

LINDA KIRKBY

MARGY-LOU

MARG THINKS OF THE BOY often now. The first time she saw him was alarming. He clambered out of his dented Volvo with bumper stickers all over it and moseyed around the corner of her trailer. He had responded to her rental ad, but when she peered through her kitchen blinds, blinds she kept shut day and night, she regretted her hasty decision to rent the room sight unseen. In a devastating moment she comprehended the reality of the risk, because after all, this was a fifty-plus Mobile Home Park.

Dressed in torn jeans and a black t-shirt that shouted, “*Show me your tits,*” Luka had hair tortured into dreadlocks that fell in his face, his eyes dark against the morning glare.

Marg had already cashed his cheque to pay her overdue mortgage. His e-mails had been well written. He was young, less than half the age stated in the Park’s regulations, but had been the only person to reply. He was employed at The Gardens, one of the many Senior Homes in Parksville, dour buildings her niece had been detouring her past, places Marg had vehemently refused. She would never go there to wait on death with those old fogeys, had refused to sign onto the waitlist for the subsidized care demanded by her finances.

Luka slouched in through the door, a suspicious scent of marijuana drifting along; he probably thought she was just one of those old people that didn’t know anything about young people.

“Hey,” he said. He nodded at her relic Fender in the corner, kicked off his filthy boots, revealing grimy socks complete with his dirty toenail poking through a hole. “Sweet guitar.”

At least he removed his footwear. Marg had difficulty keeping her eyes off the toe as he held out his hand, his fingers clammy in hers, though warm to the touch. No way could he have missed the sheer disappointment in her face.

Luka had neglected to shut the door. If Gilles, her late husband, were there she would have made eye contact with him—the way they used to do, familiar with their shared judgements. The movement of spring leaves outside magnified through Marg’s teary eyes. She had cared for Gilles to the end and the snow on the trees had cast its white glitter into the room as life left him last winter. A time since which she has nurtured an everlasting need to hide from whatever there is to hide from.

She led Luka down the gloomy hall to the room.

“You said the en-suite had a Jacuzzi bathtub, right?” Luka said.

“And I mentioned not to use the jets? And the no smoking policy?” What Marg thought she had said or done lately she could no longer be certain of. Luka was surveying the room, the king-size bed she and Gilles had shared. Her eyes moistened again, but it was the only room she could charge a decent amount for. When she spoke, Luka’s eyes shifted from the top of her head to a point in the distance, unfocused and red rimmed. Red from the dope, Marg guessed. He returned his gaze to her face, the purple-blue around her eye from a fall in the driveway, the frizz of grey curls wild atop her head. She was long past caring for her looks, but embarrassed at the way her speech sounded like a New Yorker, a little drunk, the left side of her face uncooperative. She had refused to see a doctor.

Luka’s eyes wavered, seemed unreachable when he finally answered. “Too bad about the jets. I could sure use them. Get sore from lifting senior folks all day.” He blew a little puff of air through pursed lips. His mouth was curiously small and fleshy, and it shaped a vague childlike smile. “Back tonight with my gear.”

He slid his toes into his boots, didn’t bother to tie them, stepped on the heels as he shuffled back out to his car, turned briefly and flashed a peace sign.

That night Marg lay in bed and listened for Luka’s return, dreading he’d turn out like those insolent youngsters she’d heard snickering in the restaurant her niece had dragged her to on her birthday. After cajoling her into standing on top of her chair, the waitress had shrieked opera at her, some birthday song. *All patrons look over here*—she might as well have said—and when Marg began to lose her balance she had reached out and clutched at the singer’s hair like a monkey in the zoo. This kind of singling out she imagined would be routine in the Care Homes her niece had blathered on about through the whole dinner.

She reached beside her bed for one of the sultry Romance novels that carpeted the floor, all impossible love stories, all of which became familiar too quickly.

Music was in her head again. It played in her right ear frequently, always country, like a radio station, some trick of her brain as a result of hearing loss. This time a Gene Autry song she used to play on her guitar. Margy-Lou, she had called herself back then, those few gigs in sketchy bars swelling with milky-eyed men absorbed in their pints. All these years, the fringed skirt and western jacket stuffed in the back of her closet. Before each show her forehead streaked with sweat and she couldn't go on without a shot of rum.

After she met Gilles things changed. He came to all her shows. At closing she would sit on his lap as though he were a chair. Tiny against him, she pressed her lips against his neck, the little blond hairs that glinted under the bar lights, and his warm closeness, his deep voice, sparked her. These thoughts she hoarded as though beneath a boulder, lifted it at whim, the thrill and sweetness of what had once been.

Marg flattened against the wall in her single bed, two scraggly cats pushing into her bony frame, their motors revving, smelling of urine.

At God knows what time Marg was woken by a blaring boom box beat, two car door slams, not one. Surely her neighbour would hear. That vigorous and noble busybody of a woman would likely report her. Despite the racket, she could not afford to lose her tenant. She'd have to straighten him out, drill some respect into him.

"Come on Babe. Got a king size bed in here for you!" Luka whined in a high singsong, as though he were ready to burst out cackling.

Water ran in the kitchen, the pipes always tap-tapped, and one of the cupboard doors creaked. Marg froze, listening hard. A girlish giggling as they tromped into his room. Had she not specifically stated the room was for one tenant only? Tiptoeing to her door, she pressed her ear against it, afraid of confrontation. Luka's strong build had not gone unnoticed. He had mentioned in his e-mail that he worked out to stay in shape for his job. Bath water was running, tub-jets rumbling, masking words that were certainly not quiet. Quite the opposite, laced with profanities. And a smell of smoke that was not tobacco.

Marg's bedroom door had acquired its own peculiar heft and strangeness as she pushed on the wood. She crept down the hall, incredulous to find he had left his door ajar. She crouched out of sight, squinted into the murky room.

The animal desire on Luka's face was backlit by the yellow nightlight and the red cherry of his joint glowed in the half-dark. Moonbeams shot through the slatted blinds, made a pattern on his hairless chest, and smoke flickered in and out of the light. The girl wore a lace bra and panties that didn't match, but she was magically erotic, and with the delicacy of her bones looked as though she was made of moonlight and water. An overwhelming perfume, patchouli-like wafted through the door, sickly sweet.

Marg felt the burn in her cheeks as the skin flushed at the sudden desire for this girl to replace the rotation of fatso caregivers, who once a week waited outside her shower curtain. At that moment she longed to feel those youthful hands rubbing her back. She recoiled, retreated back to her room, groping her way along the wall in the blackness. She wondered if she should call her niece about these two, about how the boy was defying her, but knew it would just fuel her niece's quest to have Marg moved into a home.

The water and the jets continued to thunder, and she imagined those kids in there going at it with a kind of brutality, a violence of entwining limbs.

"THE TUB! Holy fuck, the tub's overflowing! Look the bubbles!" The girl was laugh-shouting uncontrollably. Luka howled along with her until Marg crashed into the room, eyes swivelling away from their nakedness. Nausea burbled up like reflux inside her, and her breath came in tremendous gulps.

"You two get out here! And turn off the tub! Now!"

"Okay, man, have a hissy fit, why don't you?" There was a change in Luka's voice, a crack in it, a rising pitch.

Marg waited for them in the living room in front of the little shrine she had made for Gilles. The vase of lilacs from her garden turning to rust, the tapered candles, his wristwatch and eyeglasses she had kept home whenever he had been hospitalized, wary of theft. And the framed photograph, how his body filled it up the way he used to fill a room, his big presence, his big nose. Hidden between the photo and the frame, an ancient Polaroid photo he had taken of Marg, her body so tanned the unknowing eye might see a bikini, but she is naked, brazen. That afternoon, in each other's arms on the

rocks. Hidden Lake lit with the last light of the day. That life picks up speed, and then most of it is gone, makes her breathless.

Marg listened for the kids, tried to calm her breath, her hands laid in front of her, limp and white, resting on one of her novels.

The girl stomped over the threshold, slumped down onto the sofa. A strap on her tank top slipped down her arm as she examined Marg, gave her that “You old bag,” look. She began to chew on her nails, then on her hair. She stuck her iPod ear-buds in her ears.

“I’m Sammi.”

The girl smiled in a way that made Marg want to slap her.

Sammi was covered in freckles, like a child, with pinkish skin and prominent light blue eyes. She was wearing a ring. Marg’s wedding ring she had left by the kitchen sink!

Her fantasies of Sammi were shattered. Marg felt a surge of gratitude for her shower nurses. Though she could never shake the indignity of their supervision, she craved the conversation, the hot water easing her arthritis.

Luka balanced three bottles of Coke on a pizza box, a roach stuck to his pouty lip. He offered a bottle to Marg, then cracked his open on the edge of her coffee table thwacking off a small spear of wood. He let the last bit of smoke curl away from his lips in a slow thick stream, one hand rubbing his smooth chin. Smooth as his chest. He and Sammi raised their Cokes to Marg, and when she did not respond, Sammi rolled her eyes, gave a “Whatever,” and she and Luka brought theirs together in a clumsy kiss of glass. Well, thought Marg, I didn’t realize I’d invited you out here to a party.

Sammi looked like she hadn’t eaten in weeks—and mowed through a slice of pizza like it too. Luka chewed with his mouth open even while he spoke.

“You scared or something?” He said.

Marg chose to consider this not as a taunt but as a serious question. He passed her a slice of pizza from his hand. Suddenly ravenous, she took a bite, then paused, stuck out her tongue and let the food fall. His fingers had touched it, and whose bodily fluids?

“We had an agreement. What if I just call the police?” Marg said. She reached for her phone, but Luka snatched it up first. Marg sat upright, struck with a bolt of panic.

Luka’s eyes rested on the shrine as though it was the first he had seen of it. “That your husband?” He sounded earnest and a little sad. “Sorry.”

Marg got up and found her legs were shaking. Of course. She reached under her chair, fumbled a bottle of Captain Morgan Rum from her stash, tripped into the kitchen and came back hugging three glasses to her chest. The fumes from the weed must be getting to her. She usually drank her rum in a mug with coffee, and alone. She filled the glasses, slid them across the table to Luka and Sammi. She felt reckless, felt their age, daring and unaccountable. Sammi poured Coke into Marg's glass, a smirk on her face.

Marg drained her drink in one go. When she set the glass down her fingers came to rest on the sewing basket beside her chair. Something was clanging around in her brain. Something had unveiled her heart. Likely the rum.

"I used to have a voodoo doll," Marg said. She burst out laughing then. Luka and Sammi looked at each other the way she and Gilles may have done. But Marg couldn't stop. "I did. I used it on a woman my husband was having an affair with. It didn't even look anything like her. In fact, it was a Cardinal, a stuffed bird!" Her eyes opened wide, giant orbs. "Kept it right here in my basket and stabbed it with stick pins. I was afraid he would leave me for her. She had a weak heart, so it was no surprise to anyone when it failed." Marg let out a phlegmy bark of a laugh. There, she had confessed a secret scrap of her past to these potheads.

Luka stood up, shook his head in disbelief. Marg turned to Sammi and the girl's eyes were wide and completely hopeless. Sammi was a fledgling, something quivering and naked, perilously close to an edge. Cries erupted from her body, heaving, terrible sounds, and tears, snot and saliva created dark spots on her tank top.

"Nobody knows what I've told you," Marg's spite had begun to thaw. "Still, the rules you have agreed to, young man. No smoking. No overnight guests." She reached her palms out to Sammi, like a beggar on the street. "My ring!"

Sammi hiccup-cried, tugged at the ring. "Just trying it on."

Luka stared at Marg over the rim of his drink. "Sammi's parents gave her the boot. She's got some things to sort out with them. She stays tonight."

When Marg climbed back into bed the cats ducked under the chenille spread, kneaded the mattress. After Gilles' affair, after the voodoo thing—she had embellished—it had been merely a passing thought one afternoon while sewing—she and Gilles no longer had the fights that made her sick the way

she felt now. They never spoke of it, but the way they saw each other had been altered. By then the years behind them were more than the years in front; the mind and the heart were slower.

Early the next morning Marg stepped into her back yard, the first time in months, and the tension of the night receded like a shoreline, the air like a cold washcloth on her face. Mount Arrowsmith loomed up beyond the forest backing the property, iced in white. A flock of miniature birds settled near the top of the corkscrew willow in a horizontal ripple, and her scrutiny of them deflected her thoughts from her tenant.

The clay-heavy soil in the garden was mapped in roots and had become impossible for Marg to dig. Still, before Gilles had died, she had spent hours coaxing plant life under the glare of the blue sky, retreating to a metal chair when she became overtaxed.

Singing pierced the air. Out back of the trailer, Luka leaned on a shovel. A hummingbird hovered near his Rastafarian hair, no doubt to consider taking up residency in the mess. Luka paused mid lyric, sucked on a splif, as he called it, gazed at the mountains. His eyes did a lazy sweep across the yard and then landed on hers.

“Hey, Margaret.” Luka held up the joint. “Thought this would be okay outside.”

“What about Sammi? She needs to call her parents.” Marg pinched her nose at the smoke.

Under the honey-coloured light, Luka cleaved the hard earth like it was sand, lowered a spiky leafed plant into the hole, pushed the dirt back over the rootball and patted it with his bare hands, back at his song. He began to pull weeds from her garden, careful to remove the entire root of each.

Marg knew the plant, felt the whisking away of satisfaction, like when you think you’ve fixed something and it breaks again. But she decided to let it go, grateful for the help.

A part of her admired the young man before her. Something in his easiness, in the statement of his hair, his steady and strong voice. Marg felt the way she had as a child when she’d been walking through a field after a snowstorm and had spotted an owl in the quiet. The bird had seemed huge and magical. This boy had the same pull on her—such a rarity living under her roof.

One night soon after, Marg startled from her sleep. It wasn't the music that woke her. It was the rain, tinny beats on the metal roof. But there was music too. Her guitar, she knew the tone, and there was drumming. She pulled on her dressing gown and padded down the hall in her bare feet.

Around the corner in the living room, Luka and Sammi wore identical looks of transcendence. The room was dimly lit and hazy and the blinds were open wide, the first time since Gilles had died, affording her nosy neighbour a good view.

Immediately Marg's eyes were drawn to the shrine, the candles were aflame, fresh lilacs in the vase. Luka had been clipping the lilac hedge that afternoon. Her tenant, a bright buoy bobbing in the bay of her own quiet terror.

Luka was singing, Marg's guitar mellow and smoky in his hands. Sammi pounded a bongo drum, bits of hair stuck to her face. Her body pulsed with each beat. Across the way, the neighbour's curtains parted. Marg stepped into the room, waved to her tenants, then to her neighbour. Waved like the queen.

"Play Johnny Cash—I Still Miss Someone?" Marg straightened, tense, like a tuned string. Her gnarled toes gripped the carpet. She heard a voice coming from the shrine and cold goose bumps prickled up along her arms. But there was only a shrieking emptiness in the corner, the fresh and silent flowers. In the heart of that room, she was utterly solitary.

Her voice was grainy; Nashville replaced the New York drawl. She sang in angles and edges, skirting the old melody. Luka scrambled for the chords and Sammi slowed the beat, softened to a gentle thrum, hands pale as a maggot. Marg stared straight out the window. Look all you like, lady.

Marg sang out strong. Tomorrow she would serve the eviction notice.