



# SO LONG, MARY-ANN

by Ellie Sawatzky

**AFTER** high school graduation, I use my savings to buy a car—a milky blue Oldsmobile born the same year as me, 1989. I leave home two days later. My boyfriend, R.J., quits his job at Northern Sounds and Systems and comes with me.

Twenty hours in, we can't believe we haven't left the province. We take turns driving, and R.J. tunes the radio to local stations that play jangly folk-rock music, lyrics rhyming *hate* with *interstate*, *stereo* with *Ontario*. "If we were walking," R.J. says, "we'd be a walking cliché."



I have an account on CouchSurfing.com, so in Montréal we crash with some people on the fourth floor of a townhouse otherwise owned and inhabited by a family of Hasidic Jews. The building is old and sagging. Inside, a narrow black-and-white tiled staircase winds upwards, and there's the thick smell of cat food and compost. One nice thing about the building is that there's a pink stained-glass window at each landing.

The apartment itself is bright, with high ceilings and slanted hardwood floors, corners crowded with second-hand furniture. Four bedrooms and one bathroom shared between, on average, eight people. “We have an open-door policy,” the German girl, Klara, tells us. “Everyone is welcome.”

R.J. and I sleep on the hide-a-bed in the living room, and a boy from Seattle, Nick, sleeps on the couch when he isn't sleeping with Klara in her room at the end of the hall. That is, when her boyfriend isn't around.

We decide to stay awhile. We ride Bixi bikes around town. R.J. finds the address for Leonard Cohen's house—a solemn pale brick building across from the Parc Du Portugal. The word “ladies” is graffitied above the mail slot on the door. R.J. sits on the stoop and I take his picture.

Two weeks go by. We eat greasy street food and bum around in parks and museums. We get day drunk and ride the metro to the edge of town to see cheap movies at the Cinéma Dollar. We find sneaky places to have sex—in the fitting room at Simons, behind a tree in the Botanical Garden. In the evening, we cook meals with our housemates. Yvonne, from France, is the queen of dumpster-diving. I never even knew dumpster-diving was a thing. She brings home damp cardboard boxes filled with bruised fruits and vegetables from bins behind restaurants and supermarkets. She salvages what she can, cooking stir fries and casseroles, baking the fruit into pies, cakes, and crumbles. “Can you believe?” she says, brandishing a limp stick of celery, shaking it in my face. “Can you believe someone would waste it?”

We cram chairs around the kitchen table. We stay up late talking, drinking wine and beer and mysterious bitter cocktails mixed by the Mexican, Fernando.

I lie awake at night after everyone has gone to sleep. The living room window looks out onto an intersection, and when the light turns red, the colour gushes into the room. Like blood, I think. I can't help it—where the mind goes.



My mother calls.

“I’m going to weigh myself down with pills and jump in the pool,” she says.

“Mom, what pool?” I say.

“I don’t know. The Rec Centre pool. Or I’ll drive to the lake. I’ll take the pills first, then maybe I’ll die before I get there. You’ll have to fly home and identify my body.”



R.J. shifts on the hide-a-bed and the old springs yelp. Nick is sleeping with Klara tonight so we don’t have to worry about being quiet. R.J. touches my hair. “You have to think of something nice, Mary-Ann. Baby goats, or piglets.”

I say, “Really? You mean that’s all I have to do?” R.J. is sweet, and he tries, but he doesn’t get it. He sleeps easy, knowing that his retired, divorced parents are leading happy separate lives—his father on a fly-fishing

adventure somewhere in Wisconsin, his mother in a rented condo on a beach in Hawaii.

He flicks my ear. “You’re funny. But seriously. Baby goats leaping around a barnyard. Tell me that doesn’t make you feel all warm and fuzzy. Okay, what about bulldog puppies? A kid getting a bulldog puppy for Christmas. Christmas trees. Christmas tree smell.”

“Why are you talking about Christmas?” I say. “It’s June.”

“Okay, fresh cut grass. Campfires.”

“Those furry white flowers that smell stronger at night?”

“Yes.” R.J. nods. “The sawdust smell in woodshops.”

“The inside of a bakery.”

“Bacon when you wake up in the morning.”

“Sleeping late.”

“Sleeping in a hammock.”

“Sex in a hammock.”

“Sex on a trampoline.”

“Sweaty, frenzied sex in the woods.”

“See?” R.J. says. “It’s working. Now close your eyes.”



Early the next morning I go out to the balcony to smoke and find Yvonne sitting cross-legged in a shaft of sunlight, peeling and slicing an endless supply of brownish mangoes. She beams up at me.

I think Yvonne is the most beautiful woman I've ever met. She's got a layer of fat on her, and it makes her look soft and curvy all over. She has kind of a square head and a lot of dark hair. A small cat-like face.

"You're up early." I lean against the railing. Light a cigarette.

"Lots of baking to do." Yvonne motions to the piles of fruit. "Want to help?"

"I don't really know how to bake."

She goes back to peeling. "I used to bake for my mother. She owns a café in Besançon."

Of course she does. I look down at the street. It's Saturday morning and a bunch of Jewish families are out in their Sabbath dress—little boys in suits and yarmulkes, shiny ringlets in front of their ears. Little girls in white

stockings. Men with big bundt-cake fur hats. They all look so serene, even the children.

Last night someone knocked on the apartment door around ten o'clock. I answered it. A woman stood in the narrow stairwell. She wore a scarf over her hair and she didn't smile. She said, "Could you please come to turn on the oven?"

I said, "Um, sorry?"

"It's the Sabbath."

I was just looking at her blankly, and then Nick, behind me, said, "Hi, Adiya," and, "Good Shabbos," and he started after her down the stairs.

Curious, I followed. I stood in the second-floor doorway while Nick went in. The small space was packed with people—kids, grandparents. Through the dim kitchen I could see the dining room, where a long table was set and lit with candles, a little blue book on each plate.

Nick turned a knob on the oven. Adiya thanked him and shut the door behind him.

"They can't use electricity on the Sabbath," he explained to me, "unless a non-Jew turns it on for them."

"What about when they need to turn it off?"

“Oh, they can turn it off once it’s been turned on.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

He told me that he had once had to push the buttons in an elevator for a rabbi.

A while later, through the heating grates, I could hear them singing.

“Here.” Yvonne slides a box towards me. “Take a mango.” She pronounces it “mongo.” “I will teach you. We will make mango muffin,” she says, and hands me a knife.



Nick asks about my family.

We’re at a house party. The house belongs to friends of Klara’s, and all the walls inside are painted with chalkboard paint, and drawn on with coloured chalk. All the girls at the party are wearing crop tops, floral skirts, and ankle bracelets, moving to German techno music. Klara is one of them, but tonight she’s dancing for her boyfriend, a swarthy Quebec native named Liam.

R.J. isn't around—he's befriended some stoners and has gone down the street to their place to get high.

Nick and I sit on the back steps in the dark, sharing a cigarette, drinking tallboys, and loving the dog. The dog loves us back, licking the mouths of our beer cans when we're not paying attention. The dog is big and white, and one of her ears has been chalked blue.

When Nick asks about my family, I tell him I miss my dog, but what I mean is that I miss the dog I never had. Then I start to cry. I don't want Nick to see, so I bury my face in the dog's neck. Her fur smells damp and mushroomy and I breathe it in. Nick thinks I'm crying about missing my dog, and he rubs my back. He says, "I miss my shih tzu, Shirley. She's my mom's and she's kind of a yappy cunt. But, you know, she's family."

I look up and he smiles hopefully.

It starts to rain a little bit, and the lawn steams.

"Wanna see me jump that fence?" Nick says.

The yard is closed in by a chain-link fence, about eight feet high. There are garden plots all along it. Tomato plants, vines growing up through the wire mesh.

“Yeah, okay,” I say, joking. He’s serious though. He gets up and moves out into the grass. He appears to be sizing up the fence, stretching and hopping from one foot to the other. Suddenly he’s running, jumping up onto a plastic compost barrel. Without losing momentum, he grabs the top of the fence, and in one smooth motion hoists his body up and over, dropping down on the other side, landing cleanly on both feet. The dog barks, bounds over to the fence, tail wagging.

I’m standing. “What the fuck?” I say. Nick is kind of small—I wouldn’t have expected it.

He’s pleased with himself. He paces on the other side of the fence, bends over with his hands on his knees. A light comes on in the neighbour’s house. A second-floor window slides open and a woman’s voice says, “Get the fuck out of my yard, or I’ll call the cops.”

“Shit.” Nick laughs.

The window slams shut.

I say, “How are you going to get back over here?”

He stands back, then charges, hooking one foot in the fence, and scrambling up, swinging himself over. He grabs my arm and we run up

onto the porch, into shadows under the overhang. Laughing. The dog barking.

“What was that?” I say. “Are you a gymnast or something?”

“It’s parkour,” he says. “You train your body and mind to overcome obstacles. It’s a French thing. *Parkour* means *course*.”

He leans against the wall, smiling at me. His chest heaving. Without thinking, I put my hand against it. The heaving slows. A drunk wave rolls me forward. He kisses me back, his fingers grazing my shoulder.

The back door bangs open and light floods the porch. We move apart. Some people come outside to smoke.

Nick scratches his head, sheepish. “*Je m’excuse*,” he says to me and goes inside.



“I’ll drink drain cleaner,” my mother says, on the phone. “I have some right in front of me. Ninety percent sulfuric acid. It’s in my hand. I’ll pour it over my body. My skin’ll turn black. It’ll curl up and peel right off.”



“Whale watching,” R.J. whispers. His elbow twitches and meets the bone of my hip. Nick is asleep on the couch.

I make an effort for R.J. I know it won’t work, but he doesn’t know how else to help me, and that makes me feel even more hopeless. *After all*, I think, remembering a line from a story by Hemingway—one I studied in high school—*It is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.*

“Dogs in clothes,” I say. “Puppies wearing sweaters.”

“Puppies wearing booties.”

“A duck wearing a pearl necklace.”

“A pearl necklace!”

“A duck giving a blowjob.”

“Jesus,” says R.J. “Ouch.”



The day before Canada's birthday is my birthday. In the evening, I dust my puffy eyelids with iridescent makeup and put on a blue dress I bought at a consignment store. It's made of linen, and hangs off me like a potato sack. It's a look I like.

For dinner, Yvonne makes a spicy mushroom stir-fry with mushrooms salvaged from a dumpster behind the IGA. There are also a couple of day-old baguettes, and a box of soft, fragrant muskmelons. Klara and Nick are in charge of the salad. Fernando, the drinks.

"Can you believe," Yvonne keeps saying as she slices the melons. The small kitchen fills with the voluptuous smell of rotting fruit. "Perfectly good." She holds up a fat slice so that it catches the light, dips it through the air like a boat. "Beautiful."

We squeeze around the table, clink glasses. A toast to me. The door to the balcony is open and the night air smells coppery, like rain, and chemical, like hot rubber.

We eat the melon for dessert, with an apple cobbler Yvonne made especially for me. She lights a beeswax candle, and I wish to close my eyes and see puppies wearing sweaters.

"Happy Birthday, baby," R.J. says in my ear.



Later, I'm alone on the balcony and Nick comes out with a cigar he's been saving.

I puff slowly. The smoke tastes like burnt meat and vanilla.

“Anyone back home missing you on your birthday?” he asks.

I think how nice it is that he doesn't know anything about me. I say, “My mother would kill me if she knew I was smoking so much.” I pass him the cigar.

“Yeah,” he says. “Mine too.” He puffs and looks through the doorway at Klara, who is clearing dishes from the kitchen table.

He turns back to the street. “Do you think I could jump this?” He points to the gap between the balcony and the building next door. Our townhouse is the last in the row, and the building next door is a three-storey apartment complex with a flat roof. He grips the railing, testing. “I would need to take a running start,” he says, “from the roof or something.”

I say, “No one's allowed to die on my birthday.”

Nick looks thoughtful. “You know, lots of people have already died on your birthday.” He hands me the cigar. I give it back and light a cigarette instead. Exhaling, I say, “I don’t really get celebrating birthdays, anyway. People can’t help but get older. We should celebrate getting better, or actually achieving something.”

“But you have achieved something,” Nick says, “we all have. We’re here.”

In the living room, R.J. has his guitar out and is singing “So Long, Marianne.” It’s his favourite Leonard Cohen song—or maybe he just likes to sing it because of my name. Our housemates lounge on the floor and across couches and stuffed chairs, singing along. They point to me when they sing the chorus.

A cluster of fat, white candles burns on the table, the flames leaping. They make soft hissing sounds as they struggle to keep from drowning in their own wax.

My mother doesn’t call.



We take my Oldsmobile to Cap St. Jacques for Canada Day. R.J. in the passenger seat, Yvonne, Klara, and Nick in the back.

The beach is crawling with people, but the water glitters, cold and clear. I swim out past the white plastic buoys marking the safety area. Out and out without glancing back. Then, from a distance, I turn to look at the beach—a squirming scab on the shoreline. I float on my back, staring up at a sky so blue it makes my mouth dry. With my ears underwater, all I hear is a low drone.

When I come back up, I see the lifeguard’s yellow kayak paddling towards me. She waves wildly. “You can’t be out this far!”

On the way back to the city, my car breaks down. We sit on the side of the scorching highway and Klara calls a tow truck and her boyfriend, Liam, who picks us up in a black Honda Civic. I sit in the back, between R.J. and Yvonne. There aren’t enough seats, so Nick climbs through the hatchback and sits in the trunk, staring out the rear window at the disappearing road.

“You should have seen Mary-Ann,” Klara is telling Liam, “she swam so far out.”

“We thought she might drown.” Yvonne puts an arm around me.

“I knew she wouldn’t drown,” R.J. says. “Mary-Ann is a really good swimmer. We come from a lake town.”

There’s no air conditioning in the car, and under my T-shirt and cut-offs, my bathing suit starts to chafe the sides of my breasts and the V between my thighs.

R.J. puts a sticky hand on my knee and I move my leg back and forth until he takes it away.



“Did you think I finally did it?” My mother asks. “When I didn’t call, were you relieved?”

I don’t say anything.

“Mary-Ann,” she says, “Mary-Ann. Hello?”

I say, “Hi, Mom, how’ve you been?”



R.J. calls to tell me he's too drunk to make it home. He's staying downtown with the guys who sell pot. "I'm sorry, baby," he slurs. "Don't be too lonely without me. Hey, think something nice before you go to sleep. Think about, um... think about those tanks full of rainbow fish they have at pet stores. I love those fish. One day, baby, let's get a tank full of rainbow fish. Think about that before you go to sleep."



Nick kisses my earlobe, his teeth closing on the delicate cartilage as he works his way up. He holds my hair in a fist and sucks the bone-tight skin behind my ear.

"Careful," I say, "hickies."

He moves to my breasts, slides my shorts down my hips, nudges my thighs apart with his knee. He's strong, his small frame knotted with muscles.

The light at the window goes red, but I don't tell him to stop. I think about how it could be, with R.J.—the wavy blue light of a fish tank, our

own apartment with Persian carpets, rows of bookshelves. The fish like prisms, sending wheels of colour up the walls.

When Nick is asleep, I get up and go outside. The street is quiet. Every once in a while a car shucks through the intersection. The city lights make the sky look orange. The colour of stomach acid, I think.

I take out my little silver flip phone, and slide it back and forth along the railing. I don't ever want fish, I decide. I don't want anyone to depend on me, even if it's just for a sprinkling of dry flakes every once in a while.

I let my phone fall, and it smashes on the sidewalk below.



The next day, Yvonne teaches me how to make bread. We make *boule* and *brioche*, and it gets so hot in the kitchen we have to strip down to our underwear.

“I will need air conditioning when I open my own café.” Yvonne fans herself with a cookie sheet. She wants to open a café in Montréal—she’s already started planning a menu and looking for a space. “You’re a good assistant,” she says a while later. “You can work for me in my café.”

“Really?” I say. “You’d hire me?”

“Sure, why not?”

She stands over my shoulder, observing my kneading technique. “Try like this.” She takes the shaggy dough from my hands, flips it over and presses in with the heels of her hands. Adds a sprinkling of flour. Flip, press. I take the dough back, say it under my breath like a mantra. Flip, press, flip, press. As if it would help.



That night, a group of us go out to a hipster joint called Station House. There’s kombucha on the menu and a boxcar in the middle of the dance floor. R.J. pretends to be the conductor, dancing to some electronic remix of an Ace of Base song. He finds my face in the crowd and waves me over, but I shake my head and go to the bar to order another double vodka cran.

Yvonne stayed in for the night, but Fernando is here somewhere with his friends from the university. And Klara and her German friends. And Nick, of course. Nick goes everywhere Klara goes. I look around but don’t see him.

I see Liam arrive. He waves to me and approaches Klara. I watch him put a hand on her hip. She spins around, delighted.

Nick is behind me suddenly, grinding. “Nick,” I say. “R.J. is right over there.” I turn around and slap at him, but he grabs my shoulders and pulls me against him.

“Dance with me,” he says.

“No.”

“You want to.”

“Don’t take your shit out on me.”

“I know you, Mary-Ann.”

I kick him in the shin and he backs off, surprised. “What the fuck?”

“Fuck off,” I say.

He gives me a nasty look and backs away slowly before turning to leave. I look over at R.J.—he hasn’t noticed anything. He comes and finds me a few minutes later. Throwing his arm around me, he says, “I’m almost drunk enough to not care that this music fucking sucks.”



A group of us stumble home. Me, R.J., Fernando, Klara, and Liam. We climb the front steps and we're about to go inside when we hear somebody yell.

Nick is on the roof, four floors up, leaning over and waving at us. "Hey!" he yells. "Watch this."

"What's he doing?" R.J. says.

Liam says, "How'd he get up there?"

Nick disappears from sight. I know what's about to happen, and there's nothing I can do. Klara knows too. "Nick," she yells, "don't be an idiot."

He appears again, flinging himself over the edge. Klara screams.

We all see him fall. He clears the gap between the buildings. His feet touch down but he doesn't have enough momentum, and his body ragdolls backwards.

R.J. and Fernando are running to the spot where he fell, and I'm following them. Klara is saying, "Oh my God, oh my God," over and over, and Liam is holding her.

Nick is sitting up on the ground next to the path of concrete stepping stones that runs between the two buildings. His face flat and blank as paper. One of his legs twisted under him.

“You shouldn’t move, man,” R.J. is saying to him.

There’s blood coming from somewhere. Fernando takes off his T-shirt and touches it to the back of Nick’s head. It looks bad. Nick tries to get up, and R.J. and Fernando hold him down.

R.J. looks round at me. “Mary-Ann, call for an ambulance.”

I reach for my pocket, and then I remember I don’t have a phone.

“Mary-Ann!” R.J. says.

I hold out my empty hands.

Liam runs over, his phone pressed to his ear. He speaks to the operator in French. He’s looking at Nick, wide-eyed. “*Non,*” he says, “*non. Il a santé.*”



Nick has to stay in the hospital for a few days so that the doctors can monitor his head injury. His leg is in a cast. I don’t go visit him when

everyone else does. I tell them it's because hospitals freak me out, which isn't a lie.

Someone calls Nick's parents—probably Klara—and they fly in from Seattle. They come to the apartment to collect his things. They look like parents should—round and soft and curly-haired. Sweetly sad and concerned. His mom calls me “honey” when I help her pack his things into a suitcase. She's wearing linen pants and an expensive-looking sleeveless sweater. “He hasn't called us in weeks,” I hear her say to Klara. “I can't understand this.”

I want to go see Nick in the hospital if only to tell him how fucking lucky he is. To tell him to count his blessings—or something less like a grandma.

But then I start to think maybe he already knows, maybe he realized mid-leap that it was wrong, he'd been wrong. Wanting gets the better of us. I know what that's like. I see it now—some lake, some city. Some bright thing always glittering somewhere, just out of reach.



I find a pay phone outside a Pharmaprix and call my mother.

“Mary-Ann?” she says. Foggy, like she’s been sleeping. “Mary-Ann?”

She starts to cry.

“It’s okay, Mom,” I say.

“Come home,” she says.



A week goes by. R.J. gets a job at Disques Beatnick, a record store.

“Maybe we should start looking for our own apartment,” he says one night. He wiggles on the screechy mattress. “A studio, or something. We could probably afford it if you get a job too.”

I say, “Where am I going to get a job?”

“Anywhere,” R.J. says.

“Oh, you’re right,” I say. “I’d be perfect for that.”

I don’t tell him about Yvonne’s offer. I’ve decided not to think about it anymore, not to hope for it. I’m not even sure she was serious, and besides, it’ll be months before her café is up and running.

“I’ll help you look,” R.J. says. “If you sell your car we could put down a deposit on a place, and maybe pay a few months’ rent.”

“I’m not selling my car.”

“Well, you won’t need it if we’re staying in the city.”

“I’m not selling my car.”

“All right, it was just a suggestion. Jesus.” R.J. turns on his side, and it’s only a few minutes before he’s sleep-breathing.



In the morning, after R.J. leaves for work, I walk down to the Pharmaprix and call the auto shop to check on my car. The mechanic tells me I can pick it up today.

I’ve packed my whole suitcase before I have a chance to decide that’s what I’m doing.

Before I leave, I go into the kitchen. Yvonne is washing dishes. She’s been up for hours, baking cookies, muffins, loaves of bread.

Dishes clunk in the sink. She’s singing something sweet and French, too quiet for me to pick out any words.

She pauses to greet me, kissing the top of my head like I'm a child. There's flour on her face and her wild hair is snarled and tufted in places from sleep. I put my arms around her waist, the weight of my forearms falling on her hips, my hands pressed into the soft bowl of her stomach. She leans her head against mine and keeps singing.

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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