



MAD HOPE

stories by

HEATHER
BIRRELL



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*For Joan Firmin, a.k.a. Nanny,
a.k.a. Mrs. Lady, 1917–2011*

The Frog

What a wonderful bird the frog are!
When he stand he sit almost;
When he hop he fly almost.
He ain't got no sense hardly;
He ain't got no tail hardly either.
When he sit, he sit on what he ain't got almost.

– Anonymous



BriannaSusannaAlana

AT THE TOP OF THE STREET where Brianna, Susanna and Alana lived was a parkette in the form of a teardrop turned sideways. The parkette had a slide, two sets of swings (one for babies and one for big kids) and a climbing frame in the shape of a rocket ship. Brianna, at six, was not a baby, but still gave the big-kid swings the respect they deserved. Susanna, at ten, loved the big-kid swings, and had the soar-and-smash scars to prove it. Alana, at nearly thirteen, was *so* over swings of any kind.

Just above the parkette was a used-car lot, and next to that, an apartment parking lot, and next to that the apartment building itself, a brownstone of moderate proportions. Surrounding the brownstone was a well-manicured lawn that had been sectioned off in the northwest corner by yellow police tape. The police tape had been there for eight days and now appeared slack in places, fatigued.

From the observation pod at the top of the rocketship, Susanna had a good view of the goings-on around and inside the police tape. She observed, then reported her findings in urgent bulletins to Brianna and Alana. The former received these bulletins eagerly, if indiscriminately, jumping up and down below the pod, while the latter sat on one of the rungs of the slide yawning and peeling back the petals of skin around her fingernails. Still, whatever Susanna could tell them could not in any significant way diminish or augment what they already knew. The reason for the police tape was that somebody had been murdered.

'I think,' Susanna said, lifting and twisting her chin with what she imagined was authority, 'we should all think back to what we were doing the day of the murder.'

'Whatever,' said Alana.

'Two, four, six, eight,' called Brianna, still jumping.

'There's a cardinal,' said Susanna, pointing to the top branches of a tall spruce across the street.

'Not a clue,' said Alana. 'Not a clue about the murder.' She stood up, climbed to the top of the ladder and sat down on the platform.

Alana

Alana had been walking home that day with her friend Zoe when three boys they did not recognize slouched out from behind a parked car.

'Hey,' said one, and hiked up his pants, 'my friend wants to do you bitches hard and anal.'

Zoe turned to Alana, giggling. 'What should I say?'

Alana shrugged. She liked the look of one of the boys, his half-up, half-down mouth and red Nike jacket. He sucked his teeth at her, eyed her chest.

'What should I *say*?' Zoe hissed.

Alana shook her head.

So they did not say anything, but let two of the boys follow them to a nearby Starbucks, where the girls bought chai lattes and sat down to sip at the foam. Two tables over, the boys lounged with their knees akimbo, flicking sugar packets at each other.

Alana and Zoe began a conversation that required them to laugh and twirl their hair. They pretended they knew what they were talking about.

Dialogue, thought Alana. We're doing *dialogue*.

When one of the boys got up and began walking towards them, they leaned in across the table so their foreheads almost touched. They smiled at each other.

The boy pulled up a chair. 'Hey,' he said. It was not Alana's boy. 'Hey,' said Zoe.

'Me and my boys're going to the ravine. Catch fish or somethin'.'

'Yeah,' said Alana's boy, now standing behind the first boy. 'Or somethin'.' He pinched his fingers together, drew deeply on an invisible joint.

'Cool,' said Zoe to the first boy. 'What's your name?'

'I'm Darryl.' He looked for a green moment as though he might have said the wrong thing.

Alana opened her eyes wide because she knew she could appear almost Chinese if she relaxed and was not careful. And because some part of her felt more alert.

'And this is Jordan,' said Darryl.

'Cool,' said Zoe again.

The boys sat down and pulled more sugar packets from their pockets.

Susanna

Susanna could not remember the day of the murder, nor could she invent it (although she cast mightily back into her mind). This was bizarre, since memories – their particular bents and textures – were usually her strong suit. At home they didn't really talk about it. *In our own backyard*, she heard her mother say on the phone. *Your friends and neighbours*, her father sighed to himself over the headlines. The problem with the mystery, in Susanna's view, was that the most pressing W questions (Who, What, Where, When) had already been answered. The criminal had been caught. The only leftover was Why. And finding Why after the death, after the arrest, was a problem. How did you dig up the clues that led deep into people's brains? The Motive, that's what Susanna was looking for.

What Susanna did remember was an afternoon two days *after* the murder, walking home by herself, thinking about the

Motive and the Concept of Evolution. She knew that sometimes ideas in books that had nothing to do with the mystery at hand could loop you back towards a solution. There was a book she was reading now, one of her mother's, a science book about the origins of the human race. She didn't understand most of it, just read the words like a robot when she wanted to relax. But there were a few pages that had stuck with her, a section explaining our ancestry, way back before kings and queens and ancient castles. It was about chimpanzees, apes and humans, mothers all holding hands with their children around the entire earth – as if the earth were time, the distance years – then turning to face each other as cousins, as relations. What the author was trying to show was that blood and time could not really separate us from the animals we were and always had been. What it meant was that we were *actually* animals. But animals who could write books about how we are actually animals. Animals who murdered for complicated reasons. This was confusing in the best kind of way. She liked it when she had to fight to keep things straight.

There were lots of leaves on the streets, but rain had clumped them up with mud and pollution. Even so, Susanna dragged her feet through the gutters happily. When she got home she would have the entire house to herself. Alana was at piano and Brianna had playgroup. On Wednesdays Susanna was a latchkey kid.

Brianna

The day of the murder Brianna hid behind her favourite tree in the schoolyard at pickup time. She watched her teacher, Ms. Sawchuk, talking to her babysitter, Frances, who nodded, then shifted her shoulders up and down quickly. Then she saw Caroline – a fat, wily, lively girl from Grade 2 – skip up to the two grown-ups and point towards the tree. Brianna pressed her cheek hard into the bark. She turned her face and kissed the trunk with all the tenderness

she could muster. ‘Goodbye, friend,’ she said. Then Frances hauled her out and pulled her towards the car, which was a modern station wagon named Saturn.

‘That was very naughty,’ said Frances, once belted in. She turned the key in the ignition and the car roared to life. ‘I was so worried.’

‘Hello, Saturn,’ Brianna called from the back seat.

Alana

Outside the coffee shop, the light had begun to dim. Alana loved fall; it made her so sleepy and willing. She watched an old man on the sidewalk clutch his hat to his head, railing against the wind like something from a movie. Darryl and Jordan were still there, telling stories involving lockers and basements and cops. From the stories, Zoe and Alana understood the boys were from the high school. The girls, who were not from the high school, didn’t tell many stories, unless they were about tv shows.

‘We gotta split soon,’ said Jordan. ‘You wanna come?’

‘Mmm,’ said Zoe. ‘Just let me consult with my girl.’ She tugged on Alana’s sleeve and jerked her head towards the washrooms.

The women’s washroom was a single, large and harshly lit, with metal bars on the walls for the disabled. Zoe looped her purse over one of the bars, and shimmied her jeans down her hips. Alana looked in the mirror. She was happy with the way her hair was falling in a smooth curtain down her cheek, but above her left eyebrow was the small rosy swell of a blemish.

‘Undergrounder,’ she said to Zoe, tapping at the spot.

‘Do you wanna go with them?’ said Zoe, standing up. She bounced twice to ease her jeans back in place.

‘Sure,’ said Alana, because she really did.

But Darryl and Jordan were not back at the table. Alana looked out the window and spotted them climbing on a parking meter outside.

‘Coupla monkeys,’ said Zoe, smiling.

On the street they paired off. Jordan asked Alana what kind of shit she was into, and she had no idea. Then he pointed to the earphones dangling from behind his ears.

‘Music,’ he said. ‘What do you like?’

‘Oh,’ said Alana. She liked her parents’ old cassettes from the eighties and soft-rock stations that played people singing about love over mild-mannered saxophones. ‘Some old school, sometimes pop, you know.’

‘Cool,’ said Jordan.

Alana wished he would plug in the earphones so they could just walk. ‘Yeah,’ she said. She focused on Jordan’s gait; it was purposeful and lopsided. His hip dipped and his arm swung like a creature who had chosen – righteously – to remain less evolved. His hair – jagged at the nape – had been dyed blond recently; there was a *laissez-faire* brown crop circle at the crown. Her cellphone began to bleat softly, rhythmically, from her coat pocket. She cherished the phone, its sleekness and weight in her hand, the flutter in her gut when she saw she had messages waiting. She flipped it open, pressed a keypad.

‘H’lo.’

It was Frances, the babysitter. Alana was overdue at home. Brianna was waiting. They were both waiting. Alana thought about Brianna. She was twice the age and twice the size of her little sister. If she were a fish in a pond she would eat her, chomp, just like that. She closed the phone and slid it back into her pocket.

Zoe, who had seen the whole thing, tugged at Alana’s sleeve. ‘What?’ she said, then clenched her teeth together.

‘Gotta go get my sister.’

‘Lame,’ said Zoe. She spat into the gutter and looked over at Darryl.

Alana began to walk away, then stopped, turned around and sidled up to Jordan. ‘Meet me later,’ she said, and brought her lips close to one of the headphones. She whispered instructions. He

nodded and snaked his hand up under her shirt, brushed his fingers against the skin above her belt.

‘Bye,’ she said.

Susanna

‘Hel-lo, Sunny!’ shouted Susanna, as she pushed open the door. ‘I’m home! Susanna’s home!’

Oh yes, Sunny barked, skittering on the smooth floor of the hallway. Oh yes, you are!

Susanna stroked Sunny madly behind his ears, then slapped his belly when he rolled over for more. ‘C’mere, you old mutt,’ she said like a pro, then reached for his paws, holding them up in the air so he could dance, his legs splayed, the tender flesh of his underside and the nubs of his groin exposed. ‘Do you know the way to San José?’ she sang, but he didn’t like it, didn’t even look at her. ‘Not so good on the old hind legs, eh, Sun?’

This was another thing that made humans different from animals: language. Not only our big brains, but also our breathing patterns – the ability and anatomy to walk and talk at the same time – made us what we are today. Sunny might be able to help Susanna with some aspects of the investigation – his nose, for example, was invaluable – but in the end, the human brain would prevail.

At school, news of the murder was passed around like an amulet; it was both excruciating and propitious to give it up to someone else. What they knew for certain was that the victim was the murderer’s mother, an old lady who once baked carrot muffins for her neighbours in 3F. He had buried her in the small garden adjoining the apartment building. Plus, one night about three months ago, someone had overheard the killer – a quiet man who wore his salt and pepper hair army-short and drove a red Ford pickup – shouting the questions, ‘Why?’ and ‘Do you think Dad ever really loved me?’ in a choked, anguished voice. It was

assumed he was drunk. There were rumours that a reward was being offered for more information that could, in the words of Jill Nelson, 'really nail the guy.' The culprit, according to Jill, was a part-time plumber. 'He only did a few jobs here and there,' she said to Susanna outside the gym doors. 'He was, like, a temp worker,' she added, in a tone that suggested her father worked at a job distinctly full-time, professional and non-plumber. 'They should lock him up and throw away the key.'

Susanna nodded. She had no choice; while you were within her range, Jill Nelson's proclamations were indelible. But when Jill was gone, Susanna wondered. Even the dog, who was now blinking up at her lovingly, divined things the rest of them couldn't, despite their big brains. For instance, when Brianna had her petit mals, Sunny predicted them. Susanna had seen him doing a panicked prance around her sister's feet just before Brianna's eyes pinwheeled back into her head. She had read that some dogs would go further for their epileptic owners: lapping urgently at their faces, pushing them with careful snouts into soft chairs, positioning their bodies in the paths of their falls. That was Love. Or else a Survival Mechanism. Too bad the dead woman didn't have a dog like that. 'Loyalty,' said Susanna to Sunny, 'that's what's missing in Today's Crazy World.'

Yes, science could offer some answers, but there were phenomena you smelled without realizing, situations you simply absorbed through your very pores. *I went to the University of Life*, Susanna once heard her father say. She had filed this away, along with, *That's Life in the Big City*, and *You Can't Always Get What You Want*. In the schoolyard, Susanna kept quiet throughout much of the speculation, but in her heart she knew *she* would be the one to finally, glamorously dig up some obscure, invaluable piece of evidence. What she had was good instinct.

In fact, there were already clever life things she was learning to do, secretly. That very lunchtime, Susanna had dropped her knapsack in the school toilet by mistake, right down there into the pee.

It didn't matter that she rescued it quickly, it was still dripping. It would smell. Jill was there too, and called in to her, 'Are you okay?' But Susanna did not panic. 'I'm okay,' she called back. 'out in a minute. You go ahead.' She stayed calm and used her head, reasoned it out, quickly flushing, then waiting for the tank to fill before she pressed the lever again and dunked the bag into the clean second swirl. Outside of the stall, she clicked the hand dryer on, allowed it to fill her head with its heat and noise. She held the bag up to the nozzle until it was dry.

Brianna

Once home, Brianna helped Frances make cookies – there was some bother with a plastic measuring cup whose lines had worn away, but Frances had a feel for ingredients and quantities, and in this regard Brianna trusted her – then she went to her playroom to tell stories to her dolls.

She sat down on the floor and surveyed the set-up. Her dolls were piled in a heap on an old plastic serving tray her mother had given her, and she had arranged her racing cars in the form of a flower directly opposite the tray. The cars looked like humped metallic insects waiting for something exciting to happen. Something exciting *would* happen. World Creation. She picked out two of the dolls, laid them out before her, stripped off their clothes and pushed them down, squashing the soft plastic of their tummies.

'You are now part of the earth,' she said. Then she scabbled them up out of the soil, blew on them two times each. 'Out of thin air,' she said. 'Man and woman.' They began to stir and come to life, pushing their limbs out, yawning excitedly. Then the girl doll walked over to the racing cars/insects and woke them up with a wave of her hand. But next to the racing cars was a flying spindle that sprung up and pricked the girl doll's palms.

'Help,' said the girl doll weakly, 'I'm bleeding.'

'We will have to hang you up on the cross,' said the boy doll.
'You are a sacrifice. Sorry.'

'I don't think so,' said the girl doll.

'It doesn't matter what you *think*,' said the boy doll.

The girl doll whistled and a silver pony came galloping in from the hinterlands.

'We have not yet created ponies,' said the boy doll.

'I don't care,' said the girl doll, and when she touched the pony with her palms her wounds healed and the pony whispered he would hide her at the top of the CN Tower.

'Goodbye!' called the girl doll.

'You can't leave,' said the boy doll.

'You better believe I can,' said the girl doll.

Then the boy doll got very angry and said he would punch her in the vagina.

'BE QUIET OR I WILL PUNCH YOU IN THE VAGINA!' Brianna shouted.

And then there was Frances, her face gathering force in the doorway like a thundercloud. '*What* did you say?'

'Sorry,' said Brianna, because sometimes saying sorry got people to stay quiet and smile with their lips closed.

'Well,' said Frances. 'Watch your tongue.' She picked up one of the racing cars and turned it over carefully in her hand. Then she looked at her watch. 'Where's that sister of yours?'

Alana

Alana took her sister Brianna to the park, their fingers interlaced in a kind of lock.

'We're trying the big-kid swings today, whether you like it or not.'

'Not,' said Brianna, and Alana looked at her, impressed, but still hoisted her up onto the black rubber band and gave a tiny push.

'Too scary,' Brianna whispered, her voice stolen by the sensation of so much wind whooshing around her midsection.

‘Okay,’ said Alana. ‘Corkscrew, then.’ She began to twist the chains of the swings together. Brianna was silent, holding on.

Alana looked around. Where this afternoon there had been only fall – trees all lacy with leaves, the night creeping in with the cold, Zoe shifting from foot to foot in her miniskirt, cursing September – there was now something else. He would come, she thought. It was like fate, or, again, a movie. Or he would not come, but only because his mother was sick, or he’d been hit by a car. Then she would help him, be his one and only helper. They would maybe go on a trip together – somewhere with a desert and strange mounded homes. But then she remembered his hand on her skin. She was not skinny. If he’d noticed? Put a little pressure on the pudginess there?

Brianna looked small, all wound up in there. It didn’t seem so long ago she was a baby, feet curled into themselves like little crullers. She was so easy to love then. There was something about smallness. Even today in homeroom Alana had slipped into a daze at the sight of Zoe’s box of mini butterfly clamps. She found she could not stop staring into their tiny, shiny maws, flapping their metal wings back and forth, squeezing to feel the built-in resistance. What it did – playing with small things – was make you feel like a god.

‘Ready, Freddy?’

‘Not Freddy,’ Brianna mumbled, hunched over under the chains.

‘I’m letting go.’

“Kay.”

It was always super slow, the initial unwinding, then there was a moment where the momentum took over, and, voila!, you were out of it, free, listing lazily in the other direction. Brianna looked like she might puke.

‘Again,’ she said.

Alana began to twist, but then she noticed something at the periphery. A flash of red near the fence, rounding the corner. She turned her head quickly to make sure.

‘Don’t stop twisting,’ Lana.’

‘Rocket-pod time, Brianna. One small step for man, a giant step for girls like you.’ Alana grabbed Brianna under the arms so she had no choice but to cling like an orangutan.

‘I need you to stay here, in the pod, and be on lookout duty.’ Alana had secured her inside the bars of the small dome. Brianna was sitting with her knees drawn up, face blanched. ‘Don’t be scared. Maybe one day you’ll be an astronaut. You could be that, you know. You could be anything in the world.’

‘Not an armadillo,’ said Brianna, and Alana knew she was off the hook.

‘See you later, armadillo.’

Jordan was right there, near the swings, fiddling with an unlit cigarette, waiting for her. He looked good, better than before, away from the street, away from the others. She had forgotten how tall he was, how his hazel eyes darted and understood.

‘Can we go somewhere to talk?’ he said, and Alana was amazed. She showed him how to scale the aluminum siding that bordered the car lot and they wandered amidst the cars, thumping them insolently with their open hands. On the border between the car lot and the parking lot someone had planted some overgrown shrubbery and two spindly trees and dragged a small picnic table into the patchy shade. When they sat down, the picnic table rocked over the uneven ground like a tugboat. They kissed. Jordan pushed his hand under Alana’s shirt, and she let him. He kissed her neck behind her ear, and slid his fingers under her thin bra. Alana felt worried. How to reciprocate? Under his shirt was flat and uninteresting. He pushed her hand downwards. She unzipped.

They kissed and kissed, slackening their jaws, using tongues. Then Jordan bent her head so she could see exactly what he had below. She kneeled on the ground in front of him. There was a Mars bar wrapper under the picnic table, and some pine needles, which was peculiar, since there were no pines nearby. Jordan took off his jacket, then draped it over Alana’s head and shoulders and

his poked-out penis. It was the beginnings of a puppet show. His T-shirt was bunched up under his arms. Above Jordan's belt were two long muscular indents, as if he were made of smooth clay and someone had picked him up carefully by his hip bones. The indents ran on either side of a trail of small black downy hairs. But Alana could not see where the hair led; the trail was obscured by white boxers that puffed out of the fly of his jeans like Kleenex. She touched one of the indents with her fingers and her heart began to beat between her legs. The skin was so soft and tight! Jordan made a sound, and Alana understood. She put her lips around his penis, then worked them down so that her mouth was full. She did this several times – up and down, trying not to let her teeth get in the way. Jordan placed his hand on her head and made another sound that was almost a word. Jordan's whole body shook. Alana gagged, then swallowed.

Then it was over, and the thing itself – the lovely indents, her migratory heart and the almost-word – was gone, shoved down into the deepest drawer of her self, but Alana had already trapped and tidied the *story* of it in her head thousands of times. There was an unstated currency in these happenings; the value would be in the timing of the revelation, the payoff would be in the exact spin she put on the thing.

Susanna

In order to find all the pertinent information, Susanna knew it would be necessary to return to the scene of the crime. 'The Return,' she said to Sunny, who licked her wrist. She decided to take the dog with her for protection. It could be the murderer had an accomplice, lurking. She gathered some supplies: a magnifying glass from her science set, a plastic bag to collect evidence, an apple for provisions, another plastic bag for Sunny's poop. Then she hooked the dog on to his leash, closed and locked the front door with her key, and began to walk up the street, stopping

to let Sunny sniff and snoop in other people's gardens. Susanna recognized the shape of each fading flower bed, the particular means the cracks in the sidewalk had for accommodating crabgrass and dandelions.

It was strange how well she knew her way around here, how everything came to her automatically, like her heart knowing how to pump, and when. It was a kind of memory, she thought, like the monarch's. Monarchs, who flitted around in the backyard in August, settling on blossoms to feed, then swooping and flirting. They were better than a whole circus. But this was not the most amazing thing. When it was time – how did they know? – the whole lot of them began a journey south, across the border, through the States, alighting on a few hilltops in Mexico. There, masses of them bent tree boughs with their weight. It took a long time, months, for them to get there, surfing updrafts of warm air, but if they got tired and died, it didn't matter, their sons and daughters had the maps in their minds' eyes; it was a memory that was inherited. Susanna has seen pictures of them clustered around Mexican tree trunks. This was all it took – one giant flapping, delicate creature – to prove how very little we know of the world. And if whole troops of scientists could not solve the mystery of the monarch, how could Susanna discover the depths of a stranger's soul?

What would ever make you so angry you'd want to kill your very own mother? 'Your own flesh and blood!' she said, then pinched some skin on her forearm to reinforce the idea. Monarchs could avoid most predators because of a poison in their bodies that birds and frogs, animals with backbones, could not stomach – cardiac glycosides. People were not always so lucky.

Sunny began to pull at his leash. *Squirrels*, he barked. They had reached the park's outer edge, and he wanted to run. But Susanna had other plans. 'C'mon, Sunny,' she said, 'we're going to check out the makeshift grave.' She tugged him gently. But then something stopped her; when she considered the grave, the thud as the body

fell, all her objectivity was supplanted by a terrible billowing sensation in her chest. It was as if her breath had lost its way, as though everything her body ever knew had evaporated. She cut through the parking lot and spotted an old picnic table next to some bushes. 'I think we need to sit down,' she said to Sunny, who didn't agree, but was beholden. Seated, she bent over and put her head between her knees. Under the bench was a Mars bar wrapper and some pine needles, which was peculiar, since there were no pine trees nearby. Susanna sighed. Then she noticed one of the pine needles was moving. An ant was carrying it! The source of the pine needles was metres away, but the ants were determined to make a nest here, under the table. Incredible!

She remembered something then, from the day in question, although it would not be worth any reward. It was her mother's voice. (Then the three of them *had* been at the park. Curious!)

'BriannaSusannaAlana!' her mother had called. 'Don't make me send your father up there!'

Why not, Susanna wondered, and it was a credit to her innocence and her father's oblivious, kindly nature that she honestly could not imagine the answer to this question.

Brianna

Brianna opened and closed her eyes rapidly, and swivelled her head around. This was called Taking Snapshots. In this way she didn't have to see it all – the whole world – at once. She was very frightened. There was no climbing down from the pod. When she looked down at the patch of gravelly ground below, she realized what had happened. The pony had succeeded. But where was he now?

'Tallest free-standing structure in the world,' she said wistfully. It was likely she would be here for a few days, with no food or water, and wild animals pawing at the dirt, their teeth aglow. She didn't mind raccoons so much, but squirrels were dishonest, and

there were certain birds whose long beaks made their eyes appear smaller, like cruel glass beads. Maybe she could escape. What was it Alana had said? *You could be anything in the world.* She let go of the bar nearest her and extended one of her arms out, into the atmosphere. It was not so bad. She brought her arm in again, then dangled one leg down, swung it back and forth. But the actual means of escape confounded her; there was too much space between her body and the ground, too much room for disaster.

She felt cold and hungry. She wanted her mother. She wriggled around and felt in her coat pocket. There were some crispy bits of something! Chips? No, old tangerine rinds dried to hard shards. She took them out, sniffed them, then placed them in her mouth experimentally. She would put the moisture back in with her tongue. But it didn't work at all. It was a bit like the sign for the store called the Bay at the mall, with its large, strange symbol that meant B, but looked nothing like a B at all. Why did they have to do that? Make the connections so odd and tattered? She hated the not-B of the Bay with all her heart. She concentrated on this – hating the B – until there was a noise from overhead, flapping and throat-clearing. A crow landed over near the slide. It had come to keep her company. Or to peck at her head. Brianna began to search for her sisters.

There they were – up near the apartment building, talking to a man with a shovel. Alana seemed to be yelling, and the man was bowing his head. Alana was getting the man in trouble! Or maybe the man was saying a prayer. 'Our father,' said Brianna, 'who art in heaven, howled be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.' What was it like in heaven? Lime popsicles, Brianna thought. Kind-hearted wolves and old men with moustaches who were gods and angels. A few ladies with big skirts and kittens. All of them floating around howling and humming the songs that were the earth people's lives. And if they stopped humming? Thy will be done. She held tightly to the bars.

Whoopsy-daisy, she thought, and the world wrestled her down.

It was the first time she had woken from an absence by herself, without the wild-eyed faces – of her parents, her sisters, Frances – glistening down at her. She was completely alone, up in the rocket pod, and she had come back. It came as a swift, welcome shock to her that she could do it; she could exist without them.

Down on the ground, the crow was showing off, walking in wide circles around a pile of twigs and dog poo. Brianna could hear her mother striding up the street, calling out. She would be rescued soon. She realized she didn't want to be rescued. *Brianna*, her father once said to her, *you're the kind of girl who Turns on a Dime, aren't you?* She wasn't sure what he meant, but she thought she was doing it now, Turning on a Dime.

All of a sudden something occurred to Brianna: a historical person from a poster at school. She liked the sound of the name; it reminded her of someone old-fashioned, raw-faced and strong, a washerwoman from a fairy tale.

'Nellie McClung,' she said to the crow, who cocked its head as if irked, 'the first woman to get the vote.'

Alana

Jordan reached into his backpack and pulled out a bottle of water.

'Want?' he said, after he'd swigged some.

She nodded, lifted the bottle to her lips and felt traces of his very self slide down her throat as she rinsed her mouth clean. There seemed very little left to do. Still, Jordan picked up her hand, released it onto the bench, then placed his own hand overtop of it.

'Your hand's so small,' he said.

Alana looked for her hand and could not find it, so she looked out into the evening, which was darkening, the whole sky shuddering with reds. Then she looked for her sisters.

Brianna was still sequestered in the rocket pod, and now she could see her other sister, talking to a man with a shovel, a

gardener maybe, over near the apartment building. Would it always be like this, the three of them linked like points of light in a lopsided constellation? Susanna was laughing at something the man had said, and he was leaning down to pat her shoulder, like they were in cahoots. That was the last thing Alana needed, for her sister to hook up with some old pervert in a granddad sweater. When they were younger they had played a game called Disappear, designed so that Alana could get some peace. But it was not long before Susanna and Brianna caught on, came blundering in to whatever cocoon Alana had spun for herself, casting off their small squeals and powdery smells, convinced they had won something fantastic. It struck Alana that, of the three of them, she was the only one who truly understood the way things were, and she was overcome by an arrogant upswell of love for her sisters.

Jordan had removed his hand from hers to root around in his knapsack. He hooked a wire and plugged up the ear closest to her, then held up the other earphone by its lead so it swayed in the air between them. 'Want?' he said again.

'Sure.' They sat there listening. Traffic surging and surrendering up on the main street, Drake doing his thing, Canada geese honking their way to some sunshiny shore. Alana felt something like happiness, but rougher. She could not be happy; she was alive, with tomorrows prickling up the back of her neck. On the hill, Susanna was still talking to the man with the shovel. She had pulled a notebook from her bag and was showing him something. Jesus, *her homework?* Alana could hear her mother's voice soaring through the twilight.

'Who's that?' said Jordan, jerking the earphones away. 'Holy shit. That's not your mother, is it? God, how old *are* you, anyway? She's not coming up here, is she?'

Alana shrugged. *Of course.* But she knew this first call was only a warning; there would be others, there were always others.

'Fuck, bitch, are you even, like, listening to me?'

Alana stood up on the picnic table to get a better view of Susanna's pervert. He was bending down, gesturing towards something bunched at his feet. It was a bag of dry leaves. No, a sleeping bag made of plastic. He pulled the bag closer to where Susanna was standing. The bag was heavy – there must be rocks or tools inside. Or a body. Then the man tried to show Susanna what was in the bag, and it could be that Susanna *saw*.

'I'm outta here,' Jordan said, and shouldered his knapsack. And Alana ran. She zipped like a cursor between a row of gleaming parked cars, skirted the apartment building, came up over the crest of the lawn and lunged for Susanna. She pulled her away from the man, down the street towards home. When she was sure they were safe, she stopped and clamped her sister's head hard into her soft tummy, saying, 'It's okay.' And, 'You're *okay*.' What Alana meant by this was something akin to what her father told her when she used to regale him with her schoolgirl sorrows and grazed knees, before she started curling her eyelashes and carrying tampons like switchblades in her back pocket. What she meant by this was: Buck Up, Kid. This Is Only the Beginning.

About the Author



Heather Birrell is the author of the previous story collection *I know you are but what am I?* (Coach House, 2004). Her work has been honoured with the Journey Prize for short fiction and the Edna Staebler Award for creative non-fiction, and has been short-listed for both National and Western Magazine Awards. Birrell's stories have appeared in many North American journals and anthologies, including *The New Quarterly* and *Toronto Noir*. She lives with her husband and two daughters in Toronto, where she teaches high school English.