

David's Saturday Post-It Note said, Home renovation. He checked the cupboards in the kitchen for faulty hinges, he pulled drawers out and slid them back in. He went out onto the deck and stepped on boards, but none of them were in need of repair. He stopped at the wall in the den and asked Petra what she would think if the wall were two inches to the left, would it open up a whole new space? Petra agreed that moving the wall would change the room dramatically. David took out his toolbox and started to hammer away at the drywall, relieved that he now had a task.

Each morning Petra and David checked the Post-It Notes stuck to the fridge. They were divided into three categories; tasks for David, tasks for Petra, and activities and tasks for the weekend. And so they would take Post-It Notes that said things like Pick up salad fixings or Drop off dry cleaning and place them into their date books. As the tasks were completed they would crumple up the small rectangles of paper and toss them away. Petra and David liked to know what had to be done.

LITTLE BREAKS

In the Vancouver Art Gallery, Carla's clothes are too tight and the room is too hot and everyone around her is too close. At the bar she gets her third glass of wine and knows that within the hour she will have a headache. She has never been comfortable in crowds; she can't figure out what to do with her hands. The gallery is packed with people dressed in black. They roam from painting to painting and mingle in clusters.

A waiter with loose curly hair sets a tray of cheese cubes on a side table. His black shirt is tight across his chest. He takes crumpled paper napkins from the table and places them on the old cheese tray and then slips a strawberry from a fruit plate and pops it into his mouth. Carla considers asking him to dinner but

knows she won't be able to muster the courage. The waiter picks up his tray of discards and walks away. The wine glass in her hand slips from her fingers and shatters on the stone floor. Wine and broken glass splash out. People nearby leap out of the way.

"Sorry, sorry," Carla says. A woman in a brown smock appears and sweeps the broken glass into a dust pan. She asks Carla if she would like another drink.

"No," Carla says. "I can't trust my hands." She wants to tell the woman that she is tired and that the wine isn't a help, but the woman has cut back through the crowd with her dustpan full of glass and wine. The waiter in the black shirt could not have been any older than twenty-three. Carla closes her eyes and presses a knuckle into her temple.

She collects her coat and goes outside. There are patches of snow on the ground. She walks until her feet ache in her high heels and her toes are numb and cramped with the cold. The Christmas lights in the trees lining the sidewalk exhaust her. A man in a black coat steps out from a doorway and, for a moment, he looks like John. She is about to say his name when the man turns and walks past her. He is not

John. She continues to walk and study the window displays in an attempt to avoid eye contact. She met John at an art auction. He arrived late and stood beside her at the rear of the room. That evening she went back to his studio and moved in two months later. He painted giant canvases without brushes; he used his hands, sticks, and, sometimes, kitchen knives, which caused fights between them on several occasions.

She bumped into John once after they broke up, at a charity gala. "I thought you hated these things," Carla said to him. "I do," he said. A girl in a teal party dress took his arm. He told Carla he was going to sail to South America. She imagines him with his canvases and paint-stained fingers on the deck of a sailboat, the girl in the teal dress lounging on the deck in a bikini. The girl would not mind the eccentricities of an aging artist.

Ahead of Carla kids gather around a man dressed as Santa Claus. He shakes hands with a young boy. She slips into a coffee shop and orders a latte and takes a seat along the front window. She tries to stop thinking about John. Santa Claus passes by the window

and then enters the coffee shop. He orders a medium roast, digs through the newspapers in the recycling box, and takes a section of the *Globe and Mail*. He sits at the table next to Carla. She asks him if his beard is real.

“No,” he says and goes back to reading the paper.

Carla leans forward. “Are you allowed to take it off in public?” she asks. He folds the paper and takes a drink of coffee. He tells Carla the beard has to stay on in public and that he delivers mail for Canada Post and just plays Santa for fun at Christmas. Carla asks him if he would like to come to her hotel room for a drink.

In the elevator he tells her his name is Bruce and that he used to be a counsellor at a hospital but it gave him a nervous breakdown. The hotel room is small and the windows overlook a water fountain. Carla pours rum and eggnog into two tumblers and hands one to Bruce. He asks her what she does.

“I facilitate the purchase of fine art pieces,” she says.

He stirs his drink with a finger and says, “Do you like doing that?”

“Sometimes,” she says.

“Do you always ask men in Santa suits to come

back to your hotel room?” he says.

Carla takes a sip of her drink and steps out of her shoes. She unbuttons her blouse. Bruce pulls his red top over his head, unhooks himself from the tummy pack, and pulls off his pants. Underneath he is wearing shorts and a Club Med T-shirt. His legs are covered in black hair. He puts the beard on a chair and asks Carla where she’s from.

“Boston,” Carla says and tells him she once lived in Vancouver for a number of years.

He asks her if she still knows people in Vancouver.

“No,” she says and pinches the knots in her shoulders.

“Why would being a counsellor give you a breakdown?”

“I had to tell people their children were dead.”

“I think sometimes I’m going to have a nervous breakdown. I suppose it’s not the real thing, the full-blown deal. It’s just small breakdowns. Little breaks along the way. Do you know what I mean?” Carla says.

Bruce nods his head. “I know exactly what you mean.” He rests a hand on Carla’s hip. She kisses his mouth and is surprised at how forcefully he pushes back. He runs a hand across her breast and slips her

blouse off her shoulders. The notches of his spine under her hands make her think of a Rhodesian Ridgeback the neighbours owned when she was a child. She pulls her underwear off and lies on the bed. He pushes her skirt up over her soft stomach. When he enters her, Carla sucks in her breath and relaxes her hips, closes her eyes, and lets him cradle her. She smells fresh-cut hay. She opens her eyes and he is above her, this man she only knows as Bruce, his face scrunched up, sweat beads on his brow. Her muscles tighten; she hopes it will be over soon. Her drink abandoned on the floor at the foot of the bed.

When they are done he leans up against the headboard and wipes his face and neck on the sheets. Carla crawls across the bunched-up bedspread and grabs her drink off the floor. She wraps a sheet around her, now she doesn't want to be naked. She scavenges for her underwear. Bruce slips back into his Santa suit. She asks if he wants to grab dinner and is relieved when he says he only has the Santa suit with him and he has to get back to the depot. They are silent in the elevator but exchange cell-phone numbers in the lobby. Carla says that she is in town every few months and will give him a call, although she knows

that she will never call him. They hug and he slips out the door and is gone.

When John left he said he needed air. In the weeks she stayed in the studio before she moved to a place of her own, she began to pay attention to her breathing. She would fill her lungs to the point of splitting and then exhale with a slow, drawn-out precision until she felt light-headed and had to sit down. Do I use more air than I should? she wondered. When they first met they would spend hours in his studio inventing new ways to make love. I would die if we were ever apart, he would say.

She goes back to the Art Gallery. There are only a few people left from the exhibition. Her high heels click on the floor and echo in the room. She stands in front of a large canvas with great red splashes of paint and thinks of space. The space one would need in a home to hang such a painting, the space one needs to view it properly, the space between people, between events, between the times you're happy and sad. She smooths the sleeves of her shirt and presses her cold hand against her flushed cheek.