

CANADIAN GIRLFRIENDS

Laura Henriksen

FOR whom is this a problem now
and for whom did it get better. I saw you
wiggling in the backyard, home for spiders
starting over, you looked like a lesser
sun god expelled from the hot tub for
unsettling the onlooking bathers. Did you
lack patience under the cloud cover, is that
why you're back now? Persuading your
neighbors with one beckoning finger
till met on the boardwalk we sweltered
and swerved and I turned like a lover
back to the devil, my neck pale and
tender as a carp's in the dirtiest
water. My crown slips down my
forehead, more strange and more powerful
are these strange powers. At my journey's
end I'll think I hear music. *Can you believe it?*
he asks but it's not for believing. We went
to investigate the source of the light.

MARY SHELLEY'S STEP-SISTER

She was the reason there even was a party. People are always forgetting that part, but without her, who knows if there would even be a handsome vampyre, if there would even be a monstrous stitched amalgamation of different pieces of dead people, causing generations of readers to reflect on life and death and obligation and also sometimes motherhood. She started the party that brought out the monsters. And that's not even the first thing I love about her, the first thing I love about her is that her name wasn't really Claire Clairmont, her name was Clara Mary Jane Clairmont, and growing up everyone called her Jane, but she saw an opportunity to be more musical, more striking, and she went for it. That's so Claire. Dead for 250 years, still reluctant at the fantasy party, casting back a brighter light from everyone else like a mirror but better, illuminating the whole villa, the wildest of them all I imagine, and the most fun, and also probably the smartest, but that could just be me and my long history of equating intelligence more or less directly with how fun and wild you are.

Claire and Mary weren't blood related, and the name Clairmont was made up too. Claire's mom, Mary Jane Vial Clairmont, who also sounds fun as hell, adopted the name, attaching it to a fictional father "Charles Clairmont," to disguise her children's illegitimacy. Claire and Mary become step-sisters when they were both three-years-old and Claire's mom married her neighbor and Mary's dad, William Godwin. The house was tense but not unhappy, there were five kids, two radical anarchist parents, maybe pets, I'm not sure, and Mary Wollstonecraft's ghost. Debts increased in that debt way, and Mary's dad and Claire's mom didn't always get along, but Mary and Claire did. Or maybe not always, but always in all the important ways. I have a sister, I know what it's like. I like to imagine them at twelve, fantasizing about the future and experimenting with the occult, singing to each other perhaps, picnicking in graveyards, doing whatever teenage girls did in Bristol in 1810, their friendship a wrall binding their lives ever tighter and tighter, practically twins with all that twin magic. I read that Claire had a beautiful singing voice. I hope they never got jealous.

When Mary and Percy ran away together to Calais, Claire was there too, thirdendeal and laughing, down for whatever, sixteen-years-old. She spoke the best French of the group. They left behind their older sister, Fanny Imlay, and Percy's first wife, Harriet Westbrook. I wonder if Mary or Claire thought at all about Harriet, who had also been sixteen when she ran away with Percy, like them ready for adventure, like them hoping to be free, but now an abandoned mother of two, harboring suspicions about the true purpose of free love. Fanny and Harriet both killed themselves, Fanny in Wales with laudanum at 22, and Harriet drowned in The Serpentine in Hyde Park at 21. In my heaven, there's a place just for the the forgotten first wives and plus ones of "Great Artists," with free and reliable childcare, no time for geniuses, regular but optional community meetings where they decide, among other things, whether or not satisfaction can be achieved by their former lovers, a water park that cleans itself, and every night a buffet followed by a pousette that never ends.

Before Fanny and Harriet died, but after Mary and Claire and Percy ran away the first time, they ran away again, this time to Switzerland to see Lord Byron, who had exiled himself elegantly and sullenly, trying to get over his inappropriate love for his half-sister, Augusta. It was 1816, a year of such strange weather it's sometimes called the "Year Without a Summer." This crew didn't care about summer though, they made their own summer. 1816 was also called "the Poverty Year" and "Eighteen Hundred and Froze To Death," but again this was not their concern. This is the famous part of the story, there have been movies made about it, my favorite, well, the only one I've seen, is 1986's *Gothic*, wherein Myriam Cyr plays Claire and Natasha Richardson plays Mary. In the movie they make Mary boring, but you just know that wasn't true at all, boring people don't keep mummified hearts in their desks. I can't remember why, but the movie ends with Claire naked, covered in mud, crawling around in the basement of the villa, I think perhaps possessed. Such is the way of all ghost story competitions I suppose.

So many things happened, things I don't know anything about. Claire lived to be 80-years-old, she lived to see Byron, Percy, Mary, her daughter Allegra, Fanny, Harriet, everybody, people I've never heard of, die, and then she herself died in Florence, now dolven but never forgotten, a goddamn legend. She was a governess for a while.

I love to imagine what kind of stories she must have told the kids in her care when they were bored or when they couldn't sleep. I wonder if they believed her. I bet they did, I bet they hung on every word.

DON'T attach to this island, slip
this boat past, Hannah
be a hero. Seduction can
be something else, I turned
to the sun, okay, I went
to my river. A spaceship / no
an astronaut. You may leave
early that doesn't make
it over. You know / it's time,
what would bring it home,
crossing balcony, hearts
in throats, shoes in bags,
felt in silence. Seven times,
seven times, it'll make you new
to something. There was a reason
I came here but then I did
something else, outlined
in the Rachel light. I have
ridden the invisible escalator I have
felt better. Sometimes hair
looks like a guardian, other
times it looks midflight.
Left by my love now all
I do is scold from the cliffs,
under clouds over weather.
I regretted removing the sticker
but by then it was too late.

ANOTHER HOLLYWOOD

Aging movie stars, enrobed, their faces softly glowing behind veils with the wet polished look of Vaseline, haunting the hills, inventing a new language whose signs are all variations of brief glances and neck postures. Their footsteps leave hardly a mark on the grass. An invisible world, each with its own government and celebrities and traditions, at the bottom of every swimming pool. Two lovers separated between two neighboring pools. Wasn't there a plague where everyone started dancing and didn't stop until they died? That but in LA. Noir, but where all the characters turn back and forth without warning between human, mountain lion, and potted succulent. Or they keep turning into each other, without losing for a moment the clandestine drive that pushes them ever forward to their doom. Making a movie, a movie about Los Angeles, told entirely from the perspective of the Pacific. Everyone joins the same spiritualist death cult. Everyone joins a cult led by a woman who looks strikingly like Princess Diana, and who we gradually come to realize is in fact a pagan lunar goddess on earth. In the final chapter she

lays waste to all unbelievers, more terrible and beautiful than the waves. From rags to riches to sleeping on the couch all afternoon for months. A story where someone keeps singing “Life is a Highway” whenever you think you are alone. After achieving the fame he long sought, a man is recognized by and reunited with his long lost and more talented twin, whose celebrity soon eclipses his own. A studio band’s endless last day. What all is stored in a hotel basement. A dark secret, held deep in the chaparral heart of Laurel Canyon, by the ruins of the garden grotto from a mansion burned down that according to mistaken legend belonged to Harry Houdini but actually belonged to no one you’ve heard of, protected by a group of women singers who perform in a nearby club lit by a blue-white spotlight, their voices winding around the hearts of all who hear them like fingers around a bottleneck or seaweed around ankles. Driving home after the show, the listeners stare at the traffic lights and realize they will never again know a moment’s peace.

GEM

There's this popular scary story from the internet that was later adapted for television wherein these stairs appear, attached to nothing visible to the storyteller, in the middle of the woods. On Sundays, my sister and I would watch the show together. So long

as I say it's summer it's summer. The light was so bright I could hear it. The clouds hung so low we cast our shadow upon them. More beautiful than a decorative flamingo at your neighbor's, from the tournament's peak, teeth-rattling in cursive, what I like about scary stories on the internet is that everyone has to agree that it's all true, that's the rule. At her own birthday party she was transformed into a demon and ate all her friends. Wax melted over and all was forgot.

PUT angels on everything
starting with the lamps.
Angels in the molding, angels
on the tea sets, embroidered
on an apron nobody wears.
Women and baby angels
only, with or without wings.
Little putti, symbolizing both
profane passion and the
omnipresence of God,
unsettling in either case when
we consider angel babies as an
afterwards of dead babies. Hold
your hands up as if to say,
“I’m at a loss,” or in some
gesture of humble offering.
You know what I did?
I looked at the pictures
from a celebrity’s wedding,
even though I loathe both
wealth and marriage. I just
want to know what they do
in those houses and I was so
lonesome. I’d climb a hill
and keep on climbing, I’d light
a fire just to watch it die.
Anything you want but only

in nugget form. Having never
before seen such a rock formation
I thought it some strange trash
heap or bush in the moonlight.
So precious I must toss it,
you silly goose. I want it but
if it were mine would I be bored?
Like those stories where you get
a cursed object, say a doll or
watch or locket, and the only way
to rid yourself of its lurking doom
is to pass it on to someone else.
Isn't that a pickle. A real hot potato,
they then just send it on to someone
they dislike, and suddenly it's back in
your possession and you just pass
it back and forth for the next thirty
or forty years between garages
and rented storage units and wonder if
what you feel is love or another
pain and wonder if when relief
comes it will feel like relief
or another emptiness to fill
like a dog in a boat
afraid of the water.

EVERY curse and every wish came true
just like you said they would. I tried
to go, but here I am. I thought I was
on a road until I looked down. In my
heaven, all feelings are met and matched
with equal intensity, and all the angels
either play guitar really well or not
at all. And they're always with you,
nodding their heads in encouragement,
like, Go on. It was in the name of love, it was
in the name of art. It was then I saw
I was crossing a bridge, all things
unfixed. I listened to the same song
over and over again, testing my love,
ready for all pleasure to buckle under
need. I could sit on this hill and watch
the trucks go by forever, all day. They say
it'll be worth it, but what even is it? Home
is where the flower patterns blur
into faces mouthing No future as you
try to fall asleep. What was it
you said? Destiny is what happened.
Well it didn't have to. All that singing
for what.

WHAT JENNIFER THINKS AND FEELS

The winds of heaven mix forever
everything was happening so slow and I
and then all these other people
drop my head to my chest, let my eyes
fill with stars and toy diamonds.

Not much and not yours, I'm overheard
as I whisper, "I believe you"
to the hills at night
the escaped cows I imagine there
disruptive and drunk.

All the machines that find what
can't be found aren't looking for
what I'm looking for. He's not
gonna get it. You ring those
bells right, you little sleuth?
You edge-flirt, trash-dolphin.

But, will it be hard? No, not
with our feet in the lake and
the devil on our side. You just
hold on a minute now, you
just hold on.

HÉLÈNE and I are at the mall, drinking sodas and chewing the straws by the center fountain, waiting for night to fall, for nothing in particular, for a love so great all suffering and joy become limitless. After the mall we'll go home and watch *Hellbound: Hellraiser II*, our favorite movie, and speak again as we do every night about Julia, the evil stepmother, who from her trembling murderous vacuum of desire in the first installment emerges into the sequel skinless, triumphant for a time, getting blood on an Armani suit in the all white living room of her new occult doctor lover who's so full 1980's cocaine at midnight cocaine at noon. Hélène and I love Julia, the chasm of what she would do for love or fun, and as we take turns walking to the fridge and back we declare her again our monarch, the queen of hell. Or we'll go to the grocery store, hover over the tiny floral department, take pictures of the bouquets pose with them as brides. Hélène, I'll ask, where do feelings go once felt? And she'll say they stay right here admiring the carnations, state flower of Ohio, the tulips, likely the cause of the first economic crash, and the lilies common symbols of innocence after death.

WHEN the tour bus arrives at the lake, the lake's best days are already behind it. American Crows flock the trees, they build their nests in the tree crotches with animal hair and the shiny black ribbons of discarded VHS tapes. They would have preferred evergreens, but they're adjustable. There is no one at the canteen, set twenty steps back from the lake. Jennifer has taken a break to investigate a rustling she knows she heard deeper in the woods. If he were there, her manager wouldn't believe in the sound, but he isn't.

Paper animal masks are taped with damp tape to the windows of the canteen. There's a tiger, a donkey, an elephant, and a dog, with holes for the eyes of the people who might have worn them. On sale there are candy bars, chips, and sodas in plastic bottles with different colored lids.

Jennifer's T-shirt says "I Hate Mondays" with a picture of a red beach umbrella. To her it says "Welcome to Hell." Grass scratches her ankles with each step she takes but it feels good. The tour bus is called Golden Sunset and

it carries its riders from the assisted living facility on regular trips, such as to the lake. All the riders, now the beach-goers, are the kind of people who appreciate the particular type of freedom a holiday or day trip offers, long disabused of the myth of permanence being somehow better than the alternative.

“Lover loser lover loser lover loser” is carved into each picnic bench around the lake over and over, probably by the same hand.

The lake is man-made and built over the old town. When it doesn't rain much for a while, the old church steeple pokes out of the water like a pointy black tongue. If you could swim to the bottom, which I think you could if the circumstances were right and you really tried, you'd find mailboxes and cars and the bones of pets and the lost hair ties of both the town's former inhabitants and summers of visiting swimmers whose braids fell out.

The American Crows watch Jennifer, their concept of a hell a mystery. She's humming but so softly it's little more than breathing.

Her hair sticks to her lip gloss. The sun shines through the trees like a lamp through a crocheted blanket.

The granddaughter of one of Golden Sunset's riders came too. She's taking the semester off because she needs some time to think and she's never going to die because she's the Devil. Her mascara is a kind of dark purple that comes off in little flakes high on her cheeks when she rubs her eyes. She came because she loves her Grandma, but also to see Jennifer.

Jennifer finds the Devil in the woods and smiles, she thinks it was her she heard rustling from inside the canteen, but really it could have been anything. They levitate, the wind picks up, stirring the surface of the lake but leaving the cars and bones below undisturbed. Jennifer gets a nosebleed that the Devil vanishes with a little shrug and wrist flick.

The Devil's Grandma watches the crows and wishes she brought bread to throw but throws

the candy from her purse instead which the crows collect like little sticky gems and then return to their nests to weave into the tape and hair.

One hundred years pass this way in hell, which you know is just like heaven but fun. Sometimes the people from the lake come up for parties, sometimes the beach-goers swim down for dinner, and everyone has a nice time.

Jennifer is Queen, she gets the roses and turns them blue, she lights all the lamps and flips all the records, she starts and ends all the stories, and then starts them again whenever she wants. She says when managers go they leave forever but best days always come back, and the Devil says for sure.

THE GOVERNESS

Dear Baby, I wanted to go to another country. When I tried to learn French my best friend's dad fell in love with me, and I never spoke it again. My only friend, really. I had to find another way.

Talking to someone you realize isn't there is the least unsettling over the phone and the most unsettling in graveyards or moving vehicles.

So long as you can't see the skull, you're fine represents the limit and method of my caregiving.

I learn that sometimes part of what makes a nation a nation is a shared language, a way of communicating, so now I study the language of the dead, thinking that might be the ticket.

Checkerboard. Honey Bear. Veranda. Portable Trapper Keeper. Lung Bank. Wood Door. Rot. Strobe.

When I first arrived in early September, the

dogs of Rickard's Way stood still and even as pylons in a guardrail, all eyelids. No one remembers a time before this. Afternoons at the creek. Boxes of sandwich cookies. The dead rising up all around us.

Like Vapors. Grass Cricket. All Clover. Light Rain. Frozen Fruit Smoothie. Welcome Back Beverly.

Speaking with the dead through the screen door before dawn I say *don't be afraid. I won't hurt you.*

The smell is both floral and meaty, a bit of the carnival, titan arum. All eyes start watering, all players get nicknames, affectionate diminutives:

Little Chevrolet. All Girl Cover Band. The Last Nights. The Earths. The Last Nights on Earths.

We believe in aspirational dressing here in the country. I never felt so alive, heedless of warnings. The trees caught the wind, held it up in their ghost hair like an antidote. We pass around the flashlight, shine it towards the sky.

Dig you well I shout from a car speeding away.

A refrigerator at night, Boris she explains over the intercom of the dead.

Little blue lemon face, shaking out the laundry. The rules are simple and easy to learn. Everything is true. Bed at 9:30. Seance at midnight. I'll find the sand dollars. I'll set the table.

The language of the dead burns my tongue like a french fry straight from the oil. It makes my head swim and my shoulders tense.

Through the screen, I can make out only outlines and lights, and hear the kind of music that's always about love and driving

Dog day. Dry run. Blue Night. True Love. Porch Talk. Cake. Lagoon.

Just standing at the threshold, lip-chewing, watching it all, hands in pockets, but not really, counting the flashes and drops.

In the light of the dead's attention, I glow like

a cat. I feel chosen. Or I gloat like the person a cat chooses for a chair, holding my breath so my movements don't disturb, silently begging the dead not to go.

Mezzanine. Air Circuit. Whinny. August.
Antler. Air.

Dear Baby, to do this yourself, here's where you start. There's no grass in the desert, unless somebody put it there, and so many homes have small rocks in the front yard instead, and on occasion those rocks are painted green to recall a more Midwestern suburb, and in one case a type of electric turquoise, recalling nothing of this world. The radio also works, or speaking sentences backwards while you talk about your feelings with your best friend in the light of late night television. Or if you can find a cursed locket. Or bury yourself in leaves and wait one hundred years. Your hair will grow long and fall out and make itself a nest around you for the dead who want to cuddle. Or you could follow the birds there. Get messages from street lights, send messages in fur.

Brooklyn

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THERETHEN

