green vest?" His frizzy hair rings his head. Like her, his skin is so pale he looks sick most of the time. Five inches taller than Katrina, skinny, an awkward phase, his eyes scan over her, wary, the vest some kind of betrayal. "Even my friends won't work at Dollar Castle."

"It's just two days a week."

"I thought you were a corporate analyst."

"Better than nothing."

He scowls in disgust and walks out. The door of the bathroom slams.

She knocks at it tentatively. "I just want you to know I have a friend coming over later. We'll be in the basement. And your father can't make it tonight, but you can heat some chili from last night." Muffled rap music cranks up and shakes the house from the other side of the door, permeating her own room as she hangs the vest in her closet. Her phone buzzes a text from Anisa, who says she can't make it, and Katrina wonders about that flash in Anisa's eyes. She takes a bowl of heated chili to the basement, lights candles, puts on an old Cowboy Junkies album, gets out her paints, and stares at the empty canvas.

The sun hits the large canvas purchased from a real art store. Anisa stands before it. "I'm going to do this one with my eyes closed."

Katrina sits at Anisa's table, swirling her paintbrush in acrylics, copying Van Gogh's *Starry Night* from a Dollar Castle calendar onto a \$1.25 art pad. It is barely a step up from the paint-by-numbers version, which Dollar

Castle also sells, but she doesn't feel ready to paint her own ideas.

"It's not about the product," Anisa says as she moves Cuckoo from the top of the canvas to the windowsill. "It's the process. A moment. Like in a theatre, but this one has no audience. Except for you." She stretches, sticks out her tongue like a yoga lion, and exhales heavily, her eyes rolling to the top of her head. Then she throws her head back, releases a guttural laugh, and looks to Katrina. "You've got to try that sometime."

"I do yoga at home, with an app."

"I mean laughing."

Katrina puts down her brush, throws back her head, and opens her mouth, but what she feels caught in her throat is not laughter but an explosion of grief. She lets out one "ha" and snaps her jaw shut. "I'm not ready."

Last time tinkling piano notes sprinkled themselves over the afternoon, but today Anisa blasts out the hard beat of some kind of rap like Martin might listen to. Anisa ties a blindfold around her eyes and lets her fingers drag into the paint she has squeezed onto a palette beside her. She runs her fingers over the white canvas and just like that there is an explosion of colour: magenta, teal, cadmium yellow, fireside red.

"God, stop, it's beautiful."

"Beauty's not the point. If all you go for is beauty, and you get a taste of it, then pretty soon it's all you want, and you'll follow it naïvely, stupidly, without paying attention, and pretty soon you'll realize that you're standing in the middle of a fucking freeway with a Walmart delivery truck bearing down on you." Anisa slaps her hand into the paint and crisscrosses the marks on the canvas. Colours shoot out to the edges, alone and vibrant. In the middle they mix into mud.

Katrina focuses on *Starry Night*, using the brush in a new way, hitting out, thrusting bright yellow onto the purple blue sky.

"Arrrgh!" Anisa yells out. Her whole hand slaps down on the pallet and then hits the canvas, smearing it. She stands back, breathing heavy. "Not good enough."

"It's really amazing," Katrina says, impressed by the thickness of the paint and the way the colours are erased as they conform, like a brown sludge with sparks of primaries flying out. Like her brain, it is a dense muck that nonetheless gives rise to the occasional fleeting idea. Alive, bright, sharp.

"Bring me a knife."

The knife block by the stove that Katrina has never noticed before comes

into focus. Cuckoo is perched on it, as though the bird knew this was coming.

“The big one.”

Katrina lays down her brush, and Cuckoo high steps out of the way. Katrina slides the heavy knife out of the block. Not a Dollar Castle knife, this knife has weight, the blade sharp enough to cut through bone. She holds Anisa’s arm as she slips the handle into her palm.

“Turn off the music. I want to do this in silence.”

The loud rap cuts off, leaving only the heavy rumbling of trucks outside. Anisa heaves the knife into the brown heart of the canvas. She slices downward again and doesn’t stop until the painting hangs in magenta, teal, cadmium yellow, fireside red, and mud-stained shreds. Then she removes her blindfold and places the knife on the table beside the dripping palette.

“Look at those pieced together bits of beauty. So easy to take apart. So dangerous when you can’t see it for what it is. I do this sometimes to remind myself of what I left.”

Katrina slides to the floor in front of the easel, Anisa leans into her, and they watch as Cuckoo plucks up feet to weave in and out of the colourful strands of wet canvas. Some kind of gurgling starts to rise inside Katrina, which brings to mind that old-fashioned hysteria women used to be diagnosed with. She looks at Cuckoo covered in paint and the canvas dangling in strips from the easel. “How the fuck did I get here, anyway?”

Their laughter rises into a howl until the man in the apartment downstairs starts banging the ceiling. It is the first time Katrina has laughed out loud for maybe a decade, and here is a man demanding that she stop. She jumps up and stomps on the floor, and there is no being quiet after that.

It turns out that she hung the boas backwards with the labels facing the wall. “How can anyone take that long to hang boas and still screw it up?” Marta barks at Katrina at the check-out. “I thought you were supposed to be smart!”

Katrina bites her lip. Being called out on this inconsequential mistake shouldn’t tap into that well of tears she carries in her gut like a water balloon, heavy, easy to burst, leaving behind only its peel of rubber. But she’s not ready to fight her own battles. If Anisa were here, she’d say something, like Katrina did. But Anisa isn’t here today. Katrina hasn’t heard from her since she sliced open the painting.



Marta's explosions are just part of the landscape. She's like this with everyone, and they all just nod and step around the outbursts like they would a small fire in a desert they know will burn out with nowhere to go. Dollar Castle has trouble finding employees that show up for shifts. That's the only hard requirement, and Katrina reminds herself that it's a requirement she can fill. She's got this.

"What are we having for dinner?" Stacey slops milk into a bowl overflowing with Rice Krispies.

"Quinoa and fish."

"Yuck! Are you kidding?"

Katrina puts the milk in the fridge. "We've had pasta three nights in a row. Every once in a blue moon, I get to make something I like."

"I'm going to Dad's. He'll order pizza."

"Dad's ordering pizza?" Martin has come in. He opens the fridge like he's hoping a hamburger will jump out ready and hot. He stands there disappointed and then takes out the milk.

"Mom's making fish."

His eyes narrow as they focus on Katrina. "Tell Dad I'm coming too."

"I might stay there tonight," Stacey says.

"Alright." Katrina picks up the trout still in its package and throws it in the freezer. "It will be here waiting for you!"

"Why are you acting so weird?"

Katrina turns on the tap. The counsellor told her not to cry in front of the children and that freezing water helps numb emotional pain. "What's weird about variety in the menu?"

"That's weird. Fish is weird. Everything about you is weird since you started at the Dollar Castle."

The children stomp out of the room, and Katrina leans into the sink.

Cuckoo watches her through the dark window on the third floor. Katrina buzzes at the door of the low concrete apartment block but gets no response, so she walks to the river park thinking she might find Anisa there. The sound of rushing water reaches her before she arrives, hitting up against rocks on its journey to the ocean. She stands at the river's edge and wonders how groundwater and snowpack can keep a river going all year. This is something else she could have learned and understood better. She could have

done a whole degree in water systems in the time she's spent at home. She could have taken a bachelor's degree, a master's, or even a PhD. She could have become the world's leading expert in water systems, travelling to conferences, having dinners with foreign men in candlelit restaurants hidden in the alcoves of four-hundred-year-old buildings with curlicues bedizening the doorways.

No one else is here, so Katrina strips down to her underwear. Sharp rocks cut in to her feet, but the water ices the pain, and she pushes forward. The river drops, and she lets herself fall into the current, the freeze pushing up her spine as she swims against it. A pain shoots to her head as she submerges, and then she moves towards the shore, her feet catching the riverbed. Once out she takes a selfie of her wet hair and the river behind and sends it to Anisa. She types out, "I was ready," and then deletes it.

Anisa buzzes Katrina in when she returns, and Katrina finds her sitting at the kitchen table surrounded by boxes, everything packed, even Cuckoo, who swings on a perch in his cage.

"I have a favour to ask you."

A bucket by the stove steams. The scent of Mr. Clean pricks the inside of Katrina's nostril. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm telling you now."

"Where are your paintings?"

"Didn't you see the fire pit by the river?"

Katrina had seen a ring of stones, charred logs, and debris, but she had assumed it was teens out at night. "But your paintings . . ."

"The paintings don't matter. None of this matters. Nothing, in fact, fucking matters."

"Your paintings matter. They're amazing. I would do anything to be able to paint like you."

"You're going to be okay, Katrina. Someday you'll have everything."

"But why did you burn your paintings? You could sell them. You could be a working artist."

Anisa glares at Katrina with the same eyes that stared her down at the Dollar Store, when Katrina tried to defend her. "Like I said. I have a favour to ask you."

Katrina leans into the wall. "Sure, anything,"

Anisa gestures towards Cuckoo. The bird twists her yellow head and

chirrup. In protest, it sounds like. “My son is never coming back to me, and Cuckoo needs a new home—one with children.”

The kids come in the door and hear a chirrup.

“What the hell?” says Martin.

They sit together around the cage, and Katrina slides onto the cream leather sofa—a piece of second-hand luxury she bought online. It’s the first time they’ve all sat together in this living room.

“Why a parrot?” Martin asks, cocking his head when Cuckoo cocks hers. He has a look of wonder in his eyes that Katrina hasn’t seen in years.

“It’s a cockatiel,” Stacey says.

“Bad choice for a pet,” Cuckoo says.

They laugh like children—even Martin—and lean in closer as Cuckoo high-steps around her cage, putting on a show, as though she knows this is her new home. Katrina looks out the window. Big dark clouds have hung low all day and now, outside, the rain starts to pitter pat against the glass.

“Listen to that.”

The children look up from Cuckoo, perplexed.

“The rain. I’ve always loved listening to the rain fall.”

The children exchange their why-is-she-so-crazy look.

“Like that never happens, Mom.” Martin picks up a pencil and pokes it through the cage, getting Cuckoo to nip at it.

“Yeah, we’ve never heard the rain, Mom.”

“What is rain, anyway?”

“I don’t know. Do you hear something?”

Stacey picks up a pen from the coffee table and competes for the bird’s attention. “Can Cuckoo sleep in my room?”

“Can we order pizza?”

Katrina walks the rows of shelves. She finally finds Marta staring at the wall of boas, scowling, her white hair flipped up at her neck.

“You train the new girl to make this mess?” Marta waves her arm, and Katrina notices that the tags are backwards. So, she wasn’t the only one who failed to notice the tags.

“I’m giving you two weeks notice.”

Marta stares at her over her glasses.

“So you can find someone else—maybe someone who can actually hang

boas.”

Marta snorts, which is the closest thing to camaraderie they have shared. “No one gives notice. You’re on cash.”

Katrina takes in the squat woman before her, hands on her hips, seething contempt. Behind her is a wall of boas, fancy cardboard eye masks, and plastic swords—endless offerings of identity transformation for a dollar. The green vest was obviously a rip off in this context.

“You’re right. No one gives notice.” Katrina rips apart the Velcro, slides off the green vest, and presents it to Marta. “I’d like my thirty dollars back, though.”

“No one gets their thirty dollars. If you’re outta here, I guess I’m on cash.” Marta disappears down the aisle of art pads and paints, leaving Katrina holding the vest.

Katrina would like to text Anisa and tell her how her quitting went down, but after Anisa helped put Cuckoo into her back seat, she asked if Katrina remembered her painting.

“The one you knifed?”

“That’s the one,” she said. “Whenever I think of you, I’m going to remember that bright yellow fragment—the one that looked like a shooting star.” Then she held Katrina’s arms, as though bracing her for the future. “You’ve got this. Don’t contact me. I’ll be fine.”

Instead of texting her, Katrina pulls a boa from the wall, replaces it with her vest, and takes another selfie. It doesn’t matter that she has no one to send it to. The boa draping her neck, she walks past Marta on cash, who either doesn’t notice or chooses to say nothing about the trade.

She stands by her car with her keys in hand, and the rain seeps through the fluff until the blue feathers mat to her skin. She could go lie on the pebbles by the river, let the rain soak her, or even plunge into the freezing current. But Stacey has swimming lessons, and Martin needs dinner before his hockey game. She drags the boa off her neck, landfill already, and turns her face upward to the bursting sky.