

# *Mudlark*

*Chelsea Peters*

The girl in front of him was skinny, the large, round bump of the belly beneath her hoodie evident even from behind. He'd been waiting behind her for at least ten minutes, and had drawn up a whole story for how she'd gotten herself into this situation: young, pregnant, and alone at the blood clinic. Absent parents, a rotten boyfriend — he was sad for her. For all their troubles, at least his girls had both escaped their teens without getting themselves knocked up.

As they finally approached the doorway into the actual waiting room, where they'd get to sit on chairs instead of standing in the hall like chumps, the girl stepped briefly out of the line to look intently at the grandfather clock that stood incongruously against the peeling white walls of the clinic hallway; probably donated by some magnanimous patron, who'd imagined it ending up somewhere grander than it had.

The girl had a long black braid and large ears. He tried to picture his girls' ears, how they wore their hair these days, but couldn't. When the girl was done looking at the clock — an action that endeared her to him — she returned to staring at her phone and twirling the braid around and around her wrist. She seemed bored, had none of the serenity about her that Sally had always had when she was expecting. He'd always loved her the most when she was pregnant, and when she was newly un-pregnant; her body all soft in an attractive, forgivable way; the new baby all pink and peach-fuzz-skinned against her milk-filled chest.

He'd left Sal alone at home, stroking her hot water bottle in its velvety red cozy like it was a baby's back. She'd been shopping for pyjamas, the cursor hovering over satin sets in luridly bright jewel tones, a red heart blooming in the corners of the images she clicked on. He thought of the heaps of ballooning, silky material she already had to envelop her from 7 p.m. to 6 a.m. each day, and wondered what she needed with any more.

She'd been so vain before the babies that he was always surprised, and a little disappointed, that she no longer seemed to care much about how she appeared when it was just the two of them. She'd never fully lost the weight from either of her pregnancies; never even seemed to notice when he occasionally gave her pouchy stomach and puckered thighs sidelong looks as they

got ready together in the bathroom, hoping she'd see as he flicked his eyes back to whatever he was doing, a measured shadow of mild disappointment crossing his face.

The curvy nurse finally took his blood, declared him free to go. It was a routine checkup — “Good to keep an eye on things at your age,” as the nurse said; his doctor would call him in a couple of days if anything was off this time. He passed the pregnant girl, still waiting in her chair, on his way out, and tried to smile at her, but she remained gazing resolutely at her phone. As he shoved open the door to the outside he remembered that girls didn't really like men to smile at them anymore — Sal had told him this recently, during a particularly fraught shopping trip — but surely he was getting old enough now for it to be permissible.

He was fifty years old today, born less than five kilometres from the clinic he now exited. The ground would have been frozen that day, fifty years ago; the river swollen and covered by three or more feet of solid ice. It had been one of the worst winters — shortly to be followed by the worst flooding — that the city had ever seen, the winter in which he was born. This year, by contrast, they'd had hardly any snow, and just a handful of days that hit a seasonable minus 30. He could go to the riverbank and squish his boots in the mud as if it were springtime, and after his appointment he did just that, indulging himself because he'd overpaid the meter, and the river was just a handful of blocks from the clinic.

Once he got down to the bank he scoped the ground casually for glints of silver or gold, or the bright of white ceramic against the grey of the clay-like mud. He didn't usually come down randomly like this; this was a bonus visit, an indulgence he allowed himself because of the day. He didn't have any of his mudlarking equipment, and didn't expect to find anything much in the hour or so he had before Sal was expecting him home, but he selected a long and sturdy stick from the bank, trained his eyes on the muck and began to poke at it nonetheless.

The air felt positively warm. The river moved at the steady speed it usually reserved for the summer. There were even a handful of jokers boating along the murky water, paddling or motoring their way down. A pair in a red canoe passed him now, waving when they spotted him on the bank. He didn't wave back, but the next moment he felt a sudden, surprising surge of nostalgia for his days spent by this very river in his childhood, with his dad and brothers and his little fishing rod. The world had been simpler, friendlier, then — and so had he, he supposed. Now he was standing around, fat and alone, irritated by people who were kind enough to wave at him. What would Lacy and Cora be nostalgic for when they were his age? Whatever pop stars

had populated the top of the charts when they were teens? The thought made him desperately sad.

As he climbed back up the bank, having found nothing but bits of garbage in the muddy clay, he thought of the girl and the clock again. He wondered what had stirred in her to make her step out of line to gaze so intently at it; what it was about the clock that had drawn her attention away from the pull of her phone for such a relatively long amount of time.

He went home. Sal greeted him with a quick peck before pointing at a plate awaiting him on the kitchen table. She'd fixed him a lunch of mushroom ravioli with bits of something green on top.

"How was it? Was the wait long?" she asked as she put the last of the dishes she was washing in the rack. Then, before waiting for a response, "I called the girls. They'll be here at four for dinner, as requested. Or so they say." She gave him a wan smile and another kiss on the cheek, before returning to the couch with her hot water bottle and her laptop in hand.

He always marvelled at the fact that she'd completely hidden her periods from him until they'd been married almost ten years, especially now that she didn't hide them at all, and he could see how bad they were. She was slightly hunched over as she shuffled to the couch and flopped herself down with a deep sigh. She was forty-seven, though — nearly forty-eight; surely they'd dry up soon.

A few months earlier she'd started making what he supposed were healthy, longevity-minded decisions, partaking in activities like doing yoga in the park with a dozen other women and a handful of saggy-assed jokers at dawn. She kept a tub of Vaseline beside the bed and slathered her hands in it before going to sleep. She wore sunscreen every single day, even in the winter, and even when she was spending the whole day inside. As he chewed his ravioli he remembered when they'd both been cavalier about their health; eating crap and barely sleeping. Now one of their favourite pastimes was to spend the morning arguing over which of them had had the worst sleep.

He got a shock from the next bite he took. He'd forgotten what he was eating — his nose had told him cake, when in fact it was this mushroomy pasta. The night before, in bed watching the soft-core porn now available on Netflix in the form of raunchy historical dramas, he'd turned down the brightness when he meant to turn down the sound, concerned that the actors' increasingly heavy moans would wake Sal as she snored next to him. It had taken him a moment of staring blankly at the dimmed, naked figures on the screen, to realize what had happened. Little slips like these were start-

ing to seem more familiar than being in control. He washed his final bite down with a gulp of beer and stood, pushing his plate into the middle of the table and leaving it there without a second thought.

After lunch Sal took two big Tylenols and they went out to buy his birthday gift, which would be a new metal detector for his mudlarking. Sal dressed for the spring-like February weather they were enjoying, while he donned his parka, heavy boots, hat, neck-warmer, and garbage mitts, as if it were the temperature it ought to be this time of year.

When they were out in the world Sal made a show of making friends with everyone she considered subordinate to them in some way. He supposed it was sweet, or would have been, if he thought it were rooted in genuine kindness. At Canadian Tire she chatted with the kid who showed them to the section they were seeking for a full five minutes after he'd brought them to the row of metal detectors in aisle ten. He knew so many people like this. They made these efforts at kindness so they could tell themselves that's who they really were. If only they could get every bus boy and gas station attendant to speak at their funerals, he thought, as he waited for Sal to wrap things up with the kid so they could get his gift and get out of there.

A couple of years after Lacy was born a friend of Sal's had disappeared. It turned out an ex-boyfriend had killed her, but at first the police mounted a big search, thinking she might just be tucked away somewhere, hidden or hiding. Sal had given an interview for the news in which she'd cried into the camera, little Lacy in her arms, and asked her friend to get in touch to let everyone know she was okay. When the spot aired, she'd recorded the appearance on VHS, carefully labelling the tape "Mona's Disappearance — CTV Interview" and slipping it in next to the Disney movies lining the shelf beneath the TV. It was one of the moments that had clarified her to him, back when they'd only been married for a couple of years, and still didn't really know each other — not properly, at least. For some reason this memory had stuck with him more than most of the others; continued to define her to him, even now. He wondered, now, as he stood in the aisle while Sal looked at the row of metal detectors, if this was completely fair, but the thought left his mind as quickly as it had entered it.

"Here we go." Sal held up the box with the metal detector he'd told her he wanted. "This the one, baby?"

"That's the one."

The same kid who'd helped them find it checked them out. He thanked the kid quickly and turned to leave, then stood for another five minutes with

both hands atop the upright box, looking at the ground as Sal confirmed the details of the kid's plans for school, before she gave a final dazzling smile and led the way back out of the store.

That afternoon he shopped for pyjamas for Sal while she took a nap, sneaking onto her computer to purchase the ones she'd let him see her singling out with those little hearts that morning before he left for the clinic.

Sal's birthday was just a week after his, something that had absolutely delighted her when they first met. He was late, as always, in ordering her gift, and would have to pay extra for express shipping, but it was fine: this was all part of their system. Once he'd already left things too long, she would make a show of browsing online for the items she wanted, and then he'd 'surprise' her with them a week later, earning himself a wet kiss when she opened the gift and, later that night, the chance of some rare, tepid sex.

The women modelling the pyjamas in the photos were all standing or lounging in the same bedroom set, a fake window behind them lit with fake sunlight. The pyjamas were all jewel-coloured and printed — bright and gaudy. All this colour. When did people start wanting so much colour?

One woman recurred in a few different photos, wearing an array of outfits. Most of the photos didn't show the models' mouths, just their bodies from the neck down, but this woman's mouth was visible in all of them, and in each photo she was smiling — not like a model, not like his daughters smiled, pushing their lips out further from where they naturally sat in their faces. Smiling like she was happy, like she meant it.

In another photo, a woman's bare stomach was visible above some frilly pyjama bottoms that looked more like underwear. This stomach had a slightly pudgy softness to it, and a poorly airbrushed scar just below the bellybutton. Though her face wasn't visible, he imagined that this was the woman with the smile.

He glanced at the door to the bedroom. Sal usually napped for half an hour — he had a few more minutes. Saving the pyjamas he'd narrowed it down to with one hand, he unbuckled his pants and untucked himself from his underwear with the other.

Lacy arrived for dinner first, half an hour early. She kissed him eagerly on the cheek after hanging her jean jacket carefully on one of the hooks by the door.

"Happy birthday, Daddy!" She beamed at him, handing him a card. She was a sweet girl, Lacy. A good girl. She bounced into the kitchen to help her

mother with the salad, and the two of them proceeded to gossip happily over the crunch of the iceberg leaves being ripped to shreds.

Cora was late, arriving just in time for them all to sit down.

“Hey, Dad.” She gave him a somewhat tight grin and let her jacket fall to the ground beside her chair. Sal glared at her as she scooped her own chair up to the table, though this scowl melted to a smile fairly quickly once she started in on the rosé.

He was quiet throughout the meal, mostly focused on his food, and occasionally on the little gestures or turns of phrase that revealed the ways his daughters had changed slightly, even since he’d last seen them just a week or two before.

He could see how they’d each shaped themselves to other people, instead of finding identities of their own. Cora wrote ironic poems in the style of a young female poet whose book she’d bought him for Christmas, but not as well. And Lacy seemed to have lost her own personality somewhere in her early teens; he could remember when she was a nerdy, sensitive little kid. Emotionally open and unwittingly charismatic. At some point she’d shifted, after a period of deep melancholy when she entered high school that he could still remember, into this people-pleasing cartoon character, all sunshine and pleasantries, who wanted to be everyone’s favourite person so badly that she’d given herself a stomach ulcer at the age of twenty. He’d never understood what had happened with her, but he’d also never really wanted to know.

Lacy. He’d worried about that name, the potential playground associations, but Sal had insisted. It was the only name she liked out of the hundreds they’d peeled through, lying cuddled together in bed so many years ago; the only name that didn’t seem to remind her of someone or some TV show character she hated. Or had it been him who’d been so picky? He couldn’t remember.

Cora mostly spoke over the rest of them, though Sal held her own pretty well. His thoughts slowly receded into considerations of the items he’d found on his last proper mudlarking visit to the riverbank, a couple of weeks before. The old glass pill bottle had been a real find. He suspected it was 1920 or so, but he’d know for sure once he’d posted its photo to the online mudlarkers forum and his fellow larkers had weighed in.

“Dad.”

“Mm? What?” Cora was staring at him — more like glaring, really; a look so like the one Sal had given her earlier when she’d arrived late.

“I asked if you’ve looked for those photos of Gran like I asked you to.”

“Oh. No, I haven’t.”

“Could you? I’d really like to see them . . .”

“Sure, sure.” Cora kept talking, but he stopped listening. Didn’t ask why she wanted to see these photos; couldn’t see why she would: his mother hadn’t been much to look at, and she and he hadn’t been particularly close.

After Cora ran out of news she wanted to share Lacy kept trying to salvage the conversation, which had lulled into near-silence by the time he blew out his birthday candles. His older daughter kept returning to the same, safe topics of food and television and celebrity gossip, and he worked hard to scrounge up a smile and a semi-interested response whenever she tried to draw him in.

She was a sweet girl, Lacy. They were all sweet, really — his girls, his women — in their own ways. They were here, weren’t they? They were here, and they were showing him love, even if it wasn’t the exact kind he wanted, and surely that was better than nothing.

After dinner Sal took the girls to her sewing room, which had once been Cora’s bedroom, to fit them for the dresses they were reluctantly letting her make for them, like she’d often done when they were little.

He was enjoying his moments of quiet peace, pouring himself another Scotch, when he remembered with a jolt that he’d never finished buying Sal her pyjamas that afternoon; he’d simply finished himself off, shut the computer, and moved on. He stopped mid-pour, paused, then took his tumbler with him to retrieve Sal’s computer.

Sal had clearly used the computer since he had: the window with the pyjamas no longer greeted him when he flipped the screen up to face him. He sighed and started clumsily dragging his finger around on the trackpad, trying to orient himself, clicking through the dozens of tabs that were open in the browser.

He wasn’t sure what happened — he supposed he’d closed one of the million tabs by mistake — but he was suddenly staring in surprise at Sal’s email inbox.

He’d never been one for snooping — he didn’t care that much about other people’s lives, not even Sal’s — but his eye caught one sender’s name over and over again amidst the dozens of emails about online sales and other spammy things.

He heard the girls giggling from Sal’s sewing room, then Sal’s deeper laugh joining in. He hesitated, then opened one of the emails at random, which brought up an entire thread of exchanges between Sal and this J. person. He sipped his Scotch as he began to read.

The river was receding slightly, depositing bits of colour in the form of leaves and garbage throughout the grey mud. He was later than he'd wanted to be, even though he'd asked for dinner to be at four-thirty so that he could make it here with his new metal detector before he completely lost the light. He'd asked the girls if any of them wanted to join him, but even today they'd just laughed and sent him off on his own.

He went to his favourite spot, close to an old dock that still got occasional use from the water bus in the summer, and at which a large and grand old sternwheeler was moored — permanently, it seemed; he'd never seen it in use in his many years of larking along this stretch of the bank.

Two years earlier he'd found his favourite-ever artifact in this very spot: an old jackknife with a genuine silver handle. The mudlarkers on the forum had helped him date it to the early 1880s. You were supposed to turn things like that in to a museum; he'd told the other larkers he'd done this, though the truth was he'd kept it for himself.

He strolled up and down the bank for over an hour, waving the new detector over the mud, finding nothing. He was returning to the place where he'd started, by the dock, ready to give up and climb the bank back to his truck, when he heard car doors closing and voices carrying over to him from the road at the top of the bank — probably some kids, coming to drink on the dock. He turned and strolled back in the opposite direction from the dock; he was in no mood for teenagers right now.

Once he'd gained some good distance from the dock he stood looking out, in the opposite direction from the voices, at the darkening water. After a few minutes, he heard footsteps in the distance, joining the sounds of the voices; rumbling hollowly over the wood of the dock. He turned to look back in that direction, surprised to hear the hard, crisp sound of heels instead of the plodding of sneakers upon the wooden planks some thirty yards away. Even more surprising: at the end of the dock the old sternwheeler was all lit up; through the boat's big windows he could see the small figures of a few servers dressed in tails wandering around, setting up a bar.

A soiree was making its way down from the shore to the old boat. He stood in his dark spot on the bank, invisible to the revellers, watching as a train of thirty or so of them tottered across the gangplank and onto the boat deck, many of the women dressed head to toe in thick furs. He stood, hands in his pockets and his elbow resting on the metal detector, a little awed by what he was seeing; that boat hadn't sailed for years. It had a funny name — The Paddle Girl or The Paddle Queen, or something like that.



He stood watching until they took off, some fifteen minutes later. The boat inched smoothly down the river, towards his spot further down the bank. Jazzy music from the 1920s started playing soon after they departed, reaching him sounding vivid but somewhat hollow, like all noise does after travelling over water; that curious, flat echo that sounds really like a lack of echo.

As the boat sailed slowly past him and prepared to round a bend in the river that would take it from his sight, he could just make out two women emerging from the bright depths of the boat, approaching the railings at the stern. They were too far away, too bundled in their fancy furs, for him to make out their faces or ages, but he could tell from their hairstyles that they were women. Their body language told him they were close — that they loved, or maybe were in love with, each other. Cora seemed to have plenty of lesbian friends — maybe these were two of them.

His thoughts drifted to his women, back at home — were they standing with their arms around each other in the kitchen? Probably not. He could picture Sal, slumped on the couch, knocked out by the wine and Tylenol, while Lacy finished the dishes in the kitchen behind her. Cora would either be on her phone, or gone already. Or were they maybe, just maybe, all together, still, laughing, like they had been when they were in the sewing room without him?

No one really tells you that people can pass in and out of your life. That they can change, and that you're supposed to change along with them, or at least acknowledge that they've grown; that if you want them to stay with you, you have to latch on and refuse to let go. You have to make an effort, or they'll round a corner and never look at you again. It was just another one of those things people seemed to be expected to pick up along the way — probably from their parents — and which he was beginning to realize he hadn't. What did it say about you, if you hated all the people around you — your loved ones, your family — for what you knew were small, petty reasons, then hated them even more for not loving you in the exact way you wanted them to?

Un-evolved. That's probably what this said about him — that he was un-evolved, like a caveman or an idiot. That was the word that had appeared most often in Sal's emails to J. — whoever the fuck that was — which were much longer than J.'s responses to her were; she seemed to email him at least once a day, sometimes more, complaining about her sad life with her un-evolved husband.

He'd found nothing at all on the bank, not even a comb or an old toothbrush. He realized he wasn't likely to, now that the dark had fully descended.

He looked back up at the boat, the only bright thing he could see, as it neared the corner in the river.

Suddenly, he felt compelled to wave to the women standing at the boat's stern, before they disappeared around the bend. He raised one arm, in what felt like a cool, casual gesture, but soon raised the other as well. He waved them both slowly at first, and then almost frantically, like he was marooned, and hoping they'd save him.

After a minute or two he put his arms down, embarrassed by how short of breath this minor exertion had left him. All that happened was that a beautiful laugh rang out as the boat disappeared around the bend. It reached him in the same flat echo as the ripple of the water, the warble of the music; the tremble of all those happy, laughing voices.