JEANNE HÉBUTERNE AND THE OUTSIDE DOG

Mid-August. Tina is sitting in the backseat of a police car. Calisto is standing on the pavement in a red stained t-shirt. Headlights are illuminating the shoulder of the road. An officer is opening a trunk. Bruno was right, Tina thinks, everything I touch just turns to shit. The insides of these car doors have no handles. They’re metal and primeval. They’re like prosthetic doors, thinks Tina, nauseated. It shocks her to think that these doors have been driving around town all this time.

The officer returns to his car with his notepad. He starts the engine and puts a plastic nozzle to Tina’s lips. “Breathe deep, Miss Goosechuk,” he says, “blow into this.” She holds the nozzle in her mouth, takes a shallow breath, and passes the test.

The officer coughs and the cords on his neck tighten. “Do it again, take a deeper breath, empty your lungs this time.” He hands the hose back. He turns forward in his seat, so he’s facing away from Tina. “I think you’re playing both of them.”

“What happens if I fail?”

“You’ll only fail if you deserve to fail, so I wouldn’t worry about it” he says.

Tina breathes steams the tube. Somehow she passes again. They both believe she tricked the machine. “Do it again,” he says. She breathes in, exhales, and pictures her lungs rolling up into the neatest packages, like sleeping bags at the end of a camping trip. She imagines cleaning up every mess the way that she wishes she could. She passes the test. We don’t always get what we deserve, and now that unfair law works in Tina’s favour.

Three months earlier. One week into asparagus season and Calisto has charmed his way from grunt picker to tractor driver, meaning he no longer lies, belly down, facing backwards, on a flatbed trailer. He no longer snaps off the green stems as they sweep
by, flipping, over and over, like the final flourish of an old home movie when the film slips off the reel.

Tina’s boyfriend Bruno Herzog, however, hangs onto his grunt status in the asparagus fields. The amazing thing about Bruno Herzog’s face is that people everywhere are compelled to stare at it. His hair is bleached with peroxide at the tips, and his eyes are the colour of a Siamese cat’s. He makes people feel like they’re standing with their back toward the edge of a cliff. Calisto isn’t like this. Calisto understands how to smile at people and nod.

Tina first meets Calisto at the hostel, where she is whipping up lattes and espressos, checking in French kids and the wobbly few, who’ve come by bicycle from Calgary, through the disconsolate plains of Fort MacLeod, through the Rockies and the mass grave at Frank’s Slide. Tina is working a warm hello. She’s a quick stop on route to Vancouver. She’s a stopover in a tacky valley town of fruit stands and August cherries (there’s always room here).

Calisto del Pilar comes into the hostel, asking if he can wash his clothes. Calisto has a face of many well-coordinated triangles, like an icon or a panther. He was raised by nuns who christened him monkey-boy because he could shimmy up anything. Calisto got scratched up while catching a bright orange bat. He killed the bat with his bare hands, and the nuns preserved it in formaldehyde, displayed it in the orphanage chapel. Scouted at seventeen, while kicking the ball in a neighborhood game, Calisto got married and had two girls, divorced, left Mexico, skipped the US and came straight to Super Natural BC via Montreal. While his clothes spin in the drier, Calisto lightly bites Tina’s bottom lip.

Just then, Tina’s boss Isabella Eyre walks in.

When Tina was a girl, she thought coyotes were not dog-like, but tormented streamers, rolled knee-high in ditches with the tips of their tongues licking at the darkness. She’d lie in bed, putting her back against the wall to protect herself from
the chaos, from what she thought were scrolls of flat crepe paper, unraveling toward the outside edge of the sky, frantic screams like sirens saying somebody might be dying. Sometimes she would try to picture them in the daylight, laying low in the ditches and rolling into the woods, but she knew they were too powerfully singular for anyone to look at directly. In this way, Tina makes a strange connection between Isabella and coyotes.

“Marty and I are going to the river,” Isabella says. “Why don’t you both come with us?”

Marty the Mountain Man has been staying at the hostel for a few weeks. He collects driftwood in exchange for rent. He looks just like Brad Pitt in Legends of the Fall, Isabella likes to insist, but Tina think he looks more like a hillbilly John the Baptist.

Isabella turns off the espresso machine. “We’ll just close up for an hour.” Isabella sees a quality of light and colour that nobody else can see, something that might look like a Modigliani painting before it dries.

The Mountain Man is the only one senseless enough to get in the river. He stands chest deep in the current, hair fanning out over the surface, blond beard dripping, eyes tinting the water around him.

Isabella sits on a rock. Lets her toes stir the surface. “It’s really too early in the season,” she says. Her spine curves forward out of her blouse, and her neck stretches over the river. With her auburn hair and the unusual length of her bones, she looks like Jeanne Hébuterne. “The water’s too cold,” she says sadly, “but it makes me happy just being down here.”

“Es pinche frio,” says Calisto, dunking one foot and dramatically jumping back. “You first, mamacita, okay?”

The river reminds Tina of her parents, those unhappy teachers, floating feet-first downstream, in their neon shoes from the dollar store. Those distant people
with a taste for craft beer. She pictures them in their studies, reading and slouching into their thoughts, pathetically searching, but searching for what?

Tina tells Bruno about the dog. They’re in her cabin, drinking stovetop espresso with steamed half and half.

“I want to keep him,” she says.

“He might not be yours, though,” he says “You know how it is in the country. Dogs wander.”

“He’s not an ordinary dog, though.”

“How different can a dog be?”

“He’s an intense feeling. I guess you could call him an outside dog. I’m not sure if see him exactly, but he stands out like he’s in a viewfinder, like he’s outside the limit of all other dogs. He’s totally wrapped up in his nose and paws, glistening and sniffing in the light wind when we’re at the river. I’m not sure, but I’m not like that. I’m always shrinking, or being reduced to some ugly part of myself.”

“Sometimes women are so neurotic.” Bruno smiles at Tina as he says this, as if being neurotic is the most adorable thing in the world, as if it’s the best that women are capable of.

From May to August. On Blossom Festival weekend, the town pools around the parade on Main Street. The cherry trees turn pink. The asparagus fields are down to fibrous culls, that early season nearly over. Near the fields, just west of town, a few remaining pickers are in the bleak camp kitchen, canning what can’t be shipped to Japan or sold fresh.

Tina kisses Calisto while Bruno waits in her living room. Bruno stretches out on her couch, dirty plate on the floor, Tina’s share crusting to the pots on the stove. Tina should be thinking of Bruno, should be telling Calisto that—in the morning—
her boyfriend will be working these fields with him. Instead, she looks out into the dark and called him her ex.

“That guy looks like a bum,” Calisto observes, and that openhearted dismissal cuts into Tina’s conscience a little. The Kootenay is pretty and grey, and Calisto’s tent is damp. Days click fast: work, the fields, Tina’s cabin in Arrow Creek. Calisto says, “Me gusta tu gusto,” admiring Tina’s bra. He calls her flaquita, corazon, his pinche. The black fields don’t seem to grow anything, but there’s asparagus there, if you look closely enough.

Once all of asparagus has been picked and shipped and canned, the cherry season opens four hours away in the B.C. desert. In late July, cherry season comes to the Kootenays. People are climbing onto ladders in the morning fog. There are fleur-de-lis license plates on main street and broken bottles in the river rocks.

At Goat River, under the Canyon bridge, in the glare of the sun, Tina sits on the far bank. She can see Bruno fighting to cross the current, crawling to shore, and dripping a radiance of water and light beside her.

“Let’s hold hands and jump in off this rock,” he says, shivering. “Come on, baby. Let’s prove our love.” The dog is there, glistening and sniffing.

Tina looks across to the other shore, where the old asparagus crowd gathers for the cherry season, the boys from Mexico and Cameroon. “I’m just warming up,” she says. “Let’s wait here for a while.”

“No come on, Tina.” Green veins are visible on Bruno’s white skin.

They climb up the cliff face and edge out onto a rocky precipice, while the dog goes crazy, barking—excessive, almost unbearable barking. So loud it confuses her.

Bruno jumps first, and the dog slips, ripping its claws down the rock-cliff. Tina screams. She leaps in, screaming.
Hitting the water is always astoundingly abrupt. In the dark-green cold, Bruno’s hand seems to slip briefly into hers. They surface and gasp.

“What the hell were you screaming for?” He yells.

“I thought the dog fell in.”

On the shore, a man is getting ready to fish. They watch him get ready. He sits on a bolder on the shore, arranges his nearly-invisible nylon line, his glittering lures.

“Will you get off of this?”

“It was just so weird. I’m sorry, but I thought he might go over the rapids.”

“And what would happen if an imaginary dog went over the rapids?”

“He’s not imaginary.”

“Well, I can’t see him, Tina, and as far as I know neither can anyone else.”

“Do you know lies beyond any limit? The outside of that limit of what we already know. Do you follow? The outside dogs.”

“We’re you always kind of crazy, or did you just get this way recently?”

The man stands with his metallic hook on the end of his shimmering line. He stands near the dog. They slowly walk out of the river, and Tina’s skin seizes in the wind, dries in the sun.

“I was engaged last year,” the man with the fishing rod says, casting. “But the bitch went to bed with a French. Fucking French. They’re all sluts, and the Mexicans aren’t much better.” This gets Bruno’s attention.

“Come on,” says Tina. “I’ve got to get to work.”

While Tina is washing towels and stretching fitted sheets over thin mattresses at the hostel, Bruno Herzog lets himself into her cabin. He opens her fridge and finds a bottle of coke and a package of smoked sausages. Just the sight of the sausages infuriates him. He takes the food outside and pitches it into the fire pit, along with the pack of cigarettes he finds on the table. With the east wind pitching rain at his
back, Bruno shatters a kerosene lamp against the rock-edge of the fire-pit. There’s a flare, but the flames struggle. Rain blows back in Bruno’s face with smells of melted plastic and burned beans. He wonders if the fire ban is still on, wonders if the Ktunaxa people, first humans in this crying marsh, would have burned the Blackfoots’ hairpipe breastplates in pathetic fires like his. The smell of sausages makes him want to throw up.

Inside the house, he finds a felt pen and begins to leave a message on the wall, just in case there was any confusion over the burned clothes. Calisto opens the door and finds Bruno writing his message. They scratch each other with flying hands. Bruno jabs at bone and bruises his fist. Calisto goes low with shoulder in the gut. They plunge into the couch and it snaps like perfect kindling. Calisto is bleeding from the nose. He’s on his ribs, dialing 911. He’s breathing into the receiver. Bruno steps on his wrist and pulls the phone from the wall. Calisto speaks.

“How can anyone be so stupid?” Bruno yells. “The fucking thing is unplugged.”

Bruno’s truck is smoking black air, a low-rider leaving the scene.

Calisto stares down at the mess in the backyard fire pit: scattered pack of Player’s Light, coffee beans, smokies, surreal bottle of coke, frijoles de la olla, his corduroys, backpack, and passport. Then, the police arrive to poke around in the spent fire.

It’s almost dark when Tina walks into the yard. She hooks the cords by the back belt loop, holds them up against a silhouette of mountains. “These can be salvaged,” she says, though she suspects this isn’t true. “With a wash, I think I can fix these up.” Calisto kicks the wet ashes, chinga tu puta madre, etc. The limp cigarettes fly up, giving Tina a hollow, cancerous feeling. Pinche Tina, pinche mamacita. Am I your pinche?

“Es tu culpa, mami,” Calisto says, settling down, letting his shoulders slope.
When Tina drives Calisto home that night she knows that Calisto has a point. It’s her fault that everything went too far, and she wishes she could take it all back. They’re driving a little too fast on Arrow Creek Road. A siren sounds behind them.

The next day, Bruno Herzog is packing up his trailer. He has a friend in Kamloops. He thinks maybe he’ll go there for a while. Pick apples. He calls the hostel and asks for Tina.

“What are you doing?” She asks Bruno.

“Dissembling,” he says. She pictures him haphazardly piling his worn-out clothes and circuit boards into boxes and garbage bags. “Hang up the phone, Tina,” he says, with a sad voice. But she waits for him to speak again. “We made the paper,” he finally says.

She knows this. She’s already clipped out the court doc. “Call it a battle of broken hearts when two women show up to a Canyon Street address for a date with the same man.”

“They really screwed it up,” He says.

Tina doesn’t hang up, but Bruno’s voice is disappearing. Bruno’s face also. His face is the face drawn in the sand between two tides, or the face lost in the past of this place. Before David Thompson, before the hydroelectric dam, before sensuous asparagus and provocative cherries, this valley hid under a massive swamp. It hid under wetlands and whooping cranes.

This crying marsh has been here the whole time. She was raised by this marsh, brought up by it, not diminished by distracted parents or her petty crimes but grown here, by the green river, oscillating by the water in the light wind.