

Lullabies for Little Criminals

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Extract

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life with jules

1

Right before my twelfth birthday, my dad, Jules, and I moved into a two-room apartment in a building that we called the Ostrich Hotel. It was the first time I could remember taking a taxicab anywhere. It let us off in the alley behind the building, where all the walls had pretty graffiti painted on them. There was a cartoon cow with a sad look on its face and a girl with an oxygen mask holding a tiny baby in her arms.

Jules was wearing a fur hat and a long leather jacket. He was all in a hurry to get our stuff out of the taxi because it was so cold. ‘Stupid, lousy prick of a bastard, it’s cold!’ Jules screamed. That’s the only type of thing anyone could say while outside in that weather. I think he was also in shock that the cabdriver had charged him ten bucks.

Jules took a suitcase filled with his clothes in one hand and a record player that closed into a white suitcase in the other. I was sure that he was going to drop it because he was wearing a pair of leather boots with flat soles that he had fallen madly in love with at the Army surplus store. They didn’t have any treads on the bottom, so they gave his feet the funny illusion of moving in all directions at once. He slipped just outside the door of the hotel and had to land on his knees to break his fall.

I had my own little vinyl suitcase with green flowers and my name, Baby, written on it with black permanent marker, bulging with my clothes and my homework. I also had a plastic bag filled with dolls that I was dragging on the ground behind me.

There was a glass window over the front door on which were painted gold cursive letters that spelled out L'Hotel Autriche. This of course meant the Austrian Hotel, but Jules wasn't a particularly good reader. There were old-fashioned radiators all along the hallways with designs of roses on them. Jules loved the radiators. He said they were the only things that could keep an apartment warm. You had to stand on a floral carpet and wipe your boots before going up the stairs. Jules had already picked up the keys, so we just ignored the woman sleeping at the desk.

The apartment was small, with a living room and a tiny bedroom for me in the back. Like all the apartments in the hotels on that street, it came furnished. The wallpaper wasn't bad, although it had peeled off in spots near the ceiling. It was blue with tiny black stars on it here and there. The carpet had been worn down so much that you couldn't see what pattern it used to have and the light switch was practically black from so many hands turning it on and off.

It had the same smell of wet clothes and pot that our last apartment had. It smelled as if a florist shop had caught on fire and all the flowers were burning. I didn't mind any apartment so long as there weren't any tiny amber-colored cockroaches that disappeared into holes. Our last apartment was bigger but wouldn't stay warm. The heat from the electric baseboards just made Jules sweat and then get colder.

We had decided to leave abruptly in the end. Jules was

nervous about a friend of his named Kent murdering him in his sleep. Kent had gone to Oshawa to work in a ski pole factory for the winter season and had left his two electric guitars, an amp, and a bag of clothes at our apartment in exchange for two cartons of cigarettes. They were reservation cigarettes and they had three feathers on each box. Jules smoked the cigarettes one after the other, as if he had an infinite supply. Even though he said they were like smoking shredded-up tires and chicken bones and they were going to kill him before he turned forty, he chain-smoked them nonetheless.

Jules had a little kid's sense of time and after a month, when all the cigarettes were gone, he didn't seem to believe that Kent was ever going to come back. He sold the equipment for fifty dollars. Two days later, Kent called and left a message saying that he would be coming back into town to pick up his stuff. Jules didn't have any problem-solving skills and he panicked.

'I can't get his shit back! I threw his clothes in the trash.'

'What's he going to do?' I yelled, jumping up on the couch, as if I'd seen a mouse.

'Fuck, he'll run me over with his car. All I need is a couple of broken legs. I can barely walk down the street as it is. You know what they call someone who can't walk? An invalid!'

'Can't you buy back his guitars?' I screamed, hopping from foot to foot on the couch cushions.

'They're worth like a thousand dollars. I only got fifty dollars for them. I'll never be able to get them back. What did he expect me to do? Keep his instruments here for the rest of my life? I've already probably got arthritis from stubbing my toes against his shit.'

That night I had a dream that a pair of running shoes were following me down the street and I woke up in a cold sweat. I had never met Kent, but Jules got me so worked up about him that I couldn't eat my lunch at school the next day. And that evening, when the doorbell finally did ring, my belly button felt as if it had come unthreaded and had fallen down through the floorboards.

Jules and I sat nervously next to each other on the couch, until we heard the footsteps walk away. Then he jumped up and peered out the peephole for five minutes before deciding the coast was clear and opening the door. He stepped out into the hallway and came back holding out a note for me to see. It read: 'Where the hell are you??? I came by for my stuff.'

'This doesn't mean anything,' Jules said, holding up the note. 'You have to send it registered mail.'

He and my mother had both been fifteen when I was born. She had died a year later, so he'd been left to raise me all by himself. It didn't make him any more mature than any other twenty-six-year-old, though. He practically fell on the floor and died when a song that he liked came on the radio. He was always telling people that he was color-blind because he thought it made him sound original. He also didn't look too much like a parent. He was boyish and had blue eyes with dirty blond hair that stuck up all over the place. It sometimes had the shape of a hat he'd been wearing earlier. I thought of him as my best friend, as if we were almost the same age.

If I'd had parents who were adults, I probably would never have been called Baby. The little stores on St Catherine Street I made Jules walk me past always had gold necklaces with pendants that said 'Baby'. My heart skipped a beat whenever I heard it in a song. I loved how

people got confused when Jules and I had to explain how it wasn't just a nickname. It was an ironic name. It didn't mean you were innocent at all. It meant you were cool and gorgeous. I was only a kid, but I was looking forward to being a lady with that name. I had stringy blonde hair and was skinny as hell, but Jules's friend Lester said I'd be a heartbreaker someday soon.

But having a young parent meant you had to pack up your stuff in an hour and run away from a twenty-two-year-old from Oshawa who was going to be mad at you for having sold his guitars.

The bathroom in our new apartment was tiny, but it managed to have a little blue bathtub. This was a good thing because Jules claimed that it was necessary for his self-preservation to sit in a hot bath for at least an hour a day. A glass soap dish shaped like a shell had been left behind and a set of fake nails were lying in it, like petals that had fallen off a flower. It was strange that someone had lived here just hours before, and now it was all ours.

There was a restaurant right under us, and you could reach out the window and unscrew one of the lightbulbs from its sign, if you wanted to. Jules ran downstairs to pick us up some hot dogs and fries from there.

'We're localized here!' Jules yelled, kicking open the door with his foot. 'We should have moved here a long time ago.'

I could tell that Jules was finding it a real treat that the hotel was right on busy St Laurent and St Catherine. He didn't like having to walk even a block to the convenience store. St Laurent Street wasn't an ideal place to raise a kid. It ran right through Montreal, dividing its east and west sections. It was also the red-light district and, to me,

the most beautiful section of town. The theaters where famous people used to perform in the twenties and thirties had been converted into cheap hotels and strip joints. There were always prostitutes around. They made me feel bad when I was little because they always had beautiful high-heeled boots, while I had to wear ugly galoshes. I closed my eyes when I passed them. In general, everyone dressed like they hadn't gone home from a wedding the night before. You could go to the Salvation Army, buy a pin-striped jacket and stick a plastic flower in the lapel, and call yourself an aristocrat—everyone was living a sort of fictional existence.

The French newspapers of the district had strippers on the front pages with their wrists in handcuffs and their breasts falling all over the place. These were people who didn't care about international news. If you never thought about Paris, you'd never think about how you were so far away from there. There were a lot of Hell's Angels around, buzzing down the street like bees. It was a joy to see them all drive by, like a parade, on their way to blow up a restaurant.

That first night in the new place, Jules dismantled the fire alarm so that he could smoke in peace. I loved when he smoked a cigarette with the lights off. The smoke in the dark looked like the dove that whispered the future to saints in paintings. He had on a T-shirt he always wore that had a little hand at the bottom, holding about twenty balloons. When he wore it, the song '99 Red Balloons' would play in my head. Across the street from us was an old theater with a million lightbulbs on the marquee. Only seven or eight of them worked, as if they were the first stars at night that you were supposed to wish on. Jules stretched out to sleep on the foldout couch and I

climbed into our small bed with a brass headboard. He opened his little white record player and put on a record. He fell asleep before it was over and I listened to the needle going around and around. There is always the sound of children roller skating at the end of every record.

Since I had to take a new route to school, Jules decided to walk me there the next morning. It was more for a sense of ceremony, though, because I knew my way around the area so well that I never got lost. I wished that I could get lost, just to know what it felt like. I wanted to be able to wake up in the morning and not know where I was, but no such luck. We'd just moved too many times for that to happen. That neighborhood looked the worst in the morning. The street was empty and there was vomit on the sidewalk. All the colorful lights had been turned off and the sky was the color of television static.

Outside my school, we gave each other seven kisses for good luck. Then Jules announced that he had to go to the bathroom and took off running home. The kids started laughing at me when I walked into class because they had seen Jules pecking at me like a hen from the window and my face was all red from the stubble of his beard. The teacher shushed everyone up as she handed back our book reports on *The Cricket in Times Square*. Jules had helped me with it the week before. He had told me that nothing was what it appeared to be in a book. He'd said that a cricket in a subway represented the Jewish People. According to him, the cricket was the same thing as the Fiddler on the Roof. I don't know why I had taken his advice, seeing as how he hadn't actually read the book. The teacher handed back my paper with a zero and said I had to redo it.

As I was walking home, I spotted Jules on the street corner. He was craning his neck all over the place, looking around for someone. He started gesticulating in a way that made it seem as if he was having an imaginary argument in his head. He kept putting his hand, palm up, in front of him, as if he was asking the universe, 'What? What? What?' His hat was down over his eyes, and when I called out his name he had to tilt his head way up to get a look at me. I knew it wasn't me that he had been looking for, but when he saw me, he shouted out happily anyhow.

His girlfriend had told me that the only thing Jules had going for him was a smile. At the time, I thought this was such a wonderful comment. It made me happy because I thought everyone saw that he had a nice smile. I didn't like how people always gave him the right-of-way when he was walking down the sidewalk. He tripped on nothing as he walked toward me.

'Hey, it's my sweet little apple pie,' he cried out.

'Hey, Jules,' I said.

'Did you get your book report back?'

'I got an A,' I lied.

'Far out!' he yelled. 'I told you I was a genius. An undervalued genius.'

2

A week after we'd moved to the Ostrich Hotel was my twelfth birthday. Jules made me a cake and brought out a piñata that he'd made by gluing layer upon layer of newspaper on a balloon and painting it white with Liquid Paper. It looked like something you'd find at a construction site, or something you'd transport drugs across the

border in. I hit at it with a wooden spoon, but eventually the handle broke. So then I smashed it with a chair leg and still nothing happened. I swung the leg again and hit Jules in the shin. While he was hopping around, I tried to rip it open at the top with my fingers without him noticing.

‘What are you doing? That’s not how you bust a piñata! I worked all night on it.’

His best friend, a twenty-five-year-old blond guy named Lester who drove a green Trans Am, showed up. They washed dishes at the same restaurant and were almost always together. Lester had a temporary job once, handing out pamphlets for an electoral candidate, and still had stickers of the guy’s face on his leather jacket. He hugged me and I looked into what was left of the candidate’s smiling face. Lester always wore a chain with a golden Bambi pendant hanging off it, which was how I had learned the meaning of irony.

Taking in our piñata situation, Lester said that he wished he’d brought his gun. He took a big bowie knife out of his packsack and started stabbing at it instead. I put my hands over my ears as Lester hacked into it. Afterward, we all sat on the couch and picked candies out of the thin slit Lester had made in the piñata. There weren’t that many sweets inside, so we ate slowly. Each candy was like taking a chick out of its egg too early.

Jules also gave me a little white fur hat and I immediately put it on. I looked at my reflection in the mirror and thought that I was good-looking enough to be in a circus with men throwing knives at me. I was especially good-looking after I’d eaten spaghetti sauce and my lips were all stained orange. Whenever things were going well, I started to feel vain.

I could tell that the hat was secondhand because the care instructions had worn right off the inside tag. Jules had a gift for finding wonderful garbage at the thrift store. Once he had found five dollars in a pair of pants that he had paid a dollar fifty for. Next he handed me a cardboard shoe box, and when I pulled off the cover there was an old-fashioned marionette wearing a blue dress with tiny red flowers inside it. She had a long nose and peach cheeks and was really human-looking. I named her Roxanne and I loved her instantly and passionately. I made her dance on the coffee table, recounting her life story, until Jules and Lester were ready to commit suicide from boredom.

Afterward, we were all hanging out in front of the television watching *Benny Hill*. Jules and Lester were lounging on the couch, laughing their heads off. I was lying on my belly on the floor, and I'd start laughing whenever they did because their laughs were so contagious. We were having a good time.

'Let's go get some chocolate milk,' Lester said all of a sudden.

'Oh, yeah!' Jules jerked upright. 'It's been on my mind too. I'd like just a little taste to strengthen me up.'

'I know this guy who's selling it dark brown.'

'Jesus! Let's find him. I've only got ten bucks, though.'

'That's okay. I've got about twelve. It'll do.'

On the television screen, a policeman opened his car door and three girls in their underwear scrambled out of it and ran down the street. Neither Jules nor Lester laughed; they had both totally lost interest in the show. They sprung up off the couch to go get their chocolate milk. Lester almost stepped on me while reaching for his coat, which was lying on the coffee table.

‘Watch out!’ I screamed.

‘Sorry, Baby,’ Jules said, even though he was on the other side of the room and hadn’t done anything. ‘We’re just going to the store. We’ll be back in fifteen minutes. Don’t move an inch. Watch the show and tell me everything I missed when I get back.’

Jules and his friends had been calling heroin chocolate milk for years. They did it so they could at least pretend I didn’t know what was going on. I don’t know exactly how I knew, but I just did. Jules had a backgammon set with electrical tape around it that I wasn’t allowed to touch that he kept his drugs and works in. He had red marks like mosquito bites on his arms even in the winter. A boy had made hickeys on his arm in class and had shown me and it had reminded me of Jules’s arms.

For a kid, I knew a lot of things about what it felt like to use heroin, just from looking and listening. Supposedly, it was like shaking hands with God. It was cool like a Black Panther. It was like putting your face on the fur collar of a great leather jacket. If you passed by a poster of a band of singers coming to town, you could hear them singing.

I looked at the television screen and the credits were rolling. Jules went out the door hopping on one foot, trying to tie his shoes without slowing down. I heard him and Lester go down the stairs, jumping the last few steps. I usually waited in the apartment for them, but their excitement was too overwhelming. I wanted to be a part of it. I put on my new white hat and my ski jacket with yellow stripes like lightning bolts on the side. I grabbed Roxanne and ran down to the corner after them.

They kept walking ahead of me down the street, as if not to include me. I had to run to stay close behind them.

They both had such long legs that they were hard to keep up with at the best of times. They could smoke and drink coffee and eat and reenact a bar fight while walking down the street without even slowing down.

They got to a skinny building that had tiny different-colored ceramic tiles all over the front and black tiles with gold stars on them on the lobby's floor. It was a more modern building than the rest on the block, so it must have been built in a spot where an older one had burned down. A drug dealer named Paul lived there. I'd been to his apartment once about a year before. He'd just gotten a dog from the SPCA named Dostoyevsky. He couldn't pronounce it, so he changed it to Donut. I was looking forward to playing with it.

'Baby!' Jules turned and yelled at me. 'Quit following us. Go play with your doll! Get lost, okay?'

'I want to come with you,' I said. 'I like Paul!'

'*I like Paul,*' he repeated sarcastically. 'Go find some friends your own age, okay? Trust me, you don't like Paul.'

'I'll wait here then.'

When the buzzer sounded, Jules and Lester pulled open the door and stepped in. It was one of those metal doors that slams shut after you let go. Once it banged closed, there was no way I could get in. I pounded on the door. Jules leaned over and opened the mail slot that was made to put circulars through.

'Look, go run and play and you can eat dinner with chopsticks tomorrow, okay! I'll give you some money to see a movie!'

As he shouted out all my favorite things, they seemed so cheap to me. They paled in comparison to my desire to be with him.

‘Screw the chopsticks,’ I whispered to myself as he and Lester ran up the stairs.

I spotted a big rock on the ground. I picked it up and pretended it was an injured bird and held it in my hand and stroked it. I encouraged it to stay alive and whispered to it that it would fly again soon. Then I put it in my pocket with the other rocks I’d rescued. I sat down on a bench outside the building and waited a few minutes, but they didn’t come back down.

I was still clingy like a little kid with Jules and I hated when he dumped me like that. I was so lonely all of a sudden. When I felt lonely, I really felt lonely. I couldn’t believe that anyone else in the world could manage to feel as lonely as I did. When I was a baby, Jules had made up a story in which I was the main character. In the tale, I was on a ship sailing to Europe that sank in a storm. I survived by climbing onto a floating armchair that had been in the captain’s cabin. I floated all the way to Paris in that chair and there was a big parade for me in the streets when I arrived. I used to beg Jules to tell me this story over and over again. I had loved the part where I realized that everyone else on the ship had drowned and I was all alone on the giant ocean. It had given me such a chill. Now I regretted that he had ever told me that story because there were times, like now, when I found myself on that armchair. I could even sort of feel the sidewalk rocking under my feet, as if I were on some waves.

The moon was out already and looked like a melting bit of ice in a glass of water. A few big snowflakes started falling here and there, all slowly, like spiders on their invisible webs coming down.

I held Roxanne up in front of me and discovered that

she didn't impress me much anymore. I was annoyed with her because I was stuck with her instead of Jules. I got up and dragged her down the street. I decided to go to the indoor ice-skating rink a few blocks away. It was by the housing projects, so all the kids who lived there hung out at the rink all day.

Strings of Christmas lights lit the place up all year. People there would steal everything you had, so you had to skate with your shoes in a plastic bag at your side. But I wasn't even able to skate. Jules had gotten me a pair of skates, but I had unscrewed the blades and banged them off with a hammer. I wanted to have a pair of fancy white boots like the kids in the illustrations in a book I had read called *The Railway Children*. The skates were impossible to walk in, though, because the soles didn't bend, so I had to throw them away, weeping.

I saw some kids I knew in the bleachers. They were eating a little jar of maraschino cherries that they had all probably pitched in to buy. Someone had come up with the idea that maraschino cherries were soaked in whiskey, and everywhere I went kids were eating them by the jarful. I'd asked Jules about it and he had said it was bullshit. I'd told some kids that, but they thought Jules didn't know anything because he was so much younger than all the other parents. They'd informed me it was quite likely that Jules was a numbskull.

A boy named Todd spotted me first. He was wearing a tight blue T-shirt with motorcycles on it and burgundy corduroys. His mother wrote his name on the outside of his clothes with a magic marker so that nobody could steal them. That was a considerable waste of time because nobody would be caught dead in his clothes. He had to be extra aggressive to overcome the stigma of

having his name written boldly on every single thing he owned.

‘What have you got there, a doll?’ he said incredulously. ‘Oh, man! I can’t believe it. What the hell are you doing with a doll?’

‘She’s been following me around,’ I said. ‘I can’t get rid of her.’

‘What?’ they all demanded, now that I was messing with their sense of reality.

‘She’s a pain in the butt, I swear to God,’ I continued. I held the puppet up to my face. ‘How come you have those holes in your elbows, Roxanne? Is that like a bad polio vaccination?’

All the kids laughed when I insulted her. The boys made lewd comments. ‘Come on, Roxy, please, Roxy. How about giving me a little piece of ass.’

Roxanne just laughed. She was a survivor, Roxanne. I guessed that I’d give her that.

Someone called my name loudly from the other side of the skating rink. I saw it was Marika, my old neighbor. I used to be madly in love with her because she was missing a finger and she would never give a straight answer about where it had gone to. It was disgusting and beautiful at the same time. She also had greasy black bangs that she wore down to her nose, and I found them really debonair or something. She was four years older than me, but she didn’t ever seem to notice our age gap.

I walked over reluctantly, though, because, despite her great beauty, she was always making me do creepy things with her. Once she looked up a strip joint in the phone book and we called up to ask if they were hiring. When they said they were, we almost lost our minds, because before we had somehow assumed that strippers were

fictional creatures, like mermaids. The last time I'd been over at her house, she had taken the lace curtain down from the kitchen window and bobby-pinned it to my hair. Then she had convinced me to marry her brother. She wouldn't let me go home until I had kissed him, and now we were married.

She was wearing a black patent-leather jacket that was a size too big and made her seem like she was somehow dressed in a wet umbrella.

'Did you see Quincy?' she asked, nodding toward the rink, where her brother was skating.

He was skating with a cast on his arm. He had drawn a naked lady on it last week, but the principal had made him cover it in Liquid Paper. I cringed at the sight of him.

'Is it your birthday?' she asked.

'Yeah, I'm twelve.'

'You have to lose your virginity when you turn twelve,' she told me.

She had a tiny jam jar filled with beer and she offered it to me. Jules sometimes drank beer that had a beautiful unicorn on the label. I used to beg for a sip just because I found the label so lovely. It tasted bitter and always made me feel as if I'd been crying. I shook my head at the jar.

'Suit yourself,' she said, taking the tiniest sip possible.

'I thought you were going to get me and Quincy divorced.'

'Do you know how long a divorce can take?'

'Did you even start?'

'I'm not going to dignify that question. My brother isn't interested in you anymore. He says you are too flat-chested.'

I shrugged, pretending not to be offended. She was

troubling me already. A couple teenagers on the ice started yelling obscenities at each other and the echo of their voices made it sound as if we were all at the bottom of a well.

‘You could make a lot of money in that little white hat of yours. You could have anything you want,’ Marika said suddenly.

‘Yeah, I know,’ I said, not having any idea what she was talking about.

‘Do you want to see something crazy?’ she asked me.

‘All right.’

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of bills. I’d never seen one of my friends with that much money in her hands. We were broke in a way that only kids can be broke. Our toes were black with dye from wearing boots that weren’t waterproof. We had infected earlobes and green rings around our fingers from cheap jewelry. No one ever even had a chocolate bar. We’d steal containers of cottage cheese and eat them together in the park. It was a miracle to see so much money in the hands of someone so young. It seemed to be a magic trick and I stared at it, waiting for it to turn back into something else.

‘I had sex with a man for fifty bucks,’ she said. ‘Me and my cousin have been doing it on Ontario Street. It’s easy. She made two hundred dollars one night.’

I wasn’t sure whether or not she was joking, so I laughed loudly and briefly. My laugh sounded different than usual, as if I was laughing in a room with no furniture. I was still uncomfortable with the idea of sex. When I first heard of French kissing, I thought it was something that only mental patients and the kids who failed grade four would do when they grew up.

‘Do you want to know the details?’ she asked, leaning her face so close that it was almost touching mine.

When she spoke, her breath smelled like cigarettes and dead things. There was something inhuman about her, suddenly, as if when she opened her mouth and tipped it backward you would see mechanical inner workings, like a little dumb weight instead of a tonsil. If she coughed and you looked in her Kleenex, you would see nails and screws. That’s probably why she was missing a finger. She had probably just fallen and it had broken off. I felt so lonely all of a sudden, as if I were the only human left in the world.

I whispered that I had to go back home and I turned around and walked away from her.

People gave you a hard time about being a kid at twelve. They didn’t want to give you Halloween candy anymore. They said things like, ‘If this were the Middle Ages, you’d be married and you’d own a farm with about a million chickens on it.’ They were trying to kick you out of childhood. Once you were gone, there was no going back, so you had to hold on as long as you could. Marika was beckoning from the other side.

I stepped outside into the cold, and since I hadn’t taken off my jacket while inside the skating rink, it was twice as cold as before. It was dark outside now. My breath in the cold air was bleach that accidentally spilled on a black T-shirt.

I started walking in the wrong direction, heading toward our old apartment building, and then I remembered that we had moved. I turned in the right direction, and this time I started running. Jules had always told me that if I met someone dangerous to run back home.

Home was something that you could fit into a suitcase and move in a taxi for ten dollars. Home was wherever Jules and I were together.

I hurried up the carpeted stairs of the Ostrich Hotel. The metal banisters curled up at the ends like the waves in Chinese ink drawings. I opened the front door of our apartment and felt the heat come out at me. Jules had already cranked it way up and had put masking tape all along the sides of the windows, so that nothing, not even the air, could get in.

I walked into the living room and saw a man I didn't know sitting on the couch between Jules and Lester. They were sitting there like Wynken, Blynken, and Nod: three little boys who were tucked in together, about to sail off into the starry universe. They all had a similar expression when I walked in, with their eyebrows raised and their eyes closed, as if they were bored aristocrats. There were glasses and jars filled with water all over the coffee table in front of them. It looked like a dismantled chandelier.

Jules was holding a teacup daintily in his hand to tip his cigarette ashes in. He opened his mouth and I waited several seconds for him to get the words off the tip of his tongue.

'This is Kent,' Jules said, pointing in the opposite direction of the stranger on the couch, but obviously meaning him.

Kent half opened his eyes and smiled. He closed his eyes again, but his face kept its jolly expression. Once you smiled on heroin, your smile could last a whole hour. Kent had a Fat Albert key chain attached to the zipper of his ski jacket. He had black hair with gel on it that had frozen outside and turned white. He had purple running

shoes with fat green shoelaces. Looking at Kent, I felt incredibly safe all of a sudden. If this was our worst enemy, Jules and I had nothing to worry about.

Jules came into my room later that night after Lester and Kent had left. He had his hands in front of him feeling around, although it wasn't particularly dark. He did that even when the light was on when he was stoned. He squeezed in next to me. He was in the mood to talk, I could tell. We lay on the bed as if we were crammed in a confessional booth together. When he was stoned, he was honest. I loved when he told me his secrets.

'So Kent showed up freaking out and saying stuff he didn't mean. It was out of control here. But Lester offered to give him that guitar he found backstage when he was working at the Medley.'

'You mean the guitar he stole from the Medley.'

'If Lester didn't take it, someone else would have, so it isn't exactly stealing.'

'What about his clothes?'

'His clothes were ugly. He can't dress. I gave him that top hat I got at the Salvation Army.'

'You loved that hat!'

'And my green suit jacket with the sparkly thread.'

'No!' I cried. All his friends were after that jacket and so I was proud of it.

'None of that stuff matters, Baby,' he said sweetly. Although he might feel differently about his losses in the morning when he wasn't high, I decided to enjoy our carefree reprieve.

'I'm sorry I told you to get lost earlier,' he continued. 'I didn't mean it. Did you have a nice birthday?'

'Yes.'

‘My dad’s birthday is also coming up in a couple days. That horrible, horrible bastard,’ he said. As he spoke, he stared amorously into the eyes of my stuffed lion.

‘How come you don’t like your dad?’ I asked. I’d been given hundreds of explanations over the course of my life, but I wanted to start up a conversation.

‘Jesus! He ripped a handful of hair off the back of my head. He dragged me down the hall and threw me out of the house. He broke my collarbone once.’

‘Why was he so mean to you?’

‘Everyone was mean in Val des Loups. It’s in the water. We had a dog that always drank from the river and he became clairvoyant. He could tell the future.’

‘How did you know he could tell that?’

‘Because his eyes were all bugging out of his head and he was always barking for no reason.’

Jules had grown up on the outskirts of a town called Val des Loups, about an hour outside of Montreal. To Jules it was the antithesis of all that was good and civilized in the world. According to Jules, in Val des Loups the dogs were all missing legs and the women were hideously ugly. I had a teacher from elementary school who told me that she was from Val des Loups. I almost lost my mind when she described it as a nice little town. I kind of figured out then that the Val des Loups Jules described wasn’t really a real place.

Once he’d told me that everyone boxed in Val des Loups. It was part of life. His dad made him go into a makeshift boxing ring once. When it was Jules’s turn to fight, he started coughing his brains out in the middle of the ring, finding it chilly standing there with just shorts on; he passed out cold the first time he got punched. He said his dad had tried to strengthen him up by making

him do a hundred push-ups. He was outside for hours working on the hundred push-ups. That's why he had lousy lungs now and always had to see doctors about them.

I knew a lot of the little details about Jules's past just from things he'd told me here and there. He claimed he didn't take a bath for the first five years of his life. He said they used to eat hard-boiled eggs out on the lawn for breakfast, lunch, and supper. When Jules was eleven years old, he broke his arm riding a bicycle and then a car hit him six months later. Then, to top it all off, he set his bed on fire with a cigarette when he was fifteen. He had fallen asleep smoking and had started to dream about giant white gardenias floating above him and it hurt his eyes to look at them. He woke up realizing there were flames all around him. After that his father kicked him out of the house.

I also knew that when he was little, he had a red raincoat with yellow flowers on it that was for girls. He couldn't read very well, but he liked to draw. Once he had drawn a dog and the teacher accused him of tracing it from a book. He'd been told when he was a little kid that he had severe learning disabilities. He was taken out of school when he was in third grade and went to a tutor instead, and that hadn't helped.

This was so tragic. It made me feel almost as sad and creepy as the story about being stranded at sea. I loved to hear these terrible stories, as they were like Grimms' fairy tales to me. The stories about Val des Loups helped me to feel better than other kids. Unlike them, I had come from a country of great mystery and pain.

Jules was still under the impression that he was a big shot for having moved to Montreal. It was his biggest

accomplishment. Once he'd picked up a broken pair of glasses from the grocery cart at the Salvation Army and put them on. 'These are so Val des Loups,' he'd claimed. 'How so?' I had asked. 'They're just ugly and have no style.'

We had left Val des Loups right after my mother died. He would tell me everything about the place except anything that had to do with my mother. I'd given up asking about her, but I started pleading for more details about his own life in Val des Loups. He lit a cigarette, closed his eyes, and got a big smile on his face. Jules was able to smoke in slow motion when he was stoned. The smoke came out of his mouth like ribbons being pulled off a present. Then he started getting ridiculous.

'We had fried snowballs for dessert. I had one toy. It was a chair. My mother put a wig on it and told me to pretend it was a horse. I'd take my chair outside and ride it. I found a key chain with a rabbit's foot on it and I kept it as a teddy bear. I named it Louis and it was my best friend. I brought it everywhere and talked to it. I had to keep him with me all the time. If my mother had found him, she would have used him to scrub the pots.'

I was waiting for him to continue but then realized that his head had slumped over to the side and he had passed out. I took the cigarette out of his hand and put it in a glass next to my bed. He was hot as hell, but I liked him there right next to me, stoned and not going anywhere. I felt protected and perfect. I could forget what Marika had said. Everything in the world was designed for a child and was safe. Even the little cockroaches in the wall were clockwork. They were made with the most beautiful tiny bolts from a factory in Malaysia, with little buttons underneath to switch them on and off.