

# OUR LADY OF VICTORY

By Matthew Fox

The letter was dated two weeks ago, February 12, 1993, and was printed on paper with ceremonial heft. Tina could tell it wasn't fresh. It had been concealed from her somewhere; there were creases throughout. A drop of mercury would have to run zig-zags to find its way from top to bottom, moving along the crumples, but inexorably down, off the page, to the rubber floor of the girls' locker room. Tina imagined the silvery droplet, its descent like her control, falling away.

“Dear Miss Marisol Cruz!” she read aloud to The Captain. “It is with great pleasure that I offer you admission to the University of Wisconsin-Madison Class of 1999, in the Department of Kinesiology!”

She stopped. Marisol's face was tenuous. Their teammates, other students at Our Lady of Victory High School, had gone and the locker room was empty. Noises amplified the silence.

Water dripped from the nozzles in the gang shower. On the other side of the wall, the Zamboni growled and sloshed its way around the hockey rink.

"You look terrified," Marisol said.

"Furthermore!" Tina read. "Lordy, Captain, there's a 'furthermore.'"

"I know!"

"*Furthermore*, I am delighted to inform you that the Athletics Department, along with the Department of Kinesiology, offer you an entrance scholarship in the amount of \$45,000."

"That's a lot."

"It's a full ride!" Tina said. "They're 'delighted.'"

Of course they were delighted, Tina thought. The team was 8 and 0 this season.

Victory was right there in the name of the school. The players felt blessed by this, Tina especially. Her brutality was sanctioned by a higher power, and made opposing players edgy. They had to keep a slice of their awareness on Tina's position.

The Hornets had become experts at gliding through that slice, using the spare seconds to slap the puck ahead of their opponents' attention. The puck was usually destined for The Captain. That's what the team called Marisol because that's what she was. She had speed, precision, a "C" on her jersey. If Tina was the enforcer, The Captain was the goal-maker.

Tina hadn't fallen for The Captain, though. She'd fallen for Marisol, the tall, ropey, nervous Filipino girl who fretted in English class, who hadn't been able to tell Sister Fran why Daisy's dock-light was green. "Can't it just be a light? That's green?" she'd said. Marisol's talent wasn't in literature, it was in numbers. She got algebra, got biology. She was as meticulous on graph paper as she was on the ice, zipping through calculus equations, eyes scanning rows of symbols. "Cripes, Rain Man, show your work," Tina would say, and Marisol went back to the top of the page to draw out the problem with crisp Xs and Ys, unravelling it for Tina with patient language.

"I'm so effing proud of you," Tina said. The Captain greeted this with a hopeful lift of her eyebrows. "And it's Wisconsin."

"Not my first choice."

"Maybe not, but com'on." Tina said, and listed the school's virtues. They had researched universities together, Tina

thinking ahead one year to when she would be applying. They'd both agreed University of Toronto was their first choice. The Captain would go this year, Tina the following September, and they'd be only an hour's drive away in the interim. Toronto had also accepted Marisol, but it wasn't the best. The best was Wisconsin. "It's not what we planned, but we'll make it work."

"You think?"

"How far away can it be, anyway?" It was a thousand kilometers away, Tina knew.

"Far," The Captain said. "Like, an eight-hour drive." Ten hours.

"I can buy a car."

"And learn to drive it?"

"Maybe Dad's ancient Oldsmobile."

Her father, Jacko, was in the Oldsmobile at that moment, sitting alone in the parking lot, listening to the CBC and waiting to drive the two of them home. Tina imagined herself in the driver's seat instead of him, barreling down the ribbon of highways connecting Fiona to Madison. She'd be alone in the car, surrounded by black trees, still unsure how to keep steady at these speeds—130, 140 km/h.

"I'll be there all the time," Tina said.

"Promise?"

“As often as I can.”

“How often can that be? I mean, with practices and everything.”

“Once a month.” Marisol’s eyes widened. “Maybe less, actually.”

“Jeez.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t ‘jeez’ me.”

“It’s just not that often.”

“Don’t go girly on me here.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t effing apologize.” Tina frowned. She’d learned to frown in millimeters. One millimeter was a warning; three presaged a weekend without phone calls; five pointed to full-blown anger, and would require days of apology. “You’re reminding me of my dad. Totally defeated—that lost Catholic look.”

“That’s unfair.”

“To you or to him?”

“To both.” Marisol rubbed a coat sleeve under her nose.

“Are you crying?”

“I promise I’m not.”

“Good. Zip up.”

“Yeah, your dad’s been waiting extra long.”

“He’s not why we’re leaving. We’re leaving because there’s nothing left to say. Unless you want to make a decision?”

“Am I supposed to decide now?”

“You do whatever you want, Captain.”

“Monthly?”

“Yeah.”

The Zamboni sighed, shut down. “OK, so, Toronto then? I guess?”

“You guess?”

“I guess I don’t know. I don’t know yet.” Marisol turned away from Tina’s screwed-up squint of impatience. “Is that OK?”

“It has to be OK if that’s how you feel.”

“Peck me? Before we go out?”

Tina did, on her cheek. She put her hands under Marisol’s parka and squeezed her above the hip. Marisol giggled at the cold and tickle.

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Tina needed a session with her grandmother. They did

them regularly, in Nonna's room off the landing, watched by the leaded glass birds trapped in the window. The space had an Ikea presswood highboy, a deep tub chair and a single bed with adjustable features Nonna never used. On the end table was a rosary box and teeth in a tumbler. A digital clock had massive green numbers—5:23 p.m.—so that Nonna could read the time with her trifocals off. She'd moved in with Tina's family four years ago, after a series of small strokes left her unable to care for herself. When she first saw her new bedroom, set up so sparsely, just for her, she said, "I'll die here." Tina's mother Bonnie started to cry, and said, "That's the general idea."

Within months, the stairs winded her. She had to climb them hand-over-hand, tendons straining over her knuckles as she clutched the banister. The sessions started around then, when Tina volunteered to help with Nonna's care. Tina clipped toenails, injected insulin, collected and disposed of urine pads. She combed the white wires of Nonna's hair, and plucked the errant ones that shot out of the corners of her mouth.

Now Nonna didn't leave the bed. She refused to see the doctor, and welcomed only the priest. She winced with unreported agonies, and had to be graduated to diapers after multiple soilings of the bed. Tina and Bonnie cleaned, but the smell lingered, combined with her medicinal ointments and

putrid breath. For their sessions together, Tina sat between the window and the bed with one arm resting alongside Nonna's body so that they could dig into each other's flesh to emphasize key points.

"He might leave, Nonna."

"Heh?"

"LEAVE! HE MIGHT LEAVE!"

"Arrrg," Nonna said. "Far?"

"VERY!"

"Toronto? Toronto's a dump."

"NO, WISCONSIN."

"Heh?"

"WISCONSIN!"

"Arrrg," Nonna said. "Get me the thing."

Tina took the hearing aid from the bedside table and clipped it into Nonna's ear. The old lady had been refusing the device for weeks, like her trifocals and her dentures. Asking for it was a kind of affection.

Nonna moved her unfocussed eyes to Tina, turning her head only slightly, but it caused a huge shift in the loose skin around her neck. The folds quaked, merged together into a deflated surface marbled with veins and dotted with mushroomy skin tags. Her face was sunken and slack, with

divots where her teeth should be. Each word she said required a sucking sound.

“Why would he go?”

“It’s a great opportunity,” Tina said. “For university.”

“There are universities everywhere. Down the road, there’s a university.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell him,” Tina pressed her fingers into Nonna’s forearm. “But this one, it’s better than the rest. It’s special.”

“Special,” Nonna said. “Why does everyone think they’re special all of a sudden? The women, the nancies—”

“I don’t know.”

“—and immigrants.”

“You were an immigrant.”

“And I wasn’t special, was I?”

“Of course you are,” Tina said. “And so is he.”

“Arrrg,” Nonna said. “What the hell’s matter with you, heh?”

“What the heck’s the matter with him, you mean.”

“No. You. You.” Now it was Nonna’s turn for emphasis, pressing dints into Tina’s forearm. “I tell you all the time. I told your mother. I told your aunts. Don’t let go. Don’t. Arrrg, nobody listens.”

“I’m trying to keep control. But there are other factors.” Tina details the scholarship, the benefits, the opportunity; the relinquishment, the loneliness, the long drive. “I don’t want to stand in his way.”

Nonna laugh-sucks in her empty mouth. “You’re already in his way. That’s where you oughta be.”

“But the guilt.”

“Guilt,” Nonna said. “Who is he? He’s just a man. He doesn’t know anything.”

“I told you, he’s special. He can think like a woman.”

Nonna gripped with all five fingers this time. “Then why would you want him at all?”

“I just do.” Tina looked into Nonna’s blank old eyes. “I just love him.”

“Love.” Nonna’s eyes re-found the ceiling. “Who cares? That’s not why people do things. Is he afraid?”

“I think so.”

“Good.”

“Good?”

“Good. Because that’s why people do things.”

“Is that why you do things?”

“I don’t do anything.”

They laughed at this.

“You laugh with me, you hear? Never with him.”

“Never?”

“Almost never,” she said. “It’s a reward. Shows weakness. Never laugh, never cry.”

They sat in the underlit silence, arms still touching. No weakness, Tina thought. Like on the ice.

“Can I ask you a question?” Tina said. “How did you keep Nonno?”

Nonna farted then, her trademark long, weak horn-blow ending in a bubbly sputter. She’d fallen asleep. Her grip was lax, her mouth hung open. Tina was left in the dim room, the rankness building around her, wondering if this was an answer to her question.

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Tina stood outside the nook of the guidance counsellor. Everyone at Our Lady of Victory High called it an office, but it wasn’t. The wee space had once been a janitor’s closet—a nub at the end of the hall where the drywall had been removed and replaced by glass to give it the illusion of space. Within the transparent box, Tina could see Mrs. Smythe smile-talking and Marisol looking nonplused. Young adults of every race grinned

down at Tina from posters next to the door, broadcasting enlightenment from distant educational utopias. They were surrounded by lush campuses and faux-Gothic buildings—what passed for august in Canada. How were they so unworried, the people in this multicultural horde?

There was shuffling, the scrape of chairs. The door swung open and Marisol stepped out hugging catalogues to her chest. Miss Smythe was right behind her, clutching her red pack of cigarettes.

“Miss O’Hara! Waiting for Miss Cruz, are you?”

“Yes ma’am.”

Marisol rested her chin on the catalogues, frowned down at Miss Smythe’s creased, unpolished loafers. Dull pennies stared out of them. Miss Smythe was in a man’s V-neck sweater—baby blue, wool, and too large for her frame—and a green pencil skirt. Her square face always had a brownish smile and shining eyes projecting helpfulness. Her voice was reassuring and deep from an adulthood of du Maurier Ultra Lights.

“Teammates stick together, I see,” Miss Smythe said.

“You all must be so proud of your Captain!”

“The team’s behind her, whatever she chooses.”

“It’s not much of a choice, is it, Miss Cruz?”

“I’m still not sure,” Marisol said.

“Jitters! What you’re feeling is so natural. But you’ll see.” She continued to Tina, “Already thinks she’ll be homesick. Tina here will set you straight!”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Work your magic!” Miss Smythe said. “After all, I might be having this same conversation with you in a year’s time.”

“You never know.”

“I have a feeling!” Miss Smythe placed her hand on Tina’s shoulder, a blessing with cigarettes, before striding away.

“Did you tell her?” Tina said.

“Of course not.”

“It sounds like she knows.”

Tina regarded the guidance counsellor with suspicion as she shrank down the hall and paused to talk to Sister Fran, the English teacher. Tina often found herself scanning women for traces of difference. Miss Smythe had a moderate reading. The Hornets made fun of her, joking that she watched them shower through a crack in the tile.

Sister Fran read as a normal. Normal and a virgin. She was among the women Tina pretended to be. Alone in her room, Tina imagined that she was as bird-boned and graceful as

Sister Fran, wearing a simple tunic and complicated make-up, cooing to the students to read *The Violent Bear It Away*.

What would it be like to be one of them? Even before she knew who they were, she wondered. When Tina was 14 and still babysitting, the curiosity was overwhelming. After she'd put the kids to bed, she'd rummage through their mothers' dresser drawers. She fondled vibrators, marveled at condoms. She'd put on the women's scarves and earrings, sit at their desks and mimic them. For five minutes, Tina was Ms. Chéhab, the manager of the funeral home; or the OB-GYN; or the housewife with too many perfumes. For five minutes, she wanted to know what it was like to be undifferent.

"Put your head up," Tina told Marisol. "You look ashamed and you shouldn't be ashamed. This is all good stuff. You got early acceptance everywhere."

"I know."

"You're a superstar. You heard Miss Smythe. It's a frigging celebration!"

"I know."

"So hold your head high."

Marisol lifted her head, but trained her eyes off Tina's face, towards the hall, and said, "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

“Why did you make me apply to so many schools?”

“So that you’d be in exactly this position.”

“I’d be happier if there was only one option.”

“That—wow!—that’s a terrible attitude.”

“Sorry. But it’d be easier. Let’s face it.” Marisol found it in herself to look Tina in the face. “It’s like when my dad died. It was hard, but there wasn’t treatment, and that made it easier. He had to go. And he did.”

“Maybe the decision is easier than you think?” Tina said. “Have you thought about what people in Wisconsin will say about people like you? Like us?”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell? Isn’t that what they do down there?”

Marisol attempted a laugh. Tina kept herself from joining her, saying, “They could eat you alive.”

“I don’t think they will. Miss Smythe said Madison is a pretty open place.”

“You did tell her, didn’t you?”

“No, of course not.”

“We have a deal.”

“I know.”

“Not a word until we’re both out of here.”

“I didn’t say a word, I swear.”

The bell rang. Streams of uniformed students poured into the hall.

“Peck me?” The Captain said. She always asked at the wrong moment, somewhere public, or before a game. At least she blushed. Tina loved when she did, because she always smiled at the same time to counteract her bashfulness. The smile was always wider on the left side and showed off the charming snaggle of her incisor.

“No,” Tina said and frowned three millimeters.

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Tina looked affronted by the fish pie. Jacko’s unique touch was to rake a fork across the mashed potato topping, so the lines browned along the peaks and stayed buttery in the valleys. It was a family favorite, taking pride of place in the center of the table flanked by an arugula salad and a platter of roasted asparagus. Tina’s brothers were already seated with Marisol. Gio, the 16-year old, was explaining universities to Danny, who was eight. Jacko was losing a battle with a wine cork.

Tina put her hands on her hips and said, “Are we really doing this?”

“Yes, it’s Friday,” Jacko said.

“After what just happened?”

“Especially after what just happened.”

“Then give me the bottle,” Tina said. She rescued the white Zinfandel from her father’s hands. “You always do it wrong.”

“If you say so, Tina,” Jacko said.

Bonnie entered with the priest. He’d been consoling her on the landing; she’d stopped crying now, but was raw-eyed and pale. Father Dupuis was sniffing the meal’s aromas with his veiny, purplish nose. His corpulence was responding to his breath—strain-lines forming and unforming around the buttons of his shirt. His white collar was nearly subsumed by his jowls.

“Bountiful spread!” he boomed. “What’s on the menu, then?”

“Dad’s Friday pie,” Danny said.

“It’s a pound of butter with cod and haddock,” Gio said.

“And salmon,” Dad said. “We have a great fish guy.”

“Fish on Fridays! Nice that some traditions don’t die, isn’t it?”

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Father?” Jacko said.

“If there’s enough—” Dupuis said.

“There may not be,” Tina said.

“I don’t have much of an appetite,” Bonnie said, indicating that Jacko should fill her glass with Zin. “Stay, Father. For you trouble.”

“Hardly any trouble! It’s in my job description, isn’t it?”

He had administered the last rites. Twenty minutes ago, the family was clustered around Nonna’s bed in the netherworld off the landing. Tina kept her gaze on Nonna’s face, not even flicking a comforting eye to her weeping mother. The priest placed a scrap of communion wafer on Nonna’s tongue, like a hit of acid. There were incantations. The holy fingers, liver-spotted and slicked with oil, drew a cross on Nonna’s papery forehead. The old lady did not react to the unction and viaticum; she merely inflated and deflated. The tranquility disturbed Tina. This was Nonna’s fourth time getting the last rites, and she slept through it, as if even she was bored of this rote, grim chore. She was Tina’s dimming oracle. There was nothing either of them could do about that. The letter and the last rites, The Captain and Nonna; everything suddenly seemed temporary.

Dupuis blessed the meal, thanking Christ for the flow of grace into the family. “The same grace we have shared with our sister upstairs, so close to her calling by the Lord.”

“She’s always been more a grandmother than a sister to me,” Gio said.

“She’s your sister in Christ,” Marisol said.

“Exactly right,” Dupuis said, breaking the pie’s crust with a spoon. “And you’re my brother, even though you’re a father, Father?”

“You know the answer to that already, don’t you, son?”

“And I’m your son, even though I’m your brother?”

Dupuis chuckled. “You haven’t changed since Sunday school, have you, Gio?”

“Yeah, you still got it,” Tina said. She frowned down the table at Gio—a warning.

“So, if I follow, The Captain and Tina are sisters?” Gio pressed on.

“Of course,” Dupuis said.

“Mom, tell Gio to behave,” Tina said.

Bonnie passed platters from Danny to Jacko without taking any food. “What’s he doing now?”

“Being himself,” Tina said.

“Then you should be used to it,” Bonnie said.

“I’m an acquired taste,” I said. “The opposite of Catholicism.”

Jacko dipped his fork up and down in the air, signaling

for Gio to cool it.

“Sorry,” Gio said. “Sorry, Father. When I’m emotional, I make jokes.”

“I do recall Sunday school, yes.”

“Did you have to go to Sunday school, Father?” Danny asked.

“A long time ago,” Dupuis said.

“Did you, Marisol?”

“Of course, Danny.”

“And now you’re going to a big school?” Danny said. “Far away?”

“Yes, the Captain was telling us that she got into Wisconsin,” Gio said. “Can you believe it?”

“I most certainly can!” Jacko said. “That’s wonderful, Captain, although I can’t say I’m surprised. Huzzah!”

“Toronto, too,” Gio said.

Tina glared at him again. It baffled them both that they came from the same genetic mash.

She thought her determination and power flowed from Nonna, skipping a generation like diabetes, while Gio’s laziness and quips came straight from Bonnie. The things they had in common—the rhino-like nose, the thick brown hair, the homosexuality—were incidental to Tina, relative to the

disproportionate inheritance of athleticism and creativity.

Tina had insisted that the two of them make a deal about being gay. They'd confessed it to each other last year, after Gio caught Tina and Marisol making out in the basement stairs. It had been an easy conversation—a confirmation of suspicions, really—but she didn't want their parents to know. Gio thought Jacko and Bonnie had already figured it out, but Tina prevailed, saying any revelation would make it real, permanent; it would let the situation slip from her control. Worst of all, the news could make its way to Nonna, a homophobe of the highest order, who categorized homosexuality along with tarragon, Anglicanism, birth control and aluminum siding—just another disgusting thing that non-Italians did to make themselves important.

“So many choices!” Gio said. “Captain, you must be stoked.”

“Stoked?” Marisol said.

“The only thing we stoke is a fire,” Tina said. “But yes, she's thrilled. Queen's and U-Vic, too. The Captain has her choice.”

“I'm sure The Captain can answer for herself,” Jacko said.

All heads turned to Marisol. She'd just slid the fork

from her mouth. They watched her chew.

“Just a sec,” Gio said. “Her mouth is full of fish.”

“Could you discipline him, please?” Tina said.

“For what?” Bonnie said.

“He’s winding me up,” Tina said. “Be a parent for, like, one second?”

“Watch your mouths, both of you,” Jacko said.

“He’s not even funny,” Tina said.

Dupuis spooned mash to his face, rapt.

“I guess I’m excited,” Marisol said, finally.

“And you should be,” Jacko said. “But Wisconsin’s the holy grail. I hope to drive Tina down there myself next year!”

“No pressure,” Gio said.

“It’s not perfect,” Tina said. “It’s really far.”

“Surprised to hear you say that. It’s all you used to talk about,” Jacko said. “Which school are you leaning towards, Marisol?”

“Toronto,” Marisol said. “I guess.”

“You guess?” Tina said.

“Any particular reason?” Jacko said.

“No.”

“Money?”

“No.”

“Huh,” Jacko said. “Well, I’m sure we can all agree that your success is something to celebrate.”

“This isn’t a celebration! It’s stupid to be sitting here, eating Dad’s Friday pie and talking about schools, when Nonna’s dying, like, right there,” Tina said. “Yeesh.”

“Yeesh?” Jacko said.

“Yeesh,” Tina confirmed.

“Yeesh!” Danny said.

The men laughed; Tina didn’t. She cupped her hands around her face and pulled them back over her hair to her ponytail. She scowled at her mother, who was emptying the bottle of wine into her glass.

“Don’t give me that look, Tina,” Bonnie said.

“You aren’t even sad, Mom.”

“You have no idea how sad I am,” Bonnie said.

“None.”

“If that were you up there, I’d be bawling my eyes out.”

“Aren’t you a saint,” Gio said.

“Gio, this is your final warning,” Jacko said.

“At least he’s acting how I expect him to act,” Tina said. “Like a little frigging smart aleck.”

Bonnie nodded at her wine in resigned agreement.

“The rest of you are just disappointments,” Tina said.

“Even the priest?” Gio said.

“Tina, we’re all sorry the world isn’t exactly as you’d like,” Jacko said. “But here we are.”

“Disappointment is part of death,” said Dupuis. “Part of grief. But it’s misplaced. Faith allows us to know your grandmother will live on. So you see, child, with faith there’s no need for anger, is there?”

“God doesn’t mind,” Marisol said.

“I beg your pardon, child?”

“He doesn’t mind that Tina’s angry. He would know what Tina’s going through. He’d forgive her, right? Grieving isn’t a sin.”

“It is without faith, because then it’s worthless, isn’t it? It’s despair.”

“She has faith, though. Tina’s different. Different than what everyone thinks.” The table was silent. “Right?” Marisol said. She tried to lock her eyes with Tina, but Tina was looking at her unfinished pie.

“Wisconsin,” Tina said. It was the closest thing to profanity she had ever uttered.

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Sunday mornings, the Hornets played a scrimmage game, one half of the team against the other. Tina blatantly unwatched The Captain as they geared-up in the locker room. She laced her skates with violent tugs, clipped her neck guard with a loud snap. The other girls must have felt the arc of cold electricity shoot from Tina to Marisol. The chatter dropped to a lower octave, a slower tempo. The room crackled with potential and fear.

This was Tina's desired effect. She hadn't slept much in the two nights since the last rites, and she needed fuel from somewhere. Last night, the phone pealed out a dozen rings, the caller ID showing the name of Marisol's dead father. Tina had the family on strict lockdown: do not answer. She'd had a verbal brawl with Bonnie, who'd given her four sisters an open invitation to come by and sit with Nonna, which limited Tina's own time in the room off the landing. She woke up early this morning to sit with the old lady, hoping for one last claw-grip—one more top-up of doggedness, a stiffening of backbone that could send her sailing through the scrimmage with brutal grace. None came.

Hockey is heat. It was easy to forget that, sitting in the stands, as Jacko was that morning, bundled in his beige parka, a Hornets toque pulled down over his ears, sipping instant coffee

from a Styrofoam cup. But below, warming up, the players were boiling in adrenaline, locked into pads and elasticized bras and synthetic jerseys, each a furnace of trapped sweat and energy, with helmets like plugs to keep the pressure contained. By the time Tina hunched at the red line, she was fevered and pulsing. The Captain took her place a few centimeters away. The pause before a face-off has a tense intimacy. They breathed each other's air. The sound of inhalation was amplified by their helmets.

“I prayed for your grandmother,” The Captain said.  
“Any news?”

The puck dropped. Tina rocketed it to the right wing and pitched her shoulder into Marisol's throat. The Captain tumbled, gasped out “oops,” as though this moment of violence were a mistake, and landed on her backside. Tina caught a glimpse of this on her way to her new position, left of the crease, where she awaited the puck, nabbed it, and shot it up, high, beyond the goalie, who expected the thing at her waist and could do nothing but scramble with her cartoonish gloves, raised too late and too low. 1-0.

On the next play, Tina skirted three players to come around the back of the goal. The unnecessary move confused them and they swarmed to envelop her and protect the net.

Tina still had her momentum, and slammed through the wall of girls, throwing The Captain against the boards with a crunch of gear. Tina could feel the cold, dry air against her cheeks as she sped up the length of the rink to her own side. She registered the blue line, the red line, triangulating her location using the memorized scuff-marks on the boards. Her thighs were pistons, the meat of them surging with power as she curled to a stop with a spray of ice. She hammered her stick, beating out a signal until the puck came her way. Ludicrous to pass up the ice to one's own goal, but the other girls were in her thrall, and one of them shot the puck to her. Tina looked down the rink, zeroed in on Marisol.

She knew that The Captain was onto her. Marisol had peeled away from her teammates and positioned herself at center ice. Smart, Tina thought. The Captain had realized that she couldn't predict Tina's next move, and had prepared for anything. She had a crouched, solid stance, neither offensive nor defensive—just ready. This was how The Captain played, exploiting an honest position for the greatest gain, inspiring workable formations that could adapt to the situation. It was honest, clean, strategic playing, even vulnerable. How could this creature, so sure on the ice, wilt so easily elsewhere?

Tina pushed off towards her. The puck stayed

husbanded between rapid cuppings of her stick. At the last moment, she passed to a teammate, and collided with The Captain square-on. They were instantly a single, tangled unit. The Captain wedged her stick against Tina's hip and stayed locked there as they glided, breathing hard, pads smashing. The puck was down the ice; Tina was blind to it, caught, and couldn't turn to the action. She elbowed The Captain in the gut so hard she felt a phantom pain in her own stomach. They split, regained independence on their blades, as the coach's whistle screamed out. Tina had gotten the assist. 2-0.

In opposing penalty boxes, they were adjacent but split by a plexiglass screen. The Captain took off her helmet, squirted water in her mouth and all over her face. Tina was hunched forward, stoic, though her instinct was not to be. She had to fight the urge to look through the plastic, assess the damage. She'd know the extent from one glimpse at that big brown face. She didn't dare look. She set her face like Nonna would, unbothered by the surrounding drama or the precedent of expectations. The Captain tapped her stick on the divider, once, twice, then in a series of hard, wild bangs, to make sure the situation was clear. Tina had chosen this and wasn't going to indulge even the slightest communication until they were back on the ice.

The game continued as it had. After more penalties—two cross-checking, one elbowing, all against The Captain—Tina was sent alone to the locker room. She ignored the coach’s command to report to his office, as well as the showers, and instead slipped from her gear and headed for the exit in a stink of sweat and exhaustion. She kicked the arena door open with an angry noise, and stomped into the winter. The fresh-fallen powder of snow escaped from under her boots before the soles kissed the pavement.

The windshields in the parking lot had shimmers of frost—all but the Oldsmobile. Jacko was warming the car for her. She could see him following her with his eyes, twisting the rusty hairs of his beard. He didn’t break his stare when he popped the trunk. The rear hatch opened ominously through exhaust that was thick and blue in the cold.

Tina stored her duffle and sticks, and settled into the passenger seat, looking straight ahead at the arena’s exit. “Let’s go.”

“The Captain needs a ride, too.”

“Let’s go.”

“I’ll let you mother yell at you. She’s better at it.”

“So let’s get it over with.”

Jacko turned the car off. The key chain swung and

jangled.

“We’re waiting for Marisol.”

“No, we’re not. The whole point is that we’re not.”

“I’m waiting for her, then.”

“You’re such a sucker, Dad.”

“If you say so, Tina.”

“We’re just going to sit here?”

“That’s right.”

Tina pressed her palms onto the glove compartment. Her pulse hadn’t dropped since the game. She could feel it in her wrists.

“Dad, you don’t understand what’s going on.”

“You’d be surprised.”

“I’d be shocked. I’d frigging die of shock.”

“And I thought you could handle anything.” He put a hot hand on her shoulder.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Things are about to get harder.” His voice sent calm, subtle tremors down to his fingers. She could feel them through her coat. “People go away.”

“Only when they choose to.”

“That’s not true. Look at Nonna.” He gripped her harder.

“Most times, there’s nothing you can do about it.”

“You still have to try,” she said. “There are no words for it. You try, even if you’re pretending.”

“I don’t think you have to pretend. But like you said, I don’t understand,” he said. “Take me and your mother. We love each other, right—”

“Gross. Please don’t.”

“—and we simply say it. And it’s fine. Can you imagine what it would be like if we didn’t have a way to say it? If those words hadn’t been invented?”

“Maybe you’d shut up from time to time.”

“Yeah, exactly. We wouldn’t have a choice. It’d be hard. We’d have to make jokes or speak in code, because it’s harder when there are no words for it. You know the story of your mother and me. It’s a beautiful story.”

“It makes me barf.”

“That’s only because we’re your parents. We met when we were young—younger than you are now—and it all unfolded in a way that was new to me and to her. But we were ready for it, you know? Somehow. We had, I don’t know, information. Emotional information. We knew how to express how we felt because it already existed in the air. We were trained for it. It’s not always that way. It’s not always that easy

to tell the story. Are you listening?”

“You had it easy. Lucky you.”

“Yeah. Lucky me. Because for some people, the story is underneath everything else. You have to sneak it in.”

The doors to the arena opened and the girls started exiting. One of the younger players was helping The Captain limp towards the Oldsmobile. Marisol waved at them as if they might peel away and leave her there.

“I just realized,” Tina said, watching Marisol approach through the salt-splattered windshield. “You’re completely inadequate in every way.”

“If you say so, Tina,” he said with a chuckle. He popped the trunk for The Captain. “If you say so.”

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Nonna died; Tina missed it. It happened the night after the scrimmage, while Tina was sleeping in the tub chair. When she woke at dawn, she could see Nonna’s breathing had stopped, but it seemed that the old lady had merely been switched off or that there was some small technical error that, once solved, would reboot her. Tina puzzled over the problem, knowing at once that there was no solving it, but feeling sure

that she could. It was only when Bonnie came in with a cup of weak tea that Nonna's death became real.

The house, already a churn of aunts, uncles, friends, children, neighbors, and Hornets, became twice as bustling. A supply of casserole dishes and Tupperware continued unabated for days, all containing the re-heatable, freezable, family-sized meals that every local Catholic had in their cooking repertoire in case of death. In the living room, Bonnie and her sisters took weepy shifts on the couches, re-telling every story of Nonna's life. Acquaintances arrived, departed; they moved through the folding chairs that were only deployed for brushes with the divine: births, deaths, baptisms, confirmations, Easters, Christmases, the series finale of Cheers. The phone rang as though Nonna were running for Parliament.

Tina didn't play that week. She funneled her energy into making arrangements. She assigned roles to everyone. Danny collected wads of tissues from the living room and kept the snacks circulating. Gio was assigned food organization, labelling every container that arrived with the contents and the giver's name using a Sharpie and masking tape. Jacko was sent to the den to write the eulogy. Bonnie and her sisters were told to go through the photo albums to find a picture of Nonna so that Ms. Chéhab could reconstruct her body for the open-casket

visitation.

Tina flipped through the Yellow Pages, making snapping sounds with each sheet, licking her finger every fifth turn. She ordered highly specific flowers in a curt, clipped manner on the kitchen phone, then dictated the obituary to the Fiona Spectator and called the Canadian-Italian Club to arrange the reception.

“That’s unacceptable,” she said, frequently. “That’s also unacceptable. Orecchiette, not penne. Romaine, not iceberg. And you always do the salads with too much oil, not enough vinegar. These people are grieving, they don’t want to eat greasy salad. And only red wine vinegar. No white.”

The aunts and Bonnie, listening from the living room, responded like a Greek chorus. “Oh, hasn’t she got a mouth on her.”

“And why shouldn’t she?”

“Runs in the family.”

“Truer words!”

“Remember Mama taking on Papa?”

“She could give as good as she got!”

“It’s the kind of lesson every girl needs, growing up.”

“Lord knows we learned it!”

“You give ’em hell, Tina!”

“Is there more sherry?”

They turned their attention back to the stacks of photo albums, reviewing each tiny window into the family history with scrutiny and tears and giggles.

“Oh, this one! Remember that chiffon?”

“Moths have gorged on it by now.”

“She wore it to Danny’s christening. Downright elegant!”

“That was the baptism with the chicken supreme?”

“Tough as nails, it was.”

“No flavor!”

“Who’d want to remember that?”

Tina sat with The Captain in the breakfast nook, their fingers intertwined—but very much hidden—under the table.

“Listen to them all,” Tina said. “Cackling when they should be crying.”

“They’re crying, too,” Marisol said.

“It’s disgraceful.”

“Not everyone’s going to do this like you do.”

“Bet you weren’t laughing when your dad died.”

“We did, a bit,” Marisol said. “Sometimes it’s all you can do.”

“It’s dumb. Have any other ideas?”

“Spend some time with the body,” Marisol said.

“That’s also dumb.”

“No really. The soul is gone and you see that it’s for real.”

“That sounds like hocus-pocus.”

“I want to help.” Marisol squeezed Tina’s fingers. “But I’m not sure I’m helping you.”

“Just don’t leave.”

“You mean tonight? Or, like, in general?”

“I’m not even sure,” Tina said.

“Wow, there’s a first time for everything,” Marisol said. “I’m still not sure either.”

Another swell of laughter came from the living room. Tina jumped up, stamped out the room and up the stairs. Her footfalls shook the house. She grabbed a photo of Nonna that she had wedged in the frame of her bedroom mirror, carried it downstairs, and slapped it onto the coffee table at the center of the aunts as though it were a royal flush.

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Tina arrived an hour before the viewing. The undertaker’s teenage son hadn’t yet put on his tie or jacket

when he unlocked the doors for her. He compressed his face in sympathy as Tina hustled past him into the empty funeral home

“Tina, it’s good to see you again. I’m only sorry it’s under these circumstances,” Joey said. He had a slight lisp; “circumstances” set off a minor alarm in Tina’s ear.

Thircumthtanthes. She wondered how many times this kid and his family members had said that in their lives. I’m only sorry it’s under these circumstances. The words had always seemed kind, but this time they felt abstract and bloodless, implying affection and remove all at once. This family breathed those words like oxygen; “these circumstances” were their livelihoods.

“Yeah, same,” Tina said.

He walked ahead of her towards the viewing room. His gait was what Nonna would call “squirrely.”

“You’re not working the door, right? When the people come?”

“My mother will be down for that.”

“OK, great,” Tina said. “No offence, Joey.”

“Of courth.”

He showed Tina to Nonna, then closed the door behind him. Silence. The Rose Room had the clean, boring quality of a hotel suite with its grey couches, ivory wallpaper,

beige rugs and ochre drapes. On the wall hung pictures of dusty pink roses framed in goldish rectangles that hinted at opulence. Every element was aggressively inoffensive and vacuumed within an inch of its life.

The only hint of personalization was the corpse. Morticians try to make bodies look peaceful, but Ms. Chéhab had failed. Nonna looked like herself. Below the thickly troweled foundation, Tina saw her grandmother's lupine awareness and weary knowledge. Her hands were on her chest, folded, with a rosary slid between the fingers. She was in a blue satin dress that had filaments of silver threaded through it in squiggles. It had been Tina's choice, after a long argument over a black, shapeless garment that Bonnie preferred. The victory paid off. Nonna looked immortal.

"I got you the Kleenexes you like, the three-ply," Tina said. "We never told you this, but they're really expensive. You know, for tissues. We knew you'd never let us buy them if you knew they were \$3.99 a go."

Silence. Tina opened her backpack and unloaded her haul. She placed the premium Kleenex under the decorative box-covers—white plastic with gold piping—and pulled starter tissues through the pre-cut slits on top. She hid the provided, and distinctly down-market, tissues in a cupboard. She changed

her footwear from boots to flats, and went to work rearranging the flowers, giving the lilies pride of place around the body.

“I’m going to downgrade these carnations to the end tables. I’ll make sure the cards are visible so everyone can see who cheaped out. You’d like that?”

Silence. Tina went on, describing the schedules and arrangements she’d set. Obituary, orecchiette, Offertory hymn; priest, pallbearers, Prayers of the Faithful; embalming, Ecclesiastes, eulogy.

“Dad’s writing it, so it’s bound to be cheesy. I mean, the things he comes up with! You should have heard him the other morning in the car.”

Silence.

And then, noise. People were arriving. The Rose Room doors opened, and crowds surged through them for hours. Tina stood in the receiving line all day with Bonnie and the aunts.

Neighbors and second cousins and parishioners moved through, squeezing Tina’s hands, looking in her face with sadness and concern. It was hagiography by assembly line, concise memories of Nonna’s virtues, delivered in such a random chronology that Tina gave up stringing them into a story. Up and down the line, she could hear the snippets of the aunts’ reactions.

“She could be tough, but always fair.”

“She was pushing us.”

“She loved us.”

“She could never say.”

“She showed it.”

“She was proud.”

“She was hard.”

“Hard is good.”

The town’s professional mourners were out in force. They were local Italians that Tina saw exclusively in this building. Efficient in nothing but the realm of death, these hunched men and their Aqua-Netted wives zipped down the line of relatives at a shocking speed, skipping chatterboxes who had stopped to reminisce, and jabbing out “mie condoglianze” to each of the bereaved. Their fingers were already slipping away from Tina’s hand when she went in for a shake. “And how do you know my grandmother?” Tina asked them, and they’d blanch at the challenge, take moment of indignity, then cough out “per rispetto,” out of respect, and move on. They had other cadavers on the schedule.

Marisol and the Hornets arrived late in the day, directly from practice. They were energized, giving hugs instead of handshakes.

“I don’t know what half these people are doing here,”

Tina said.

“They’re paying their respects,” Marisol said.

“Yeah, but why? They didn’t even know her.”

“I think it’s more for you than your Nonna. You and your family,” Marisol said. “I won’t ask for a peck—”

“Keep your voice down.”

“—but I’ll call you later.”

A wake followed this juggernaut of condolence. Tina didn’t go straight away; she wanted to set the room right before the pre-burial blessing, scheduled for the following morning. After the crowds left, Ms. Chéhab asked her if she needed anything. “I want another moment with my grandmother, if that’s OK.”

“We do the prep at this point, so we don’t usually allow—”

“At these prices?”

“Oh. Right, very well. I suppose a few minutes couldn’t hurt,” Ms. Chéhab said and closed the casket lid. “I’ll see you at the wake. Give Joey a knock on the office door when you’re ready, and he’ll start the prep.”

After hours of circulating mourners, the Rose Room was silent. The textured wallpaper and soft drapery sucked up

even Tina's own noise. It reminded her of her babysitting days, when the kids had been put to sleep, and she could lurk through the house, violating all its codes and secrets, or pretend to be the woman of the house. Here, she tried to be Ms. Chéhab, walking with the funeral director's professional grace across the plush carpet. She ran a finger along the wainscoting, checked the sconces for spiderwebs. She picked up some fallen lily petals. Last, she lifted the coffin lid to check on the body. Glancing at the unmoving woman inside, Tina said, "It's good to see you, Nonna. I'm only sorry it's under these circumstances."

Silence.

"Do you remember that funeral when I asked you and Mom why we had to call Ms. Chéhab 'mizz' instead of 'missus,' even though she was married to Mr. Callino? And before Mom could explain the whole kept-her-own-name thing, you said, 'because she's on her high horse, that's why.'"

Neither of them laughed. Tina leaned in and pecked Nonna on the cheek. The act reminded her of Marisol, and Tina felt a flash of weakness. She didn't want Nonna to see it, so she pulled the coffin lid down on its quiet, expensive hinge, and wiped imaginary fingerprints from the handle.

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Moments later, Tina approached the door of the funeral director's office. There was laughter on the other side. Inappropriate, she thought, and opened the door with a scowl on her face. When she caught sight of Gio and Joey, she upgraded her face from outrage to annoyance. Joey was on his knees; Gio was in the office chair. Their ties were over our shoulders, their belts were flopping. Porn aside, suits are terrible for blowjobs.

Gio locked eyes with Tina, gave her their gay-sibling look—an exchange of homosexual data. His blood was immediately reassigned to his face, which reddened with embarrassment.

Joey sprung from the floor, overflowing with apologies as Gio turned to the wall to zip up.

“You cannot, cannot, say a word. Not a peep,” Joey said.

“I'm not your babysitter anymore,” Tina said. “Get your things, Gio.”

“I don't have things.”

“Then get my things.”

Gio collected her backpack from The Rose Room.

When he returned to the foyer, Tina was standing by the exit with her gloves and coat on, hood up, ready for the cold. Joey's terrified sniffles floated in from the washroom.

"You want to check on her?" Tina said. "Little Miss Vacuum?"

"I should, shouldn't I?"

She shrugged.

"Joey we're going," Gio yelled.

"OK," came a muted croak through the door.

"Probably, yeah, you should."

Out in the biting dark evening, the siblings walked a block without speaking, listening instead to their different paces, squeaked out between their boot soles and the snow.

"How long?" she said.

"A few months."

"Who knows?"

"You."

"Ah."

"I should go back, shouldn't I?" Gio stopped walking, letting the fridity wrap around him.

"Don't bother."

"He's terrified."

"It'll do him good. Let him cry in the toilet."

“Is it cold out here, or is it just you?”

“That’s not your best, Gio.” She put her hands on her hips, the motion repeated in her long shadow on the snow in front and behind, cast by street lamps. “That was weak. And so are you, if you go back.”

“That’s your advice?”

“Trust me.”

“You mean trust Nonna,” her brother said. “What did you get from her, anyway?”

“What, you didn’t love her? Your own grandmother?”

“Of course I did.”

“You have a screwed-up way of showing it. Joey Callino, for god’s sake. What would Nonna say if she saw what I saw?”

“Who cares?” Gio said. “This is all super-sad and everything. I’m sadder that I thought I’d be. But isn’t there a tiny part of you that’s glad she’s going take her opinions to the grave? A teeny-tiny part? She hated people like us.”

“At least she wasn’t afraid.”

“Everyone’s afraid,” Gio said. “Though I guess Nonna’s not anymore.”

“If everyone’s afraid, why were you laughing? I heard you two giggling away.”

“Well, the situation was pretty hilarious,” Gio said.

“Objectively speaking.”

“How can everyone laugh at a time like this?”

“Because we can’t help it,” Gio said.

“Of course you can,” she said and squinted at Gio. It was a face of genuine miscomprehension, lost down the puffy tunnel of her parka’s hood.

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Tina spent that night in Nonna’s room. The gigantic green numbers glowed 1:18 a.m. The leaded glass birds were rendered flat by the moonlight. There were still wrappers from the paramedics on the floor and dentures in the glass by the bed. The space felt like what it was, the setting of some freshly completed drama, but with nothing put back to order yet.

Soon, it would be. The nether-time between the death and the funeral would end, and all of this would be gone, Nonna’s presence along with it. Tina shoved her face into the pillow again and again, filling her sinuses with Nonna’s smell—sweat, synthetic roses, urine, rot, Downey—until her synapses fired off a holistic idea of the woman she was inhaling, a glut of indistinct memories conspiring to deliver the entirety of a

person in a single sniff. It was Nonna, delivered to her brain in particles, as Tina had always known her, with her fierce truths and angry advice.

Tina registered a series of steps and creaks elsewhere in the house. She ignored them at first, thinking Danny was going to the washroom or Bonnie was getting a glass of water. But then there was murmuring, somewhere downstairs, and soon there was a creak and a shifting noise and a sharp intake of breath upstairs, near the bedrooms. And then a peal of Bonnie's laughter. Tina rose, opened the door and padded up the stairs to the hall, where her mother was sitting on the floor next to the phone desk. Bonnie was giggling, one hand over the input end of the receiver. Jacko and Danny joined the scene, standing in the door frames of their respective rooms. Gio arrived late, climbing the stairs from kitchen.

“Oh, it's a riot!” Bonnie was saying, now crying from the laughter.

“What is?” Jacko said.

“Have you finally lost your mind?” Tina asked.

“It's so much better than that!” Bonnie said.

“Were you listening to my phone call?” Gio said.

“Gio, yes, but, oh my God,” she paused for a breath, “please forgive me!”

“Mom, I—”

“Don’t! Gio, please. It’s fine. We all knew anyway.”

“Knew what?” Tina said.

Mom looked at Gio. She wasn’t going to say it.

“Fine,” Gio said. He rolled his eyes. “I’m gay, OK?”

“And he’s in love with that undertaker’s son!”

Tina shot Gio a look of panic.

“Well, ‘love’ is a bit strong,” he said.

“I got up to pee, and saw that the light on the phone was on. Who could be on the horn at this hour? The caller ID said it was Chéhab and Sons! And, Gio, again, I’m sorry, but I thought the worst—I thought something had happened with Nonna, with the funeral. But it hadn’t! It was you comforting that Joey kid.”

“Joey Callino?” Jacko said. “That boy with the lisp?”

“Yeah, theriouthly,” Bonnie said. “Well done, Gio. Think of the inheritance. That place is worth a mint just with what we spent there this week.”

More laughter.

“I’m glad you all find this so funny,” Tina said.

“Well, this is it!” Bonnie said. “I’m so relieved.”

“So now you know,” Gio said.

“We always knew.”

“Told you,” Gio said to Tina, wincing.

“Shut up,” Tina said.

Bonnie jerked a thumb at Jacko. “This one called it when you were ten.”

“Bonnie, we agreed,” Jacko said. “In their own time.”

“I’m sorry, really. I know this isn’t about me,” Bonnie said.

The phone started blaring its warning to hang-up.

Bonnie stood, replaced the receiver, and hugged Gio hard, deep and tight. It was a full embrace of all of him. She did the same to Tina, who stared at Gio over their mother’s shoulder. He smiled a smile that was involuntary and goofy—a smile of alleviation. Tina wasn’t feeling the same relief, though. For her, Bonnie’s hug squeezed out something different, though it was akin to relief. It was permission.

Finally, Tina laughed. Laughed and cried, all at once. It was as though her center had crumbled, and she put her arms around her mother to keep from collapsing. She wailed intensely—like a siren, like an emergency—and convulsed with a powerlessness she could only interpret as love.

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“She doesn’t look peaceful,” Marisol said. She was in The Rose Room with Tina, hovering over Nonna with a face like an inspector—someone deployed to confirm the fatality.

“Not at all,” Tina said.

“More bothered.”

“Yeah. Death is pretty inconvenient, especially for the corpse.”

The Rose Room was empty, even emptier than yesterday. The flowers had been packed up, moved to the church. The velour skirt below the coffin had been removed, exposing the wheeled metal frame that would roll the body to the hearse.

“So, here’s Marisol,” Tina said. She gripped Nonna’s arm. The sleeve was rough on her skin, and there was no heat coming from the body—no reaction, no flicker of life. Yesterday, she’d wanted one, but for their last session, Tina was hoping for stillness. “You’ve met before, I guess. But not like this. This is The Captain.”

“Hi,” Marisol said.

“And she’s a woman.”

“It’s true,” Marisol said.

“And she’s going to Wisconsin, too,” Tina said to the dead woman. Nonna’s face stayed unsettled, annoyed, worried.

Disappointed. It's the face she'd worn all her life, and would for the rest of time, Tina thought. There's no changing that. "Don't give me that look. Wish I had the words to explain it to you. I'm not sure they even exist. Or if you'd understand them. But you don't have to understand. Or approve. Maybe you'd do both, if you knew what I knew."

"You would," Marisol said.

"It doesn't matter," Tina said. She gave Nonna's arm one final squeeze and kissed her on the forehead. A dot of wetness stayed on the lifeless skin, biting into the makeup. Tina decided to leave it there, a little imperfection of her own, that would go into the grave. "Alright, goodbye. It's going to be a long day. And I'm tired. Mom had us up all night, talking and talking. I'll spare you the details, Nonna, but you know Bonnie—it's going to be months of talking now. Bet you're glad you're dead."

"That's not funny," Marisol said.

"Yes it is," Tina said.



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