

## **AFTER THE RAIN**

It's August and it's hot. So hot that the nights in her bedroom are stuffier than the days. A fan on the bedside table is turning back and forth gradually from one side of the room to the other, its propellers whirring. This time, when it breezes by Pauline again, she shuts her eyes. The fan has been running for hours but isn't doing any good, neither is the window overhead that's open all the way.

It's a little after midnight and Pauline is about to lose it. She doesn't want to be up but her bedroom door is not soundproof and she can't drown out the noise that's going on in the hallway. Her mother's yelling has stopped, though that doesn't mean the fighting has—just that the screaming isn't helping any and she'll have to come up with another way to get her father to listen. A week ago that meant hurling a baby cactus that had been sitting on the porch step at her father's skull while he was walking toward his car. He was lucky. He didn't even see the plant flying toward him but managed somehow to escape the ambush. Pauline saw the whole thing from her second-floor bedroom window. The car windshield took the brunt of her mother's rage. The ceramic pot had smashed into the glass and fallen over. A driveway splattered in soil. But the incident made Pauline believe that the unsuccessful attempt was a sign that it wasn't over, that even gravity and vicious intent were not enough to destroy her parents' marriage.

“Shut up!” she wants to scream to stop her mother's yelling.

Instead she keeps quiet and continues to listen to her mother who is now sobbing. Soft, pitiful moans, followed by silence, then the moans again.

Pauline knows she can't hear her father's voice because he's trying very hard not to wake her. She knows he's placating her mother with the same series of defenses—no, there's isn't another woman; yes, he loves Pauline and wants to be a real father; no, his business trips aren't an excuse to get away from them; and no, he doesn't want a divorce.

The voices die down. A while later she hears the squeaking of the hardwood floor outside her room. The door to her bedroom creaks open and brightness hits her eyes.

“Pauline?”

She keeps still at first, fearing the words that might follow.

“Pauline, sweetie?”

She tilts her head up from the pillow and murmurs in an insincere, groggy voice, “Daddy?” Though he's a silhouette from where he's standing she sees his shirt collar flipped up, his tie loosened and

dangling over one shoulder. His six feet, medium-built frame blocks her view outside her bedroom so she can't tell whether her mother is standing close by, the both of them maybe wanting to bid their daughter goodnight—sort of like the cadence at the end of a solemn Beethoven piece. She came upon the Moonlight Sonata the day after her thirteenth birthday. Unknown to Nadya, their beautiful slender Russian neighbour, Pauline was the secret guest to the woman's Sunday evening red wine.

Father treads softly into the room and switches off the fan. The house suddenly goes quiet. Pauline struggles out of the blanket that's tangled around her legs and arms.

"Daddy?" she says, sitting up from the bed.

"Just checking. Didn't mean to wake you."

"No—I'm up."

"It's late—don't get up," he says, running his fingers through his dark wavy hair and sighing. "Go back to sleep." And before she gets to put in another word, her father whispers "love you" and shuts the door.

Pauline is alone again.

Pauline counts the days on her calendar before school starts: twelve. Summer vacation is the worst. When the fighting starts, school can't save her. One weekday afternoon, lying at the foot of her bed, she does as many sit-ups as she can. After thirty-four she poses in front of her full length mirror with a measuring tape around her waist, pinching the globs of fat around her belly. Twenty-six inches... and a half. She turns to her side, poring over the contours of her figure the way she does distant rooftops when she's perched at her bedroom window fantasizing about someplace better. She's wearing a pushup bra—it's pink, with a tiny white bow in the center, lace on the cups (Mother would be horrified). Pauline grimaces. A pair of displeasing green eyes stares back.

The ringing of the phone startles her. Pauline waits for her mother to answer. She does so after the second ring. It's probably her father returning her mother's call. As sales manager for a national telecommunications company he commutes daily from city to city to meet with clients. Somehow he manages to return the calls. If he doesn't, he'll get hell for it at night.

"Pauline?" her mother hollers from the hallway, which is always accompanied by three quick knocks. Pauline grabs her school tennis uniform from the pile of clothes on the floor, slips it on, and unlocks the door.

"Yeah?"

Her mother pops her head in, surveying her room before addressing her. Her eyes stop briefly at the pile. "Your father just called. He's getting off early. We're having dinner at six."

"Sure."

She waits for her mother to close the door, but she doesn't.

"What are you doing this afternoon?"

Pauline shrugs.

"I need to get groceries. You want to come?"

She shrugs again. "Sure."

Mother is in a bright yellow and white striped flowing summer dress, her light brown hair tightened up in a bun, held up by a shiny black hair stick whose pointy end is visible at the top of her head. Her makeup masks the dark patches Pauline is used to seeing suspended below her eyes like two eclipsed suns. The soft lines on the sides of her cherry glossed lips have also miraculously vanished. She looks good—meaning she is happy.

Whenever Mother got angry, Father used to joke out loud to her with Mother within earshot: “Remember, Pauline: the more attractive a woman is, the shorter her temper.” Mother would instantly fire a quizzical glare at Father, but the tactic worked: soon after her anger would subside.

“It’s nice out,” Mother says before walking out of her room, “you shouldn’t be cooped up inside.”

While Mother is driving into town, Pauline is searching. Every now and then she’ll see a couple of kids not much older than she scattered from one intersection to the next holding up signs, some tacit, “Smile” or “Need Change or Food,” and others more unaffected, “Out of Work” or “Left Abusive Home.”

Their car stops at a red light. Pauline stares out the car window at a boy’s knapsack resting on the hot concrete. She wonders what’s in it, whether it’s all of his possessions. Cans of kidney beans and chicken noodle soup; a change of clean clothes; washed out photos of long-forgotten family. She tries to guess where the boy’s from. Everyone has family to start with, she thinks. What had driven him away? The questions bombard her until the light turns green and Mother steps on the gas.

When she’s feeling depressed she doesn’t think she’s too far from being where they are: everyone has a breaking point—she just didn’t know what hers was yet. She often feels guilty for thinking this way and has to remind herself that she’s got food, shelter, sporadic displays of parental affection, what more could she ask for?

One rainy day in April, Mother had stopped at the red light again and Pauline noticed a teenaged girl standing not too far away from their car. She swallowed hard.

“Mom?” she said. “I took three cans of corn from the stash in the cold room. Can I give them to the girl?”

“Of course,” her mother said, automatically lowering the backseat car window halfway, her close-lipped smile appearing in the rear view mirror.

Pauline fought her hesitation and extended her hand out the window. The girl was wearing khakis folded up to her knees, an army green tank top, and her blond hair was tied up in one big braid that wrapped around her head like a snake coiled around a rock. The light had already turned green, so she rushed to their car.

“Thanks,” she said.

Pauline watched her tall gaunt frame return to her station where her knapsack was, which was drenched.

She felt stupid for not saying anything but anything leaving her lips would have reeked of condescension: “Have a nice day,” “God bless,” “How are you doing?”

How does one wounded person speak to another?

It’s Wednesday so Mother has bought chicken breasts and sweet potatoes. It’s a quarter to five and Pauline is setting the table, for three. The dining table is solid wood, with four seats encircling it, three of them matching and the other one is in a tacky floral print. Mother picked it up at a garage sale from the Anderson’s who live about a block away. The fourth one is just to keep the symmetry: they never have guests over, and if they do, one extra chair wouldn’t do anyway.

Pauline grips the forks, knives, and napkins in her hands and eyes the empty spot in front of each chair, deliberating where to lay each setting. If it were just she and her mother, they would be sitting across from each other, her mother facing the wall on which the eight-year-old family portrait is hanging and Pauline facing the window above the sink that looks out into the yard. In the family portrait she’s in a lace pink dress with pigtails and her parents are standing behind her, Mother in a silk blouse, and Father

in his favorite navy blue suit with one arm around Mother and the other resting on Pauline's shoulder. During dinners with just the two of them, either Pauline is recapping the plot of a novel or Mother her favourite TV show. Laughter erupts when they forget, momentarily, that one of them is missing.

She settles with putting her own setting across from Mother's. She puts Father's setting, the one where the wine glass will be, to her left so that his back is facing the open area in the kitchen and not the opposite wall. If anything happens he can easily get up and back away from the table.

But by half past six it's apparent that none of Pauline's thoughtful calculation matters. She is sitting at the table, her chicken and potatoes cold while Mother is picking up the phone, slamming the receiver when the ringing goes to voicemail, then picking it up again—as if it didn't matter whether Father answered the phone or not, but the very act of calling was enough to telepathically communicate her outrage.

To Pauline's relief the phone rings five minutes before seven. Mother answers right away. Pauline has already washed the dishes and stored the uneaten food in three plastic containers, one stacked on top of the other on the kitchen counter. She doesn't dare eat because she knows the untouched food will testify to Father's selfish act, so she gestures to Mother that she's tired and is going to bed. Mother nods and continues with the heated conversation. Pauline doesn't know what her father is saying on the phone, whether he's on his way, running an hour or two late, or whether he's coming home at all.

Not that it matters. It's all going to be the same.

Pauline leans out her bedroom window and looks below. From the second storey she is fifteen feet from the ground. The base of the red oak tree in their front lawn is four and a half feet away from her window sill. Their house is almost fifty years old and she guesses the oak tree has survived for just as long. Its branches are sturdy, coarse, madly sticking out in all directions, the way a kid's hair does when touching that electrical, static metal ball at the science museum. Its luscious green leaves and abundant roots digging deep underground have stolen many glances from passersby, some sneaking pictures beside it when they think no one is at home.

She has witnessed a few of their neighbours having had to take down their oak trees—arborists arriving with their chainsaws, Mr. and Mrs. Altman holding each other in their driveway, the four-year-old Walker twins with their noses pressed up against the living room window gawking as the power tools roared like angry beasts. A widow, Mrs. Powers, who has lived in the neighbourhood longer than all of them, even cried, as if the men had showed up to hack off one of her limbs. They were killing an already dying tree, she was told. Though looking at it no one could tell: the tree looked perfectly healthy—but it was being infected from the inside. Fungus. It's a slow death, and if it isn't cut down soon the next big storm would send the thing crashing into her home, they warned.

Pauline inspects her room. The blanket draping her bed, tears long-dissolved in its fluffy cotton, calls out to her. This time she resists running to it for comfort. She has backed out one too many times. Tonight she is determined to stand firm.

She runs her fingers along the fantasy and thriller books lining her shelves and picks her favourite one to take with her.

Lying idly on her desk is an unfinished jigsaw puzzle of an eagle perched on a rock, its wings spread wide against an empty horizon. Exasperated, she had quit, 134 pieces shy of completion. Too much blue. She sweeps her palm along its perforated edges before yanking the handle on her desk drawer and taking out a notebook. She rips a page from it, then writes at the top "Dear Mom and Dad" in neat cursive. She sighs, crosses out the "Dearest," hesitates again before crumpling up the paper and tossing it away.

She was never given an explanation for their actions, they didn't deserve one either.

Her knapsack has been ready-to-go for days: she has packed a jacket, a sweatshirt and jogging pants, seven chocolate chip cookies, a bottle of apple juice, and five months' allowance.

She takes a deep breath. She has never climbed a tree before, much less one this high, so tonight she is nervous about whether she can do it. She tiptoes into the hallway and listens. Her mother is screaming, "That's it" over and over. Pauline closes the door to the voice and twists the lock in place.

She looks down from her window again. A red rose bush is positioned directly beneath her, the roses in full bloom. Pauline holds her breath, then plants her right foot firmly on the asphalt roof, her left hand clutching the edge of the window shutter to keep her balance. Shingle by shingle she eases her way down the incline until her sneakers are pressed up against the roof ledge. She scans the road in front of her to make sure no one is watching, then reaches for the branch that's closest to her. Two birds fluttering away from the tree startles her—she loses her grip and the branch springs upward, quivering. It isn't until this moment that she considers the danger in what she is doing, suppose the branch snaps and she plunges to the ground? She'd live through it. Some broken bones maybe.

Then, from up high, she spots her father's white Volvo at the stop sign at the corner end of the street. She waits for him to turn left. His car stalls longer than usual. No other cars are around. He must be on the phone. If her mother is still yelling at him, she can't hear it anymore—she being too far away from them now. A few minutes later the car rolls forward; Pauline anxiously grabs the branch a second time, latching on tightly, imagining what would be waiting for her if she were to turn around.

The branch feels solid as she slithers along it. Her panic is brief: in seconds she already has her foot supported by another big branch and she's clinging to a small one above her head for leverage. By the time she makes it to the center of the tree, her crimson t-shirt is stained with sweat.

Her father pulls into the driveway. Pauline freezes. He retrieves his briefcase out of the passenger's side. The garage door rumbles as it closes and he disappears into the house.

When her feet touch the grass, she catches her breath, and smiles.

She is free.

At first, she doesn't know where to go. It's been an hour, maybe longer (she forgot to wear a watch). Her stomach is growling. She thinks of chicken and sweet potatoes when she passes by a fast food joint, so she goes in and orders a junior beef burger and drinks the apple juice from her knapsack. She takes tiny bites, because she has all the time in the world.

Diagonally across from her is a man wearing a beige fisherman's hat and thick gold-rimmed glasses suspended at the tip of his pointed nose. He sits cross-legged, scanning the business section of the newspaper, smoking a cigarette. A carton of fries is sprawled across the table in front of him, and a little boy, his grandson maybe, swoops around the restaurant like he's an airplane, hollering "Eeeeeee-yerrrr," returning to his seat only to grab a fry and then he's off again. When the boy grows bored he sprints toward the table, crashing into the old man's legs, giggling. The man doesn't flinch. The boy, munching on another fry, has already found another game: he is jumping up and down trying to catch the smoke rings rising into the air.

When the pair leaves so does Pauline. She decides to take a shortcut, believing it will take her to a plaza where she can buy gummy bears, but she soon finds herself lost amid rows of lit and unlit homes. Against the echoes of faraway sirens and howling dogs, the sound of her parents' fighting is no longer threatening.

Pauline stands under a lamppost and peers down a road. Besieged by shadows, she begins to see the ominous creatures in her books creeping about her. She is terrified. So she starts running. She scurries through the city like a frightened animal, entering a labyrinth of deserted streets, passing over juttied

potholes and sidewalks cracked with the tracks of residents who are at this instant nestled comfortably in their beds at home. She thinks of knocking on one of the doors and asking for help but stops herself, not wanting to explain to a stranger why she is lost.

Streams of nameless streets disappear behind her. Then, from the other side of the road she hears the hammering of piano keys. She looks over to a large open window that frames a moving picture: a man sitting in front of a grand piano, his shoulders rising and falling like rolling waves, pounding out ferocious chords. Rapt by the music, she flutters toward the house; not noticing the curb, she trips, her knees breaking the fall. Blood dribbles onto the sidewalk. She checks her knapsack for bandages, even though she knows she hasn't brought any.

A nudge on her leg startles her. She looks up to find a white Collie licking her. She shrinks back but the dog only tails her more closely. When it starts to bark, she nervously scans the nearby houses.

"Mozart, come back here." The dog whips around, fixing himself between the owner's legs, panting and wagging its tail, as if proudly announcing, *Look what I found*.

"You all right?"

Pauline holds her breath, staring at a middle-aged man dressed in flannel pajamas and slippers.

"Are you all right?" the man repeats.

She keeps her distance but nods. He's Chinese, though with only a trace of an accent.

He gestures at her knees. "You're bleeding."

"I'm all right."

"It looks pretty scratched up."

"I'm lost, actually," she says. "Can you tell me where I am?"

The man's gaze travels from her injured knee to beyond the street. He shakes his head, "It's late, what are you doing out at this hour?"

Pauline looks behind her.

"We're on the east side of Massey," he says to reassure her. "Are you new here?"

"Are we far from Gardenia Road?"

"That's about five blocks away."

Pauline turns from one side of the street to the other, trying to distinguish east from west.

"In the dark I guess every street looks the same," he utters sympathetically. "But it'd be against my better judgment to let you go off on your own," he says, bending down to give Mozart a pat on the head. "You need a ride home?"

"I can walk," she takes a step back. "Thank you."

"At the least, let me call the police—someone should drive you home."

"No—don't—I'm all right, really."

"Well, you can't walk if you're bleeding like that," he says. "Let's get that taken care of before you decide what you want to do."

The man's stern voice reminds her of her father when he is reprimanding her, so she is feeling uneasy and protected at the same time.

"I'm all right," she says, "I'm all right," repeating the words as if then they would come true.

The man turns around, Mozart trotting contentedly behind him. Pauline watches him open the screen door to his modest bungalow, with its unkempt lawn and garage door that closed only two-thirds of the way. The place resembles a child's drawing of a house, plain but warm and familiar.

Pauline remains still, not knowing what to do. She looks at her knee—blood is oozing down her shin.

"Come on," he says.

His porch light is on so she sees him waving her inside from behind the screen door.

She goes after him, the image of the grand piano in the window prodding her forward.

His home is bare, unadorned. Other than the piano, a brown leather couch rests against the far wall, a black and white sketch of a classical composer hanging above it. An old writing desk is hidden away in the corner, on it a lamp with a jade green shade and a chestnutwood-framed photo of his parents. The man has his mother's almond-shaped eyes and father's chiseled cheekbones.

She watches the man, who is not much taller than she, reach for the uppermost shelf of his wall niche. He presents a first aid kit and a can of antiseptic spray.

"I'm John," he says as he kneels in front of her.

"Pauline," she says, extending her hand.

He shakes it quickly and proceeds to inspect the wound as if he were a doctor.

"This might hurt," he says, holding the spray nozzle to the wound.

She cringes but bites on her tongue to stay still. He wraps the kneecap several times with a rectangle of gauze, taping down the corners.

"Swing your knee back and forth."

She complies.

"Too tight?"

She nods.

"You have to be able to move it or else you can't walk," he says, unwrapping the gauze and rewrapping it.

Maybe he is a doctor, she thinks. Maybe he plays the piano in his free time. His civility and graciousness hint at a life that is far removed from this part of the city.

When John is finished dressing the wound, he sits on the piano bench, leaning his back against the keys, causing a cluster of them to chime. He looks at her, puzzled, as if she were a wild animal that had broken into his house. "May I ask?"

"Ask what?" Pauline is not used to the restriction of her knee movement and limps toward the couch. She runs her fingers along the gauze-swathed knee, its stinging now replaced by numbness.

"What were you doing out there?"

She doesn't answer. She doesn't know how, the whole night as if a dream to her.

A crackle of thunder goes off like a gunshot in the distant sky. John turns to the open window. "It was forecasted to rain tonight," he says, as if slyly remarking on her imprudent decision to go out tonight.

Pauline can taste the dampness dancing outside. She did not pack an umbrella.

"I ran away," she confesses, more to herself than to him.

"Hmmm..."

"But I shouldn't have."

"But you did." He points his bristly chin to her knapsack.

"I shouldn't have," she repeats.

"Then why did you?"

"I should go back."

"You should."

Their words intertwine. They turn to the window when the sound of rain begins hitting the porch.

"I'm gonna have to drive you home."

"No—"

"Well, I can't send you out into the rain."

"I can't go back there."

“You can’t stay here,” he says. A skeptical look is in his eyes, “Is it that bad?”

“My parents—they fight all the time. It’s like I’m not even there. Sometimes I just want it to be over so I don’t have to wonder.” She gives him an earnest look. “Why am I here if things were going to be this way?”

“Because people, even your parents,” John says, “can lose sight of where they’re going.”

“Well, they can go on without me.”

“Where were you planning on running to?”

Pauline shrugs, “Anywhere but home.”

“But there’s nowhere for you to go but home.”

She looks at him, offended, even though he’s a stranger and she has no right.

John shakes his head, as if chiding her for her naiveté. He picks up his keychain off the piano, which has a gold treble clef dangling from it. “Your parents are going to send cops all over the city looking for you. I don’t want to get in trouble for keeping you here.”

“No—not yet,” she stalls, “after the rain.” She is pleading with him. She turns to the piano again, looking at it longingly, its black lid propped up and gleaming like a stallion on its hind legs. “Are you a doctor or a pianist?”

“Not a medical doctor,” he says, chuckling. “I compose music.” He points his chin to the writing desk and the pile of sheet music on the floor. “Do you play?”

“I listen.”

“I’m conducting a piece next month—going back to China.”

“Why are you here?”

“Just finished my PhD. thesis in performance—I’m going back home.”

Pauline nodded, realizing why his home was so unfurnished.

“You cold?” he asks when he sees her shivering.

“I’ve got a jacket,” she gets up, but John flaps his hand, urging her to sit back down.

He goes to her knapsack, unzips the bag and tosses the jacket to her. He returns to the piano bench.

“My parents wanted me to be a medical doctor,” he began. “I applied for med school to appease them, got accepted—didn’t expect to—but refused to go. My father disowned me when I was eighteen.” John twists his body to face the keyboard and fools around with an arpeggio in a minor key. “It’ll be my first concert.” His fingers move swiftly across the ivory as if he is brushing snow off a frozen pond and not banging keys.

“So everything is good now. You’ve proven to them you’re doing well.”

“My father,” he says, “is a very proud man. My mother would not do anything to disrespect his decision. I’ve written to them, told them I’m coming back home.”

“And what did they say?”

He looks at her. “I’m still waiting.”

“I can’t wait,” Pauline says, swallowing the painful throbbing in her throat. “I can’t.”

“You can’t do nothing,” he says. “That won’t fix anything.” He marches over to pick up her knapsack and holds it out to her. “Time to go home.”

She looks at her knapsack, but doesn’t take it; instead looks away from his grip and out the window.

“What do you have waiting for you if you run away?”

Pauline bites hard onto her lower lip. “It’s still raining—” she says, her gaze avoiding his.

John opens his mouth, as if about to speak, then sighs instead. He gently sets her knapsack by her side and walks to the piano; he nudges the bench closer and sits down, his body arched forward, his fingers resting firmly on the keys—but differently this time: in those initial seconds, he is still, as if he is waiting

for the energy inside of him to build up for the very first note, and when he plays it, the sound is so faint Pauline hangs onto it in anticipation of the next, and then the next, until she finds herself fully immersed in the melody.

Pauline feels like she is listening to a story unfold and she doesn't want to leave until she hears the last note. The discordant tones, the unpredictable rhythms, the abrupt shifts from one register to another—she realizes that these are intimations of John's story, the music like nothing she's heard before, coming from a place she knows she's never been.

She closes her eyes, wondering if she were to have such power, what her music would sound like, but all she can hear now is the soft, erratic beating of the falling rain.