

ОДИН

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It's been dark in the stairway for a few lifetimes. Light bulbs need changing, but everyone thinks someone else is going to do it. Eventually everyone just forgets that it's dark.

You sort of remember, only in winter, when you're tying your laces and trying not to fall.

Roxane has always had trouble with her laces. Two rabbit ears, that's what they say. But rabbit ears don't look like that.

Anyway, one day she's going to have boots and then fuck you, rabbits. Roxane yanks her toque down on her head.

The pigeons are cooing in the ceiling. Roxane stops to listen.

If she were taller, she could peek between the boards to look at them. They must be settled in nicely, huddled together so they don't freeze. The dad, the mom, and the babies, all huddled up.

'Hi!'

Kevin's little voice. He's the neighbour in 62. When he talks, he flings his words. It's like they are going too fast for him, like they come out of his mouth and take off running. He's like that too. Uncontained. Right now he's trying to get his key in the lock, but he's so jumpy that it goes every which way but in the keyhole. Roxane watches him. There, it's in.

'Bye!'

He tears down the stairs.

He must be going to a match. He's been going to more ever since his mom took off. His father is Big, and Big always wins. Kevin wants to be like his father. He wants to win.

Roxane holds the handrail so she doesn't fall. She goes down slowly, looking at her feet.

On the next floor down, Mélissa throws opens the door to 58. Her bangs hide her eyes. It's as if she would rather stay hidden. The bangs are a compromise: I'm going, but you won't see my face.

Today is judgment day.

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Mélissa.

A virtually empty hearing room. Beige walls, brown benches. Wordless whispers in the air. Background noise with no substance, no personality. It's like everyone has worked hard to make it feel dead. Like they left life outside the door, waiting for this to pass: inside, it's just too rough to take.

From behind her bangs, Mélissa's eyes scan the few faces that have come to hear the decision. She doesn't know them. She can't grab on to any of them, even with just her eyes, even through her hair. There's her mother. But she's sitting at the other end.

Weathered. Even skinnier than last time. High as a kite.

She sits on the other side of the hearing room, hunched, shrunken. Her whole body says, 'Don't do this to me.' But Mélissa is the only one who hears it. Even though she is far away. She hears it. Because even hunched, even fucked up to her core, Meg is her mother. That's what the people here don't understand. Meg is her mother, no matter what.

It's probably just too simple.

Mélissa knows they put Meg at the other end on purpose so she can't grab her, hold on to her with her eyes, hold her tight.

Mélissa at one end, Meg at the other. Daughter, mother.

A few weary faces that feed on the decisions like a bad soap opera.

A tired judge takes three sentences to say that they won't be seeing each other anymore.

'Madame, you need to maintain a distance of fifty metres from your daughter until we have proof of your rehabilitation.'

Other empty words are threaded on the necklace, while Meg and Mélissa vanish a little more.

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Kevin.

A church basement. Showy lights, strobe flashes, heavy metal.

Behind the smoke, a rough-looking crowd. Children, adults, excitement peaking.

'LET'S GO, BIG! KILL 'IM! KILL 'IM!'

In the middle of the room, a ring. Two wrestlers face to face, dressed in bright colours, faces distorted by grimaces and makeup.

In the crowd, Kevin, eyes glued to the match.

Smaller than the others, gets jostled but stays riveted to the ring, spellbound.

He gnaws on his lips, nervous.

The larger of the two wrestlers sends his adversary bouncing off the ropes, grabs him, throws him to the mat, jumps on him. The crowd goes wild. *Ding ding ding*. Big is declared the winner. The other guy is lying knocked out on the mat.

Kevin jumps for joy. 'Yesssssss!'

The winner, in a red cape, salutes the crowd in triumph. Shines under the white light.

'BIG! BIG! BIG!'

Kevin chants along with the crowd: 'BIG! BIG! BIG!'

His dad won again. When his dad wins, Kevin wins.

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Roxane.

Gets off the metro at Georges-Vanier. The Salvation Army is right across the street. She goes there often; she knows everyone there. The guys like her. They all say Marc is lucky to have a daughter like her.

'You're lucky, Marc. That's one special daughter you've got there.'

Roxane goes often. Not just because it's the only place in the world she's special. But because her father's been there a few months. Now he's done. Tonight he gets his certificate. That means he's won. He's

still going to stay there until he finds a job and to make sure he won't backslide, but he's done, he's won, he's gone through all the steps. He's stopped drinking.

It's the fourth time he's dried out. The other times he fell off the wagon; he faltered. But the fourth time's the charm.

Roxane walks through the wall of smokers at the entrance. 'Hey, Louis. Hey, Pascal. Hey, Charles.' She goes inside. She feels good here. Everyone talks to her. Everyone thinks she's the best daughter in the world.

Her father is on the other side of the room, in a corner. Looks nervous.

The room is decorated with garland and lights. They're handing out free Cokes and coffee as you come in. Christmas is coming.

Her father got spruced up. Put on a blue shirt tucked into his pants. Slicked back his grey hair. Looks tired, his face weathered.

He spots her from across the room. Walks toward her. Long, unsteady strides. As if he might fall off his feet.

She's all he has left. You don't walk the same when you're walking toward the only thing you have left. He reaches her, finally, as if reaching the other side of the world.

'Hey.'

'Hey, Dad.'

Around them are others. Warriors. Some at the end of the battle, proud and restless. Others still making their first forays, a halo of alcohol as their shield.

Roxane takes her father's large hand in hers. They go sit on one of the benches set up in a row. At the front of the room, a mic and a Christmas tree the guys have trimmed. A few Christmas lights blink tentatively.

A man takes the mic. He is tall and pale, with all the panache of a basement in winter. His voice reverberates through the room.

'Tonight, we're going to celebrate winners. Big winners. For the new guys in the room, for those of you who are struggling and think you won't make it, the twelve guys you're about to see thought the same thing when they got here.'