

This Crisis is Manageable

No one knew just how ill Hanora was until they received news of her death the day after Victoria Day; their backyards little battlefields, littered with spent fireworks, the grass charred in odd places.

It broke through their circle of friends like a crack forming underfoot.

Their loose assemblage of friends and neighbours, who had, so far, walked in tandem to the milestones of middle-age, unscathed by deep loss. With Hanora gone, their troupe had been finally anointed by crisis, by the injustice and irrevocability of an early death in their tribe, and they scrambled for solid ground.

Lourdes was told, very dutifully, by her husband, that it had been quick. A pulmonary embolism in the shower—most likely a complication of the lupus she'd managed in her stalwart way since she was twenty-five. That John led with this was not lost on her. Hanora had chosen a good man, a kind man. Of course she had.

Lourdes listened dutifully, too. Whether she liked it or not, she was appointed their unofficial intermediary, by virtue of knowing Hanora the longest. They'd started ninth grade in the same year, travelling to the new high school via bus from separate ends of the city; odd,

precocious girls who found each other almost immediately, like molecules bonding to each other in the petri dish that was St. Jo's. And neither of them had let their other friends forget it.

—Remember your eighteenth birthday when we stole that roast chicken from Sanagan's! Hanora only drinks Irish whiskey. She's been a convert ever since our trip to Dublin, so don't even try to trick her with Bowmore—A puerile marking of each other; the hierarchy of the playground alive and well. So it was only right that it should fall to Lourdes to usher in their new reality. She would know how to send off their friend. How to balance the maudlin with the ironic; how to acknowledge Hanora's love of well-timed melodrama.

After the first jolt—the quick drawing of breath, some ridiculous and involuntary expression of shock—Lourdes murmured understanding and condolences to John in a half asleep, post-coital way. But her adrenaline refocused her and she got dressed while cradling her phone against her ear before perching on the edge of the bathtub with the pad she kept on the bedside table. —St. Michael's Hospital. 7: 48. Cancel the department meeting. What about Liam? — If she didn't stop writing, she was going to cry into poor John's ear. And then she was lost.

With her thumb she traced the outlines of the subway tiles above the towel rack. The solidity of her house now felt essential: the silver-headed nails in the floorboards, the caulking between the tiles, were like rivets straining against a weightlessness she had only encountered twice in her lifetime. The first when her sister was reported missing at a Gatineau campsite only to be found, quite alive, the next day, having spent the evening with a boy in a nearby yurt; the second when a strap on her knapsack caught onto some widget on the 5:10 Go Train as it was

leaving the station and she was yanked backwards for several terrifying steps until she came loose, collapsing on the westbound platform. In both incidences she had returned to earth with a thud, gratefully, and the lightness was salted away, to be dealt with another day.

John was telling her the departure time of his mother-in-law's flight from Gander when he stopped speaking. A private recalibrating, like the moment during strenuous exercise when you must stop for a breath, be still, or risk passing out.

Lourdes put down the pen. —I'm coming, John. I'm coming.—

Hanora was their wicked mimic. The last one at the sink after a party drying dishes, sweeping under the table. She boasted about her Berkeley education when drunk, was snobbish about food presentation, vain about her hair, which was thicker than most women her age; she always remembered their anniversaries and the children's birthdays, sending some outlandish, messy gift that the kids loved and made the parents roll their eyes good-naturedly. She was good about the divorces, too—would send a card of congratulations. Her pot-luck dish was Moroccan cauliflower salad. She loved her son.

Now this son led a trail of his kind up the stairs to his room. He was already assuming the celebrity of the bereaved; didn't understand that this lightness would soon crystalize into a separateness that would shape him, for better or worse. His smile was beatific, knowing, and Lourdes only heard tightness in his voice, a juvenile type of irritation over having to welcome a

guest from the Rotary, when addressing his father and she pitied John then for all the unravelling that was to come. Like a spool loosening itself, the first end of the thread coming free. Lourdes knew, even from the distance of her childlessness, that fifteen-year olds were a baffling demographic, at once inchoate and all-knowing. And Liam had entered adolescence kicking and screaming, as Hanora used to say. Lourdes felt a maternal awareness honing in on Liam as he disappeared up the stairs followed by the realization that a very delicate, very complex, responsibility awaited her. Hanora would expect nothing less.—You’ll figure him out, Lola. You have to.—

Tanya and Catherine were struggling to raise the leaf of the dining room table. The pink trifecta, Lourdes once privately called them. Wounded by her exclusion in the beginning, these friends from Hanora’s women’s studies days at U of T had seemed then to be privy to a new and evolving piece of Hanora. Lourdes had scoffed behind their backs at their virtue signalling, their self-righteous goodness when Hanora introduced them all at Liam’s first birthday party. *They think they’re gonna save the world, one online petition at a time.* But, in truth, she liked them. She grew to enjoy their light humour, the conscientious way they organized their annual portaging trip to Temagami, their kindness. They chose to be friends, in spite of Hanora’s heavy-handed insistence that they should.

And then the strangest scene for Lourdes, Tanya sliding a turkey casserole into the refrigerator and embracing John in the hallway in the grasping way of a lover. Reflexively, Lourdes stored away the scene, Tanya’s neediness, John’s puzzlement, until she realized that she

was collating these events to tell Hanora. The way she'd always stockpiled bizarre occurrences, shocking encounters, that she knew Hanora would marvel at.

The day was accelerating and coming to abrupt stops as can only happen in the aftermath of a death within a close circle.

She had cleaned the kitchen twice with Catherine; ordered pizza; welcomed the minister from the Presbyterian church; countless blank faced neighbours; a precocious young girl whom Hanora had taught to skate the previous winter; a few of Hanora's bewildered colleagues. Then she had lost the dog, a stubborn schnauzer, and chased it, wearing Hanora's too big rubber boots, almost to the community swimming pool before they had a stand-off in the park that ended with her falling on her knees in the mud.

Then she was sitting with all of them in the basement in a type of warm, confessional circle: Tanya, Catherine, Catherine's husband, Khalid, John and herself. Several of Hanora's colleagues were in the kitchen cleaning up the glut of casserole dishes. Engrossed in their own orbit of loss and memories tied to Hanora's work self. No sign of Anthony yet, who lived across the street. He was Hanora's most recent find. The executive director of a small community food hub: divorced, agonizingly shy. Hanora had corralled him into their circle last fall after he'd moved in to care for his aging mother—the popular kid taking in the street's cast-off. Lourdes had rolled her eyes at her friend's boldness.—He's lonely, Lola. The poor thing!— But Lourdes

knew Hanora was too kind for deliberate condescension. She had always meant well in spite of herself.

People were allowing themselves at the end of the lengthy day to be pulled slowly back into the demands of daily life, like returning from a long and exacting journey, they were acclimatizing. It was only Tuesday after all! Who's taking the car into be serviced tomorrow? Do I need to swing by the grocery store before heading home? Some phones were delicately being checked.

Lourdes extracted herself from the group and wandered up to the front room. A red-headed girl bounced down the stairs while buttoning up her shirt, each creak of the stairs felt illicit. She pretended to search for something in her purse until the young woman passed.

Across the street Anthony stood on his front porch, cradling a bouquet of lilies.

Lourdes watched him sit and then stand, sit and then stand. She saw what perhaps no one had yet noticed: that he loved Hanora deeply and privately. Separate from all of them. He busied himself by picking up several branches that had fallen on to his lawn during Monday's windstorm before sitting down once again, his head dipping forlornly. Finally, he stood up without preamble, as though a far-off starting pistol had been shot, gathered the lilies again into the crook of his arm.

She watched his face undergo several painful and private adjustments as he walked.

As he stepped off the curb on the west side, his expression was of one indignantly bracing for battle; half way across it was stiff with terror; and as he passed beneath the streetlight in front of Hanora's house, it took on the look of a young man who has gathered up his strength, doused his pride, to admit to a wrong.

And as he finally stepped through the front door to pay his respects—his eyebrows raised in exaggerated sheepishness or perhaps only fatigue, exasperation—his cheeks, Lourdes saw from his reflection meeting her gaze in the mirror above the fireplace, were flushed, like hers, with the awful embarrassment of the living.