

2

A.M.

at The

Cat's

Pajamas

a novel

Marie-Helene Bertino

Also by Marie-Helene Bertino

Safe as Houses

◆ 2 A.M.
◆ at The Cat's
◆ Pajamas
◆ a novel

◆ Marie-Helene Bertino
◆



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Mom,

You said, *some people invest in prizefighters, I'll invest in you*. It was one of those gray nights when (everyone took the easy way out) I did not feel strong. This book is for you (Helene Bertino), for turning me into a prizefighter, with grace.

“Yes, [Philadelphia is] horrible, but in a very interesting way. There were places there that had been allowed to decay, where there was so much fear and crime that just for a moment there was an opening to another world.”

—DAVID LYNCH

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Acknowledgments

It is dark, dark seven A.M. on Christmas Eve Eve.

Snow flurries fall in the city. Actors walking home from a cast party on Broad Street try to catch them on their tongues. The ingénue lands a flake on her hot cheek and erupts into a fit of laughter. In Fishtown a nightmare trembles through the nose and paws of a dog snoozing under construction flats. The Rittenhouse Square fountain switches to life with the pronouncement of water while Curtis Hall musicians, late for final rehearsal, arpeggiate through the park.

The flurries somersault, reconsider, double back. The Ninth Street alleys bear witness as they softly change their minds. Mrs. Rose Santiago, shawl knotted beneath her chin, uses her broom to convince them away from her stoop. They refuse to land. She sweeps uselessly at the air.

In her room at the prow of her father's apartment, Madeleine Altimari practices the shimmy. Shoulders, shoulders, shoulders. In front of the mirror, so she can judge herself, face sharp with focus. It is the world's most serious shimmy. After thirty seconds, a flamingo-shaped timer trills and hops on its plastic legs. Madeleine stops shimmying and rejoins Menthol 100 dozing in an ashtray on her vanity.

She exhales. "Again."

On the record player, Blossom Dearie says she's alive, she's awake, she's aware. Shoulders, shoulders, shoulders. After thirty seconds, the timer trills again.

Madeleine frowns at herself in the mirror. "Terrible." On a list by the ashtray, she marks *one minute* next to *The Shimmy*, followed by a pert *C minus*. She drags on the cigarette. The other categories—*Singing, Scales, Guitar*—are unmarked.

Madeleine is two days away from being ten.

She wears a clothespin on her nose and the uniform for Saint Anthony of the Immaculate Heart: a maroon sweater over a gray jumper over a gold shirt over a training bra with lemon-colored stitching. Thick, maroon tights. She is number three in fifth-grade height-ordered lineups, behind Maisie, whose spine is shaped like a question mark, and Susan, the daughter of ballerinas. She read somewhere a clothespin worn religiously will shrink her unignorably large nose. She thinks the occasional glimmers she can see through her window are snow flurries. She has trouble spelling the word *rhythm*. She likes when people in movies go to see movies. She cannot understand why the dime is worth more than the fatter, wider nickel. She needs a haircut. Her favorite singer is Blossom Dearie and her favorite bass is upright. She spent the previous night dreaming of apples. She smokes Newport Menthols from the carton her mother was smoking when she died the previous year.

Eggs cuss and snap on the kitchen stove.

The unofficial rule of Saint Anthony of the Immaculate Heart is that Madeleine is never allowed to sing again in church or at any assembly. Never, never, a whole page of never. Even though she had nothing to do with what happened at the previous year's Winter Assembly. Still, it is going to be a gold star day. She will suffer through Clare Kelly's singing in morning mass, the girl's nasal notes and plosive *p*'s filling the church with godless noise, spritzing the first row of pews with every heretical *t*, BUT THEN, her class will be making caramel apples. Madeleine has never had a caramel apple and she wants to taste one more than she wants God's love.

Clare, the sound Madeleine's toilet makes when it's dry. Madeleine is forever adding water to its basin when it wails, from the purpose-specific can she keeps under the sink.

Like a comet, a horrific afterthought, a roach darts down the wall. Its path follows indecipherable logic. Madeleine screams in high C and crushes the cigarette. She pivots, rips paper towel from a roll on her nightstand. The roach halts, teasing coordinates out of the air with its antennae. It senses her and is rendered paralyzed by options. Madeleine closes her eyes, makes the sound of a train whistle on a prairie, and squeezes. Ninth Street Market roaches are full and round like tomatoes. This one leaves a mark on the wall but most of them gets flushed down the toilet. She scrubs her hands. Breathes in and out. Every day, more and more roaches. Every time she kills one, Madeleine worries she is a bad person. *Stop worrying* she instructs herself. *It's time to sing.*

She changes the record and releases the clothespin from her nose. She locks eyes with herself in the mirror and waits for the music to start.

Madeleine sings.

My name is Blossom

I was raised in a lion's den.

One hand is perched on her hip while the other swings back and forth, keeping time. Tucked into the mirror of her vanity, a picture of her mother singing: one hand on her hip, the other swinging back and forth, in time. Her mother was a dancer and singer whose voice could redirect the mood of a room.

My nightly occupation

Is stealing other women's men.

After the cancer spread to her lymph nodes, Madeleine's mother filled a recipe box with instructions on how to do various things she knew she wouldn't be around to teach her. HOW TO MAKE A FIST, HOW TO CHANGE A FLAT, HOW TO WRITE A THANK-YOU NOTE FOR A GIFT YOU HATE, HOW TO BE EFFICIENT: *Whenever you are doing one thing, ask yourself: what else could I be doing?* On one recipe card Madeleine's mother listed the rules of singing.

The #1 rule: KNOW YOURSELF.

Madeleine knows she frowns in the silence between lines. She knows if she straightens her spine she can hit more notes than if she hunches. She knows she makes up in full-throatedness what she lacks in technical ability. She knows how to harmonize, with anything, with someone talking, that harmony is what melody carries in its pocket. She can burrow into a line of music and search out unexpected melodies. She can scat. She knows she scats better when she has eaten a light breakfast. She knows an empty orb hovers inside her, near where the ovaries are drawn on the foldout in her health textbook: the diaphragm. In the diaphragm the weather is always seventy degrees and sunny. Unable to be shaken even when she shakes, Madeleine has trained herself to, when she falters on a high note, clasp the reins of her diaphragm and gather.

The song is over. In her flamingo notebook, Madeleine marks *Blossom's Blues* next to *Singing*. The scating was flat but had soul. *B minus*, she writes.

The eggs are ready. She slides them onto a plate and adds a square of toast and a spoonful

of jam. She holds her breath as she steps into her father's bedroom. He is sleeping, his back toward her. She clears medicine bottles, an ashtray, a half-empty glass of water, to make space for the plate on his dresser.

Normally she leaves his breakfast and skedaddles, however this morning she wants to feel close to something. She places her hand on his arm. It moves up and down in sleep. Madeleine breathes in and out, in time.

"Eggs," she whispers.

In her bedroom, she peers through the curtains to confirm that the glimmers are flurries. Using mittens, boots, a scarf, and an umbrella, Madeleine turns herself into a warm, dry house.

In the back bedroom of the Kelly family's row home, Clare Kelly plaits her second, perfect braid. She administers advice to her little sister who sits on the bed, transfixed. Clare is proud of herself for allowing Elissa to pal around. She can learn from Clare's mistakes—not that there have been many—and her achievements—which have been plentiful, praise God. Student of the Week, Month, and Year certificates pose on her wall.

Clare finishes the braid with a pink barrette and admires herself. The barrettes will reflect the light of Saint Anthony's stained glass when Father Gary announces, "Clare Kelly will now lead us in the responsorial song." She will step-touch to the foot of the altar under the worshipful gazes of her classmates. Step-touch to genuflect at the statue of Mary, making full stops on her forehead, breastplate, left collarbone, right collarbone. Step-touch to the microphone.

Clare Kelly never has shark fins when she combs her hair into a ponytail, and her braids always part diplomatically.

Her mother gazes at her daughters from the doorway. "Time to go to school."

Clare is proud of herself for being the kind of daughter who doesn't rebel against her parents. Even when they told her she was having a little sister after they'd promised she'd be an only child. She could have answered "garbage" when they pointed to her mother's swollen belly and asked what she thought was in there. But did she say garbage, or a stocking of potatoes, or a lizard? No. Clare Kelly said, "My li'l sister," taking care to furbish "little" with an adorable slur.

Clare helps Elissa into her backpack before donning her own. The Kelly girls file down the carpeted stairs, past the makeshift bar with a sign that reads *Kelly's Pub*, to where their father waits, cheek thrust out in anticipation of each girl's kiss. Every day this kiss, then the school city walk to school. Clare, then Elissa plants one on Dad's smooth cheek and Mom opens the door. Flurries fall in the halo of streetlights. Clare elbows Elissa out of the way. She wants to be first into this snow-wonderful world.

It is her last conscious thought before being struck by a speeding bicyclist.

Clare is hurled against the brightening sky by the force of the handlebars against her thigh. The rider, sliding on his side, meets her falling figure against the base of an electric pole. As they planned.

Elissa's screaming hits enviable notes. What range that little girl has!

Café Santiago comprises the bottom level of a two-story, aggressively flower-boxed building on Ninth Street. The store fits a table with eight chairs and three display cases selling sweets and prepared foods that vary daily depending on Mrs. Santiago's moods. Christmas cards bloom in empty gravy cans on the windowsills. Above the counter hangs a life-sized portrait of Mrs. Santiago's late husband, Daniel. Mrs. Santiago lives on the second floor with her dog Pedro, who is currently, on Christmas Eve Eve, missing.

She stands behind the counter feeding sausage mixture into a casing machine, coaxing out smooth links from the other side. The shop smells like fennel, the cold, and coffee.

Sarina Greene, fifth-grade art teacher at Saint Anthony of the Immaculate Heart, peers into a display case, weighing the merits of three different kinds of caramel. She sways to the instrumental jazz playing on the café's speakers and points to a pile of stately cubes. "Would you say this caramel is sweet or more chalky?"

"Sweet," says Mrs. Santiago.

"That would be good for Brianna but not for the other Brianna," Sarina says.

"How many do you need?"

"Only one, I suppose, but it's a popular name. We call one Brie to keep them straight."

"How many," Mrs. Santiago says, "kinds of caramel?"

Sarina grimaces. "My brain's not working today. I looked for my keys for ten minutes. They were in my hand."

"Must be love."

"Ha!" Sarina cries. Mrs. Santiago's elbow startles a stack of coffee filters. She stoops to collect them. "I don't know how many kinds I need," Sarina says. "I have twenty-four students. Leigh is allergic to everything and Duke is diabetic. He'd turn red if he ate a caramel apple. Become unresponsive and die."

Mrs. Santiago blinks. "We don't want that."

"Which caramel would you use?"

"Medium dark."

"Fine." Sarina nods. It is her first year back in her hometown since high school, summoned by her mother's death and the aching blank page that follows divorce. She counteracts the feeling of being a failure by plunging into every task like a happy doe into brush. Today these caramels. Last night: spelling each of her student's names in glitter on the brims of twenty-four Santa hats.

"One pound?" Mrs. Santiago says. "A pound and a half?"

Sarina's phone begins its embarrassing call at the bottom of her purse: "Wonderwall." She roots through her bag, finds what she thinks is her phone, and shows it to herself—calculator. She paws through tissues, a sewing kit, her wallet, pipe cleaners, a parking voucher from a crochet class she tried, where she made a tote bag, this tote bag, out of old T-shirts—it's kooky but contains too many caverns. The song continues its assault, then—at last—her phone.

Her grade partner is calling, a woman who finds no situation over which she can't become frantic. Sarina dumps the call into voice mail. The bells of the door clatter. Georgina McGlynn enters from the dark, shaking snowflakes from her coat. Sarina and Georgina, who

everyone calls Georgie, went to high school together.

“Picking up a pie for tonight,” Georgie says with an apologetic air. As if she needs a reason to be in this shop at this hour. This cues Mrs. Santiago, who disappears into the back.

“Pie is ...” Sarina says.

The women look in different directions. No radio plays. The street hovers between night and dawn. This is the second time they’ve run into each other in the neighborhood, both times marked by stammering and adamant friendliness.

“Key lime,” says Georgie.

“Wonderful.”

“You should come!” Georgie’s volume frightens both of them. “It’s the old gang.”

Sarina has never been part of a gang. “Tonight?” she says, then remembers Georgie has already said tonight. A forgotten flurry announces itself on the top of her head. It burns with “I can’t tonight.”

“You must.” Georgie’s tone is panicked. “They would love to see you. Michael, Ben ...”

Mrs. Santiago returns with the pie.

“You don’t want this bag of potatoes hanging around,” Sarina says.

The room’s silence doubles down. Sarina has no idea why, in the presence of this ex-pur queen from high school, she is compelled to insult herself. Bundling the pie, Mrs. Santiago tsks.

“You’re not a bag of potatoes,” Georgie says. “Is that ‘Wonderwall’?”

Sarina searches the bag again. This time it’s Marcos, her ex-husband. “Must be Call Sarina Day,” she jokes, dumping the call into voice mail. Georgie wasn’t present for the other phone call, she realizes. So the joke makes no sense and Sarina now seems like a girl who rejoices upon receiving any communication from the outside world.

“Key lime.” Mrs. Santiago passes it over the counter and Georgie pays. She pulls a card from her wallet and hands it to Sarina.

“Call if you change your mind.” She bells onto the street, pie in hand.

Sarina says, “Two pounds.”

Mrs. Santiago weighs and bags the caramel.

Is it Sarina’s imagination or did Georgie pause for the length of a sock in the jaw before Ben’s name? On the sidewalk outside the shop, a mechanical carousel horse leaps to nowhere. “What’s the deal with that horse?” she says.

Mrs. Santiago looks up from the scale, her face still arranged in an expression of scrutiny. “The deal?”

Sarina’s grade partner is calling again. She answers.

“Clare Kelly ... has been attacked by a biker!”

Sarina apologizes to Mrs. Santiago with her eyes, gathers her bags of caramel, and slips outside. Flurries second-guess through the alleys. “Is she dead?”

“She’s at the hospital now, poor lamb. I called Principal Randles. We need to find a replacement to sing at this morning’s mass. But who? When she sings it’s like God is hugging you.”

Sarina supports her bags on the carousel horse and rolls her eyes. Her opinion on God: You work your side of the street, I’ll work mine. She mentally sorts her students for a singer. The twins, James and Jacob, two variations on the same, dull boy. Brianna, the other Brianna

Maxwell, Devon, Mackenzie. A classroom of girls angling for a future in swimsuit modeling. Maybe don't name your kid on an empty stomach. Her mind's eye rests on Madeleine, hastily combed little girl in the third row. She recalls some teacher's lounge gossip. Madeleine, assembly, singing.

"What about Madeleine?" she says.

"Good Lord, no," her grade partner chortles. "She sang last year but it was ... unpleasant. I doubt the principal thinks of that day fondly."

"She was that bad?"

"Did I say she was bad?" the woman says. "Things happened."

"If we need a singer, she's all I have," Sarina says.

"She probably won't want to sing after what happened."

"What happened?"

"It was unpleasant. Let's leave it at that."

Sarina freshens her tone. "I could ask her."

"You could."

"I will." Sarina hangs up.

Mrs. Santiago has waited for her to end the call. The window between them, the woman waves good-bye. Sarina mouths the words: *Thank you*.

"My pleasure," Mrs. Santiago says, at full volume.

You can hear through the window, Sarina realizes. Another stunning miscalculation on her part.

In Fishtown, beneath a pile of construction flats, Pedro the dog launches out of a nightmare. The bear that chased him becomes an advertisement pasted to the bottom of a box, a tall attorney with reasonable rates.

Pedro is an open-air pooch, not prone to evenings at home. His joints are nimble and his snout superb. He spent the previous night following the scent of a bitch, pink notes and hydrangea and dung. The pursuit led him out of the meat and coffee smells of his neighborhood to the minty trash of Fishtown. Flirting around the periphery of his brain is an idea both completely vivid and at the same time so malleable that it is not only an image but a hope. When he moves from one street to the next he feels he is moving more toward himself. He is lonely and knows he is lonely. He is in love but is not sure with whom.

As the dog awakens, the city awakens. Crust on its windshields and hungry. Snorting plumes of frustration in the harbor. Scratching its traffic on the expressway. Bone cold and grouchy, from the toes of its stadiums to the strands of its El. One by one each Main Line town revs its city-bound trains. Against the light of dawn, their track lamps are as worthless as rich girls.

Good morning, the city says. Fuck you.

The dog does not consider himself lost, though several neighborhoods away, his personal worry manifests in food prep. Fat sausage and sweet bread. The flurried sidewalk dampens his paws as he sniffs around a fire hydrant. Her? Her? A street vent. Her? The trunk of a tree that in warmer months brags cherry blossoms. Her? A stretch of fog-colored siding, then a blunt interruption—the cement steps of the Red Lion Diner.

Inside at the counter, Officer Len Thomas finishes his breakfast. This final bite, the corner of toast dipped in the bit of ketchup piled with the last of the eggs, is the culmination of ten minutes of planning. Napkin dispensers on the counter: gorged, gleaming birds. He chews thirty times, gives up after sixteen, dabs his mouth with the napkin, and with a succinct gesture signals for the check.

The waitress, who had to promise him twice that she understood what *dry* meant, watches a television that hangs in the corner. A famous actress is coming to town. The waitress does not see Len's gesture or hear the whistle he adds when he performs it again. She is officiating the marriage of two bottles of ketchup; overturning one and balancing it on the mouth of the other so it can empty its shit.

The man whistles again. The waitress turns around and in one fluid motion replaces his plate with the check. It strikes Len, still enjoying the slide of egg-bread-ketchup down his throat, that the waitress and the actress have physical traits in common. If the waitress lost twenty pounds and straightened her hair she could be the actress's fatter, less attractive cousin. Len unfolds his wallet and counts out bills. The waitress doesn't hide her interest in the badge and picture in his wallet: a Sears shot of Margaret holding their alarmed-looking son.

"Your wife?" she says.

"Ex." Len flips the wallet shut. "The Cat's Pajamas is on this block, right?"

"Next block." This man has rejected her niceties, so the waitress returns to a glare. "Not open this early, though."

“They’ll open for me.” Len forces a laugh.

“Sor-ree, Mr. President.”

“You look like her.” He counts out a tip. “That actress.”

“Nah,” she says.

“Change?” he reminds her.

She rings him up and deposits the change onto his palm. “Good luck with Lorca.”

“Pardon?”

“Cat’s Pajamas, right?” She turns her attention back to the television.

Outside, Len unrolls a stick of gum from a pack he keeps in his breast pocket. He is accustomed to people not liking him. The waitress, everyone in the Boston precinct he left behind, and probably whoever this club owner is whose day he’s about to ruin. The morning feels scraped clean. He folds the wrapper into a neat square and tosses it into a nearby trash can. He knows the numbers on his license plate add up to fourteen. He knows the latch on his belt is centered because he has checked, twice. A dog sniffing a newspaper stand notices him. Perfect flakes twitch in his whiskers.

“Hello, pooch,” Len says.

The dog finds nothing it needs in the figure of Len Thomas and goes back to searching.

The only sojourn Madeleine is permitted to make alone is the half-block walk to Café Santiago every morning to eat her breakfast. It is one of the many rules that snap frame around her newly motherless life. No alleys. No sleepovers. No going anywhere except Santiago's after school.

Her apartment complex is shaped like a horseshoe; her father's apartment is on the fullest swell of the round. In the center stands a halfhearted fountain that has surrendered to time and inattention. Madeleine marches past it, through the arch that leads to the street, past the store of stained-glass lamps (a line of dancers; their jeweled heads bow), through the cobblestone alley (screw off, rules), to the blue carousel horse in front of Café Santiago. She rests her mittened hand on the horse's saddle.

"Hello, horse," she whispers.

Madeleine can feel its yearning to go up and down, its hooves frozen in midgallop. Slipping a quarter into its rusted change box would elicit nothing but a lost quarter. It's busted, marooned and affixed to the sidewalk by an indiscreet pole, with no carnival for miles and no equine company. But Madeleine loves the horse, and saying good morning to it is one of her traditions. Skipping it would feel as uncomfortable as an incorrectly buttoned coat.

Inside the shop, Madeleine unlayers her outer garments by the door. Mrs. Santiago fries sausage behind the counter; the café is filled with the pleasant crackling of a vinyl LP. On the table, a stack of chocolate chip pancakes, a cup of black coffee, and the newspaper, opened to the Entertainment section. Madeleine delivers a kiss to Mrs. Santiago's cheek and sits.

Mrs. Santiago is a lumpy woman in a state of continuous fluster. Most of the business of her face is conducted on the top half: forehead, mournful eyes, and tiny nose lined up in show order. Her mouth, dime-sized, is usually arranged in a surprised purse, giving her the effect of a holiday cherub, the light-up kind currently decorating the neighborhood's abbreviated yards.

Mrs. Santiago evaluates all situations through the prism of her late husband Daniel's likes and dislikes. Daniel liked good posture, gingersnaps, and aloe plants. To Mrs. Santiago, a good world is straight posture, gingersnaps, and aloe plants. "Your teacher was just in buying caramel," she says.

Madeleine swings her legs. "We're making caramel apples today. I've never had one."

"Bring the fork to your mouth, dear, not the mouth to the fork. Pedro is still missing. The last time, Frank down the street called to say he was eating from the trash. Stop swinging your legs. Why would he eat scraps when he has every kind of food he could want here?"

Madeleine stills her legs and brings the fork to her mouth. She cuts her pancakes into equal-sized pieces. In the corner of the shop, a briefer stack of pancakes sits in a bowl marked *Pedro*.

"He'll have to stay in the house when he gets back. This will give him anxiety attacks, but it's for his own good." Mrs. Santiago slides a sausage link into a pan of quivering grease. "Maybe it's time he started eating canine food."

"What about a leash?"

Mrs. Santiago snorts and gives the pan a shake. "He'd die on a leash." She brightens with a new thought. "Madeleine, it is almost your birthday. Who should we invite to your birthday?"

dinner?"

Madeleine pretends the article she is reading is the most important article in the world.
"No, thank you."

"You can't 'no, thank you' your birthday."

"You 'no, thank you'ed your last birthday."

"That's different." Mrs. Santiago wags a tube of sausage at her. "I'm old and allowed to ignore whatever I want, like time. How about Sandra?"

Sandra is Mrs. Santiago's sister, a retired reading specialist and paraplegic who tests Madeleine's aptitude by having her read Harlequin romances aloud.

Madeleine doesn't answer.

"What about Jill from school?"

"I hate Jill from school."

Mrs. Santiago makes the tsking sound that means she's offended and only half-listening.
"Where did this hate come from? Your mother loved everything."

"Like what?" Madeleine says. This is her second favorite game.

"Flamingoes, your father, when people slipped. Not when they would fall outright and get hurt. When they would lose their footing for a second. She'd laugh so hard she'd turn purple."

Madeleine frowns. "I already know those."

"You ask every day, dear," Mrs. Santiago says.

It has been a year and a half since Madeleine lost her mother, and she has been living more or less, alone. Her father owned several businesses in the city, among them a celebrated cheese store in the Ninth Street Market, but hasn't so much as sniffed a wheel of Roquefort since his wife's death. He stays in his room, listening to her favorite records. Not even the sound of his daughter calling his name can rouse him as each day passes seasonlessly by.

Madeleine knows she will only be getting a Christmas/birthday present from Mrs. Santiago and it will likely be a knit vest with a Pedro on it, while Pedro will receive a knit vest with Madeleine on it. "I don't want a party," she says. "And that is that."

"I promised your mother. And that is that." Mrs. Santiago shrugs.

Madeleine shrugs.

Mrs. Santiago looks outside and gives a sudden wave. "The McCormicks are here. Get your things."

Madeleine stacks her plates in the silver sink. She presses her chin into Mrs. Santiago's elbow as the woman slices the browned sausage into medallions. Then she re-layers coats and scarf-hat by the door.

Outside, she exchanges vague *heys* with Jill McCormick and her two older brothers. Together, the children boot past the carousel horse (good-bye, horse), back down the alley through the back doors of the bread store (cloths, earth smells), the fish shop (boxes on boxes stacked on boxes), the cooking store (a worker sitting on a crate peels a potato, cigarette balanced on his lip) and through another alley until they arrive at the immortal realization of Saint Anthony's.

Saint Anthony of the Immaculate Heart's schoolyard, the size of a football field, is shaped like an hourglass. On the top half (what time you have left), grades K to 4 double-Dutch and hopscotch; on the bottom (what time you have lost) grades 5 to 8 hang in slack-jawed close, digging fingernails into their pimples. The middle belt section acts as repose for teachers who

hand off whistles, balls, warnings, and gossip before diving back in.

Row homes, each bearing five families, border the field. Every morning out of the crowded brick houses emerge the sorriest kids in the world, yawning into maroon V-neck sweaters, sneering at each other to get off, stop it, find the cat, stop doing that to the cat, shut up, leave it, give it back! The proposition of the yard is conducted on an upward slant, so that children going to school can climb from their cruddy homes with plenty of time to appreciate the magnitude of the church and school. *Check me out*, the building says, *this is what happens for those who pray*. At the end of each learning day, the school dispenses the children back to their cruddy homes, quick as gravity.

Here is Madeleine, on the day of the caramel apples, blending in with these kids as they trudge to the schoolyard to engage in a perfunctory morning recess. Madeleine prefers to spend this and every recess alone, singing scales under her breath, walking laps up and down the parking lot. Madeleine has no friends: Not because she contains a tender grace that fifth graders detect and loathe. Not because she has a natural ability that points her starward though she does. Madeleine has no friends because she is a jerk.

“Look alive, bubble butt,” she said to Marty Welsh, who was dawdling at the pencil sharpener. That his parents had divorced the week before did not matter to Madeleine. An absent father doesn’t give you the right to sharpen your pencil for, like, half an hour.

This is what Madeleine said to Jill McCormick (darting between her brothers, who swat at her) on the occasion of Jill’s umpteenth attempt to befriend her: “Your clinginess is embarrassing.”

Madeleine had one friend: Emily, a broad-shouldered ice skater who wound up at Saint Anthony’s as the result of a clerical mistake. Once, Madeleine watched her make a series of circles on an ice rink. On solid ground, Emily still walked as if negotiating with a sliver of ice blade. Her parents moved to Canada so she could live closer to ice. Not before she taught Madeleine every curse word she knew, in the girls’ bathroom on her last day, with reverence: *shit, cunt, piss, bitch*. Madeleine uses these words when one of her classmates tries to hang around, as in: *Get your piss cunt out of my creamy fucking way*.

There was a reprieve in her isolation in the weeks following her mother’s death when Madeleine, polite with tragedy, allowed Jill to pal around. It wasn’t long before she regained her wits and shooed her away.

Even jerks have mothers who die.

Into the thoughts of every playing child careens the clanging of an oversized bell, rung with gusto by Principal Randles. The children line up according to grade and height. Some of the older ones take their time. Principal Randles eyes these delinquents and rings harder. She waits, ring and ring until she achieves order. Until the kids standing closest to her clamp their hands over their ears. Madeleine is corralled into line by her homeroom teacher, Miss Greene. Finally, the ringing ends. A chiasm of sweat shines on the principal’s neck.

Miss Greene kneels next to Madeleine. On the stage of Madeleine’s school-to-home world, Miss Greene is a main player. Madeleine has memorized every intonation of her teacher’s voice, every possible way she wears her blunt, nut-colored hair, every time she has varied from her black sweater on black skirt wardrobe—twice. Miss Greene always smells like tangerine and Madeleine likes that she never wears holiday-themed apparel like the other homeroom teacher, who today wears a holly-leaf tracksuit.

Miss Greene keeps her voice low. "Clare Kelly has been involved in an accident and won't be in today."

"What kind of accident?" Madeleine says.

"A serious one."

"Is she dead?"

"She's not dead." Miss Greene makes the expression that means: *That is a disrespectful question.* "I'd like you to sing 'Here I am, Lord' at this morning's mass."

"Has this been approved?" Madeleine doesn't clarify because she is daft or aggravating. She clarifies because she is a girl who has had things taken away. Even before her mother died she was not a girl who assumed her train would come. Last year, for example, she delivered a perfect rendition of "On Eagle's Wings," and because of the shit show that happened afterward she had to sit in detention for a week.

Miss Greene's smile falters. "Approved."

Madeleine is overcome by the desire to cartwheel, which she overcomes. She wants to sing in church more than she wants a caramel apple. In the shadow of the building, they pray: a shower before entering the house after the beach. Amen, every other grade goes to the classrooms. The fifth grade follows Principal Randles through the corridors to church. Two girls in, behind Maisie's confused spine, Madeleine tries to control her flopping, lurching heart.

Here I am, Lord. The lyrics batter Madeleine's brain. All holiness and thank you, Saint Karma, for injuring that plaited kiss-ass Clare Kelly. *I will hold your people in my heart.* Hit "I Hit "people." Hold "heart," vibrato, done. Madeleine's big chance. Time to knock it out of the park, toots. Here I am, Lord. Check this fucking business out.

Jack Francis Lorca, owner of The Cat's Pajamas and what are considered two of the finest ears in jazz, sits hunched on the side of a cot, staring into the uncurious dark. So dark he cannot tell if his eyes are open.

Someone is knocking on the front door, or it is a residual dream sound. Or a stray stone shaken loose from the rock of tinnitus. If it wants to be answered, Lorca thinks, it will have to come again.

In the club's heyday this room had been a kitchen, but now it is his office and makeshift sleeping quarters for his house musicians. Max Cubanista, bandleader, and Gray Gus Stein, drummer, slumber on the floor by his feet. Sonny Vega, rhythm guitarist and know-it-all, mumbles on his cot in the walk-in freezer. "Christian Street. Faster." Even in dream he is correcting someone's route across town.

Lorca has been sleeping here, nubby peacoat rolled for a pillow, because his apartment without Louisa seems dead. He does not remember particulars but is certain the constellation of shot glasses arranged around the bodies of his friends played a role in the headache blooming at the base of his skull. He is a man of average height. Not an attractive man by any striking. The three names tattooed on his right arm are Francis, Alexander, and Louisa. The guitar tattooed on his left arm is a D'Angelico Snakehead, the same one that hangs over the bar like a prized swordfish. Lorca wears the same clothes from the previous day: black jeans and T-shirt, a narrow belt of fatigued leather. He bats at the wall for the switch that controls the overhead lamp and braces against the light.

The nucleus of the room is a round, battered table. Lorca's father, Francis, the bar's original owner, had bought it, still new, for what he called "family dinners," and around it many jazz greats had eaten, played cards, out-fish-tailed each other. Now the table is covered with parts from the model plane Gray Gus has been negotiating with for weeks, its inner workings propped on empty spools to dry.

The oven is stuffed with old set lists. A glass vase filled with picks. Working and nonworking amps. A trash bag, marked, threateningly: *Christmas*. A woman's pearl-colored coat hangs over the back of a chair, too nice for the room.

It is almost a home.

The knocking on the front door returns, insists.

Lorca trudges shoeless through the darkened club. The rapping becomes more insistent. *hear you*, he tells it. He hopes it is his son, Alex, who left without saying good-bye the night before. But instead a man in an unfortunate suit holds out a badge like an apology toward the peephole. His voice is close shaven. "Mr. Lorca?"

"We don't serve until noon," Lorca says.

The man shifts from foot to foot. "Hello?"

Lorca releases the chain and jolts the door open, revealing the cop and a scene of flurries.

"Is it snowing?" Lorca says to no one.

The cop consults the sky. "Since dawn."

Lorca pulls a pack of cigarettes from his back pocket and shakes one out. "In here it's always midnight. I guess you want to come in." He motions for the man to pass him, then follows him into the club.

The club has a carved-out quality like the caboose of a train. A knee-high step separates the room from the stage, where, amid an argument of cables, Gray Gus's drum set sits, charred. The stools lining the long oak bar are draped in unlit twinkle lights. Lorca recalls a boozed predawn idea of hanging them. He had overturned chairs on only half of the tables before quitting, he recalls, to get sick in the men's bathroom. The Snakehead, a 1932 archtop with Waverly individual tuners, is the club's beating heart. Lorca's father said he won it in an arm wrestling match but this was one of his fish tales. He had saved for years to buy it. Next to his picture a sign reads: *All musicians are liars except you and me and I'm not so sure about you*

The back of the cop's collar is not fully folded over his tie. "I don't want to take up much of your time," he says.

"Then don't." Lorca plugs the lights in. "Ta-da." They go green then red then blue. "When was the last time we had a white Christmas?"

"It's not likely to last." The cop extends his hand and they shake. "Len Thomas." He shows his badge again.

Lorca nods toward it. "Jack Francis Lorca."

The cop pulls a notebook from his blazer pocket. "I'm afraid we've gotten several calls about your club. Over capacity, use of pyrotechnics, excessive smoke ..."

"Where's Renaldo? Normally they send him."

Len scribbles into his notebook. "Renaldo got promoted."

"Good for him. Deserves it. Excessive smoke?" Lorca says. "The crème brûlée torch?"

The cop points to Gus's drums. The warped cymbals hang on blackened stands. A singular licorice smell emanates from them.

"He wanted to see if every time he hit the cymbals, flames would explode," Lorca says.

"Did it work?"

"Not like we thought it would," Lorca admits.

The cop reads from his notebook. "... Consistent refusal to abide by the city's law of no smoking inside the premises."

Lorca stubs out his cigarette in one of the bar's ashtrays. "I can't get used to that law."

"It was passed in 2007."

"Has it been that long? We're all getting so old."

"... Consistent refusal to stop serving alcohol at two A.M. I stopped in last night around three and saw fifty or so people cheering on a drummer dousing his drum set in lighter fluid."

"If you think about it," Lorca says, "it's funny." The cop's expression doesn't budge. "I'll tell Gus no more fires."

"That's not all, Mr. Lorca. This property"—he points to the garbage bags, the stage—"is licensed as a bar, and a bar only. No one is legally allowed to use this property as a residence. How many people stay here every night, Mr. Lorca?"

The shape of the cop's visit and the potential price tag form in Lorca's mind. For years Renaldo let them go on all of it. Being exposed as a residence would be thousands of dollars. As long as the boys stay sleeping in the back, he can bargain this cop down. He raises his hands as if guilty. "I've been crashing here," he says. "My girlfriend and I have hit upon hard times."

The cop raises one eyebrow. "No one else?"

Sonny emerges from the back room. His hastily tied robe reveals his pale, hairless chest.

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