

Tamas Dobozy

LESTER'S EXIT

Lester Jones was active for such a short time that you'd be forgiven for not having heard of him. Official records consist mainly of photographs in newspapers between 2007 and 2013: Lester at the Northumberland conservative rally, January 4, 1995, staring at the photographer teeth bared as if he wants to chew through the page; Lester under the low light of Laff'n Gaffs, howling in black and white; Lester at the G20 summit in Toronto, arms raised against a police baton at such an impossible angle that he seems like the poster of a man blown into the frame. None of the photos or articles identifies Lester by name, and anyone who didn't know him would think he was there by accident, a bystander to some other, larger story.

But then his preference was always anonymity. Myles Lynch, owner of the Laff'n Gaffs chain of comedy clubs, still can't describe what Lester looked like. "That's probably," he grins, "because he came around in disguise so often, especially near the end." Lynch shrugs, troubled by memory. "By then I was telling the bouncers to watch for him, you know? Don't let him in. Can you blame me? The comics were terrified—even though he made a lot of their careers." The windows of Lynch's office are smeared red and orange and blue by neon refracted in the raindrops. "Well, Lester had a demon inside. He'd go after you and wouldn't stop. It didn't matter what the comics threw back, or if the audience turned against him; Lester didn't back down. The only thing you could do was beat him up. I told him people were starting to come around to see him more than the guys on stage. You should have seen his reaction."

Lester Jones was born to Nathan and Marion Jones on September 23, 1969, in Fort Erie, the second of two children. His older sister, Erika, had been killed in an automobile accident three months before he arrived. Her police file, available through the Canadian Freedom of Information Act, is filled with details of the accident, along with a snapshot given to the officers by her parents: a blonde girl in the late afternoon sun, four years old, sitting like a cowboy on the back of a black Labrador. "The family was destroyed by the

accident," says Lieutenant Karl Jeffries, the investigating officer. "That part was normal anyhow." He turns the cover of the dossier back and forth. "But the guy, the father, he kept coming back to it, you know? Couldn't shake it. Had the whole file copied for himself, looked at it all the time, even added a few things of his own, like the case was some kind of conspiracy. Kept calling me for years. Said he had 'new questions.' But they were nothing. 'Was she smiling when they found her? Was she still on the dog when she got hit? Was there any hair between her fingers, like she was clinging to it when the car rounded the alley?' Crazy stuff. Stuff that made no difference one way or the other."

He closes the folder and puts a hand on it. "I'd think of Nathan Jones when I heard, later, about Lester. Of course, I was never involved in his arrests. For some reason, his cases never came to me." The light glances every which way off the surface of the photograph. "They were minor infractions." He waves his hands in the air as if clearing smoke. "At least the stuff they actually brought him in for. Misdemeanors, public intoxication, disturbing the peace—assignments they give to the junior guys. But whenever I heard about Lester I'd think of this picture, what it must have been like in that house. I mean his old man, he called me two nights before he died. Can you believe it? Eighty years old, stuck in a hospital bed, tubes everywhere, and he wants to know if there was any alcohol, not in *her* system, but in the dog's. I told him we didn't do an autopsy on the freaking dog!"

The last address for Lester Jones was 4b-74 Jarvis Street, overlooking Saint James Park. There are half a dozen prostitutes sitting curbside. "Hey, sweetheart, if you're going in there, take me with you." But they go quiet at mention of his name. Lester always treated them well, they say, though when asked about what that "treatment" consisted of, they go quiet again, then disperse, muttering insults. One of them lingers a moment, introduces herself as "Susie," and says she'll reveal everything she knows about Lester "for three hundred dollars." Then, without waiting for a reply, she lifts her middle finger while backing away. "You want the real story on the Heckler, you come find me." She turns, her body stringy in the arms and legs but flabby in the belly and hips. The polyester skirt rides high on her backside, the zipper only half done up. There are buttons missing from the front of her shirt, runs in her nylons. One of the other girls yells from across the street: "Don't

listen to her. I'll tell you everything about Lester. Cheaper. Two hundred bucks!"

The current tenant of Lester's apartment is Alfredo Espinoza, a street-car driver. "I own this place now. He was just a renter," sniffs Espinoza. "He left everything behind, believe it or not. *Everything.*" He gestures at the closet, says it was full of clothes, bags and bags of vintage three-piece suits, tuxedos, sequin dresses, wigs—enough disguises for an army of spies. The shelves were filled with books. Posters, paintings, newspaper clippings, personal photographs on the walls. There was still half a bottle of Johnny Walker Blue in the top drawer of the dresser, beneath the underwear. "Who the fuck leaves behind half or even a half inch of Johnny Walker Blue?" asks Espinoza. "Never mind his underwear," he mutters, pulling an old suitcase from under his bed filled with all the memorabilia of Lester he thought worth keeping. Here are the clippings of Lester at various demonstrations, political rallies, theater events, public exhibitions, in each one of them his face circled violently in red and X'ed out as if he hated the sight of himself. There's a photograph of Marion and Nathan and young Lester, who is maybe seven years old, severe in its contrasts, his mother and father in the foreground wearing black and white clothes, young Lester a step or three back, near the edge of the frame, like someone arrived uninvited. None of them are touching. None of them are smiling. The surface of the image is buried under the oil of fingerprints.

There are also five or six books checked out from the Toronto Public Library, long overdue. Paging through them, Espinoza stops at passages underlined by Lester:

The heckler has scant interest in sole creation, the thing beautiful unto itself, being neither actor nor artist but an agent of interruption, dedicated, as we have chanced to hear, to the pause, the digression, or what our brethren to the east call the *non sequitur*. (from "Fragments of A *Cutting*" [1682], by Bartholomeus Wrocklage, Harold Feinstein translator and editor)

Marcel Delisle—terror of dancehalls, theatres, and salons from Boston to Savannah and back again—claimed "an exclusive devotion to the accidental," stepping "naked of resources, every night, into [his] customary seat at the back of the room, taking up only

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the tools and opportunities made available by chance, which were in turn left behind when [he was] forcibly ejected into the street.” (from *Pecadillos de Amor* [1891], by Madrigal de Flor (pseud.), Elise Floria Sanchez translator and editor)

Christ's announcement, at The Last Supper, that he was dining with his betrayer may have baffled the other disciples, but Judas only heckled him: “Surely, you don't mean me, Lord?” Judas knew perfectly well who the Lord meant! In this regard, the kiss in the garden was the ultimate catcall. Like all hecklers, Judas made his target rise to the occasion, to realize His full potential—the redemption of humanity itself. Then, afterwards, in an act of violent renunciation, Judas committed suicide, noose around neck, having refused even that most basic of thank-yous—the thirty pieces of silver. “Better not to have been born” was the final verdict, his entire life distilled to one point in someone else's destiny, given over to realizing someone else's glory without any reward or recognition other than everlasting infamy. This, it seems to me, is the distillation of heckling to its purest, most ethical form. (from *The Cheap Seats* [1946], by Horatio Thomas)

These are only a small sampling of the materials Lester collected on heckling (if his user history at the Toronto Library is to be believed), though nowhere is there a notebook, or letters, or any other kind of evidence to suggest he might have been gathering information for a study. The bits of underlining in Espinoza's books seem more like an inventory of consolations, stray words and sentences to remind Lester he wasn't alone in history.

This isolation is visible in the few videos of him. An appearance at Centre Stage's improv night shows him leaning over a table like a dog looking for scraps, except he's barking at Ben Farney, an up-and-coming comic back then, long before the international tours and movies and best sellers. The sound in the footage is scratchy, fading in and out as if the microphone were a fly zooming across the room. The visuals are equally fragmented, handheld, panning violently from Farney to Lester and back again.

“Lester Jones,” Farney yells from the stage. “Still looking for acts to ruin?”

“Why, Farney, you got one?” Lester yells back.

Farney scowls, mutters something under his breath, then leaps to the edge of the stage, leaning out over the audience. “You think you’re doing us a service? Like you’re on a crusade? Don’t you ever get sick of pretending you’re not a motherfucker?”

“Come on, Farney. I’ve given your mother a lot of satisfaction over the years.”

The crowd’s laughter drowns out the next exchange, at the end of which Lester again receives a roar of approval. Leaning out further, Farney lifts his middle finger. “If you want my comeback, you’ll have to squeeze your ass cheeks together,” he shouts.

“Oh, was that you back there? I didn’t know cunts could fuck assholes.”

“Well, you’re an asshole who fucks cunts, so it makes sense that . . .” The remainder of the sentence disappears in the general howl.

“True. I heard the ex-wife fucked you pretty hard on that divorce settlement.”

“Well, she’s your sister, so you should know how hard she fucks.”

Lester smiles. “Nice one, Farney.”

“Wish I could say the same, dickhead.”

Then Lester is put into a headlock by a bouncer and dragged out the door.

The other videos are even more fragmented: security footage of Lester being bounced off walls; an iPhone clip of Lester mooing at a fat comic; a newsclip of Lester spitting insults at a rally. This last one, according to documentary filmmaker Hailey Nelson, is part of a CBC news report from April 23, 2013, at a campaign stop for conservative MLA Kenneth Williams in Etobicoke. Lester is standing near the podium. He keeps wiping his eyes as if the wind’s blowing sand in his face. There are protestors shouting through bullhorns, waving signs, being shoved back by police whose hands are already on their canisters of pepper spray before Williams has even begun to speak. Here and there you see groups of young men who’d later be disowned by official protest groups, misnamed “anarchists” in the press, milling with the crowd, indifferent to all politics, already delirious with the idea of violence, looking for any excuse to jump in, strike out, smash windows, set cars on fire. When

the noise of the crowd subsides, Lester's lips move, almost imperceptibly, though judging from Williams's reaction, whatever Lester is saying doesn't need to be said loudly to take effect. Within minutes, the politician's handlers are pushing aside the crowd from one side, and the police, taking note, are moving in from the other. Lester ducks into the mass of bodies.

Then the crowd loses control.

"I was working on the riot," Nelson says, running the footage backward and stopping at a close-up of Lester's face. "It was just an accident that I ran across this at the CBC archives. I hadn't even heard about Lester before that."

She zooms in on Lester's mouth, then runs the film forward frame by frame to make out the shape of his lips around every word spoken. "From what I can see, he's saying, '*Honcho Magazine*, gay porn, nineteen-seventies.' He's accusing Williams. Look there! He's saying a name. David Punctual? Donald Mutual? Dunstan Mundy? I can't quite make it out. But here, look . . ." She skips ahead a few seconds. "Look at that. If he isn't saying 'Gerald Knox,' I'll give up filmmaking forever."

It was Knox's office that shut down Nelson's documentary, long after Lester disappeared. Until the Etobicoke riot, Williams had been Knox's main opponent in the elections and had been up five points in the polls, a lead obliterated after he came out and admitted to a series of risqué photo shoots in "two or three gay magazines" in the 1970s under the pseudonym David Mutual. Nelson received a cease-and-desist order shortly after making contact with Knox's senior advisor, Margot Ramsay, requesting an interview with Knox on the connection between his office and that of Lester Jones. "This was the early days of my documentary. I was still putting together the proposal," she says. "They never even returned my call." Her grant applications were rejected. "Most of the financing comes from provincial and federal governments. Knox's office spiked them."

She pulls a file and opens it. Inside is *Honcho*, issue twenty-three, December 1975, dog-eared, staples loose and rusted along the spine. One of the layouts features two men, one of them dressed as a construction worker, the other in housewife drag, fairly tame by today's standards, though revealing enough to ruin a political career. Nelson bends over the photos, adjusts the lamp, and points at the construction worker, whose face is obscured by the hard hat. "For a while I had this theory that the other guy was Gerald

Knox, under the name . . ." She runs her finger along a lurid caption underneath. "Here it is. Vincent Barbaria." She laughs. "But the pictures are so shaded, especially on the face. I can't be sure. But that," she says, pointing to the housewife, "there's no question who David Mutual is." She smiles. "A good-looking guy, even in a dress."

She finds a photo of Williams from thirty-five years later. The likeness is unmistakable. "A left-wing candidate might have been able to get away with the scandal, maybe even turn it to advantage. But Williams was running on the social conservative ticket—pro-family, anti-abortion, welfare is for lazy people, the environment doesn't exist—the whole bit. It killed him. And, of course, Knox's office had the most to gain. But it would have been death, given the sympathies of their base, to reveal Williams's past directly or to risk blackmail, or if anyone found out that someone in Knox's office had contracted Lester to do it." Nelson leans over the table spread with photographs and newspaper clippings. "In fact, they went out of their way to express sympathy for Williams, congratulating him on his courage to come forward." She picks up one of the pictures of Lester. "He probably hated himself for doing what he did, but he must have hated Williams's politics more. There are very few appearances by Lester after that date, two or three at the most. By the end of the year, he'd disappeared."

Nelson's documentary remains no more than that: a fragment of Lester whispering secrets at a rally in Etobicoke. "They—Knox's office—they killed my project before I even got a chance to get it going." Nelson shrugs now, though it's evident that abandoning the project has not lessened her fascination with Lester. "It wasn't even the politics that brought me to it," she says. "It was his loneliness, you know? Here was a guy who went around heckling people, but I always got the sense that there was something fiercely moral behind it. A desire to make the world rise to the occasion, without anyone ever finding out that he'd done it, much less being able to thank him. In fact, I sometimes wonder if it was really Knox's office that killed my film, or Lester."

Margot Ramsay lives in the Annex neighborhood of Toronto. She no longer works for Gerald Knox or his party. Officially, she's a "political consultant," linked to a number of lobbying efforts around aboriginal issues—land claims, drinking water, educational initiatives, dry reserves—as if she'd

picked the fastest, hottest humanitarian cause to regain her political capital. Her rise and fall within Knox's office was swift. She guided him to the legislature and then, shortly after Lester's own disappearance, resigned for "personal reasons" never made clear. But long ago—before the Masters in Political Science from McGill; before the PhD in Governance and Management from Princeton; before involvement in community advocacy around Toronto, canvassing for civic politicians on the left; before the work as an aide in City Hall and then the provincial legislature—she worked for a year in the office of Nathan Jones, MD.

Even now, two years after Etobicoke, Ramsay is wary. She refuses to open the door until it's clear there will be no questions about Knox or Williams. "Did I know a boy called Lester Jones once? Sure." Margot waits, suspicious, looking for the hidden agenda, the trick question that will lead her into talking about Etobicoke before she even realizes she's doing it. She fingers the lace doily on her armchair as if weighing how much she really owes Knox. Maybe, in the end, her debt is actually to Lester, to reveal at least the truth of *his* story. Or maybe revealing his story is actually a form of revenge, a way to get back at him for what his actions cost her.

"I've never seen such a lonely kid. He was shaking with it, you know? Like it was building up inside. There were always problems—*always*." She pulls out a photo album and opens it. Inside are pictures of the Jones family and Margot's own. "My parents were great friends with Marion and Nathan before Erika died. Afterwards, I don't think the Joneses were friends with anybody." She leafs through a few pages and then hands the album over. The dominant theme is backyards, barbecues, cocktails—the high summers of white-collar affluence. Nathan and Ralph Ramsay lift martinis above flowerbeds. Erika is pushed on a swing while everyone stands around, wineglasses in hand. Marion and Louise Ramsay laugh in front of a picnic table filled with salads, cold cuts, cheeses, and bottles of champagne on the day of Erika's christening. Marion, three or four months pregnant, smokes a cigarette and lifts a cocktail shaker over her head like a movie star at the Copacabana, the lights of the parlor reflecting off the darkened windows.

"I was eight years older than Erika. I remember her. Angelic and adventurous. The kind of kid, two, three years old, you have to watch all the time, or else she'll slip out the door and run off across the highway to the park. Everyone loved her, especially Nathan. He was so proud of her. Al-

ways horsing around, doing crazy things, like putting her on that dog . . ." She frowns, pauses. "Kids weren't looked after so carefully in those days. I'm not saying it was anyone's fault." Margot sits up on the couch, puts her knees together, and rests her elbows on them. "Well, once she was gone, it was different."

It was as if Erika had never existed. Her toys and clothes and even pictures were dumped on the front sidewalk the day after her death. Nathan and Marion broke off all relations with neighbors and friends. They never mentioned Erika again, not to anyone. And if one of those acquaintances happened to mention her, both Nathan and Marion would go quiet with an awkwardness so excruciating that sooner or later everyone else stopped speaking of her as well, conditioned by the Jones's hostile silence. The funeral held shortly after her death was so private it might as well have been done at night. Not a single person was invited.

"They'd been best friends—my parents and the Joneses—but they stopped coming over, stopped inviting us. We'd see Nathan leave every morning, off to work at the clinic, and come home. Spent just enough time outside to get in and out of the car. He was still a good doctor, but he was distant, professional. Lester, on the other hand, we'd see around a lot. He was a lonely kid, but not a quiet one. We didn't hear it from the Joneses, but everyone knew the reports. I talked to him once in a while, early on, when he was still able to hold a conversation, before it all became snide remarks and insults."

Margot stops, makes a silent decision, and then describes what it must have been like in Lester's home, filled with what could not be spoken of, like dust on every word, a silent mother and father brooding between meals and chores. Once in a while an eruption of temper or a depression so deep the boy spent afternoons pulling at the locked doorknob of his father's study, his mother's bedroom. Days spent at the window watching other kids come and go—to baseball, to piano lessons, to afternoons in the park, to trick or treat. It was a life as barren as the moon, and after awhile it must have come to feel normal—being weightless, ignored, invisible—until it became a kind of principle or craving.

"His first name wasn't even a first name," Margot says, laughing without actually finding it funny. "It was his mother's maiden name, Leicester, though he always spelled it L-E-S-T-E-R. It was like Nathan and Marion

couldn't handle bringing another extension of themselves into the world, so they refused to give him his own identity. Not that we were invited to the christening. They'd closed the door to everyone by then."

She remembers how it played, Lester's childhood, acting up in whatever way he could—dropping glasses, breaking windows, climbing roofs. Later, it was drugs and alcohol and as much sex as possible. Petty thefts from his mother's purse, his father's wallet, then shoplifting, breaking into vending machines, swiping the charity bank in front of the cashier, behavior so corrosive to his teachers' authority that multiple suspensions finally led to expulsion—each act planned for maximum outrage.

"He was sixteen when his father kicked him out." The whole neighborhood heard about it—shouting, slamming doors, Lester's good-bye delivered in the form of a rock hurled through the window—and also about the final transgression that proved more than his parents could stand. He went down to city hall, got up on a railing on the upper mezzanine. It looked down over the main concourse. As the city councilors walked back and forth, Lester began hurling abuse. "Alderman Grove, aka Mr. Moron, planning the Estatesway Parking Lot on the aboriginal burial ground. You knew damn well what it was. Nobody buys that shit. What? You want a piece of me? Come up here and get it, pussy." "Councilor Eberly, yeah you, jackass, what made you think getting rid of the walking mall on Main at 16th would make this a better city? Got tired of seeing your daughter down there turning tricks?" "Hey, look everyone, it's our fuckwit mayor. Coming back from your six-beer lunch in the private parking stall on P2? What, you trying to say something? I can't hear you. You're slurring your words. Drunk mayor, drunk mayor, drunk mayor." It took five policemen to get Lester down, and he spent a night in jail before being released, briefly, into his parents' custody.

"He disappeared after that. But a long time later, back in . . . Well, years ago, I ran into him—quite by accident, really—on the street in Toronto. He already had some notoriety, in the clubs, among certain political circles. I was expecting the old, surly Lester, but he was very quiet, almost humble. He seemed, I don't know . . . He seemed holy." Margot smiles, shakes her head, looks at the floor. "I know that sounds ridiculous: Saint Lester. But it turned out he'd kept track of me. I was flattered. He asked if there was anything he could do to help. . . ."

But as far as help is concerned, only one comic, Adele Jones (no relation), is willing to credit Lester. She snorts at some of the remarks made about Lester by other comics over the years. “I think he was careful, almost prescient, about whom he heckled. Name one single target of his heckling who didn’t go places. Just look at the list: me, Jim Dement, Sally Hay, Franz, George Hayter, Jess Billings, even Ben Farney. You ask them what their big night was, when they finally realized they’d come into their own. If they tell you any story that doesn’t include Lester, they’re lying.” Adele’s calling from Chicago, where she’s headlining six sold-out months at the Fun Factory. The call is interrupted by regular requests from stage managers and room service and her agent, all of whom she whispers away, hand cupped over the receiver. “Why not ask them this: Of all the comics Lester could have heckled—and believe me he didn’t heckle that many, not if you look at how many he might have heckled over those years—why you? Why us? Night after night, he’d turn up, bringing the audience with him, staying on until we’d kicked his ass decisively. Then he was gone. We never saw him again.”

She whistles loudly to get someone’s attention, whispers inaudibly, and then returns to the phone with a story of their last meeting in the early winter of 2013. Lester was sitting in a greasy spoon—one of those east end places where you can buy bacon and eggs for \$2.99. He was with a twitchy young woman, her face a mess of scabs. Adele saw him through the window past a painted-on advertisement for all-day breakfasts. When she went in and approached him, Lester looked as if he wanted to sink through the floor or, barring that, pretend they’d never met. Adele stood there. She’d just wanted to say thank you. Lester looked worn to the bone, his hair hanging in gray strands, his beard also gray, fallen into the deep hollows of his cheeks, and his clothes stained with what looked like months spent in restaurants like this.

Adele persisted, telling him that before his arrival at Linklater’s Improv Night she’d just been trying it on, half-hearted, showing up at the same place every week because it was easy and allowed her to keep a day job. Lester sighed and muttered: “Rise to the occasion or die.” Then, as she continued to stand there, he scowled. “I don’t even want to be a footnote.” He rose from the table, and she saw how shrunken he’d become, eaten away, amazed that this same person had once been so relentless, glaring from the back row

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at Linklater's night after night with a ready torrent of abuse. But his tone was soft. "Glad you made it, Adele. But there are enough stories about me already." After that, there was nothing more for her to say. It seemed he'd accepted her thanks. Lester was still standing there, facing the spot where she'd thanked him, when Adele passed through the door and along the windows and off into the life Lester had prepared her for.

Adele wasn't the last person to see Lester alive. That was Susie Johnston, twenty-four years old, on a night in March, an exact date she no longer remembers. It was snowing then, at the long end of one of those Toronto winters, minus thirty degrees Celsius, stretching far into the spring. She was coming down from a week of bad tricks, bruised and torn, days on meth, and Lester had taken her in, given her his bed while he eased his own wrecked body under a sheet on the couch.

He was drinking a lot, she says, but it was all good stuff—Bushmills Twenty-One Year Old, Blanton's, Johnny Walker Blue, Aberlour 18—and he was never drunk, just keeping it going glass after glass, steady from noon until night. It was as if the drinking didn't matter as much as disposing of the roll of money in the dresser, enough fifties and hundreds to clog a dozen toilets. He'd pull out another handful of bills and head to the nearest liquor store, leaving the dresser drawer open, not caring if it tempted her, if she stole, telling her to take what she wanted, though Susie swears she never did. She loved Lester too much for that. Now, against the ball of her thumb, she riffles the three hundred dollars she's received to tell his story.

"He'd come back with groceries, more booze. That was the only time he ever went out. We were there for weeks like that, and the whole time I couldn't figure out if he was hiding because someone was after him or because he needed to burrow away for a while to figure things out. He was making up his mind about something."

They never slept in the same bed, nor had they slept together before. Lester insisted he was too old for her. The only time he came near Susie was to hold her down when she shook from withdrawal, to bar the door when she went insane for more, when she wanted to get down to the street, to hustle, to take another loan from her dealer. He pulled cotton balls and iodine from behind the bathroom mirror and swabbed the abscesses along her arms, above her heel, down the side of her neck. He held her fingers

when she started picking at scabs, her nails traveling from one sore to the next like some torturous connect-the-dots that drew her in full. He would rock her gently, humming. When she screamed on the toilet from taking a piss, Lester put ice in a bag for her to hold between her legs. And all night he sat with her, smiling as she spewed rage and hate, every curse she could think of, until days and nights later she was too exhausted for anything but sleep. When Susie awoke, she was always tucked in.

And in the quiet moments between symptoms, she listened. He was setting out the problem, always in shorthand, like a thousand-piece jigsaw of sea and sky, each one too difficult to fit with the rest. He mentioned a name, "Knox," several times and described him as a "protégé," someone he'd helped rise in local and provincial politics. "Lester said Knox had failed him," Susie says. "He only used his power to keep himself in office. Lester said Knox was like a rat trapped in the plumbing." She wasn't sure if he hated Knox or was afraid of him. "I should never have gotten involved in politics," he said. Whenever Williams's resignation came up, or, worse, the Etobicoke riot, on television, in a newspaper, including the three people who'd died in the stampede, crushed up against cars and fences, Lester turned the page or turned the program off.

At other times, Lester talked about his childhood, his parents, and then his sister. He knew very little about Erika, next to nothing. But discovering her had been the most important moment of his life. "I wasn't a good person, not a very good person at all, before I found out about Erika." He said it as if the discovery had come too late to save him. "She made me think about what others had lost," he mumbled. "She lost everything. And I think, my father and mother, they lost everything with her as well."

"I told Lester no," Susie says, shaking her head. "They didn't lose everything. They still had him. . . . You know what he said to that? 'I did the same in return. I thought only of myself.'"

Susie fingers the wad of bills as if she wants to separate them in half and give part of the money back. In another second she comes out and says she thinks Knox killed Lester. It's the only theory that makes sense, she says, that explains the weeks of locked doors, furtive exits and entrances, the gazes at the street through the crinkled venetian blinds, the steady sips of whiskey.

But then Susie's eyes refocus, and she says no, she remembers Lester

calling afterward. Or does she? He sounded a long way off. There were noises in the background. Zooming cars. Seagulls. The ding-ding of cars and trucks running tires across driveway bells. It was a gas station, she thinks, somewhere way out, beyond Toronto. But en route to where?

"I don't know," she says. "I was so high by then." She takes the wad of money and pushes it back across the table. "Lester was gone three, four days, and I was already high." She looks away.

On the phone, Lester asked if she was okay. Susie said she was fine; it sounded like a stray sentence spoken by someone else and picked up at random by the receiver. There was a long silence. "Better not to have been born," he whispered. She could still hear the gulls and traffic and driveway bell and the receiver knocking against the phone booth where he'd left it dangling as he walked away. Was that the last time they spoke?

Susie waits, shaking her head. "No, there was one more call." She reaches for the money again, draws it across the table, over the edge and into her lap. Lester's voice was like a rasp. The seagulls and zooming cars were gone from the background. Susie thought she heard the sea, or maybe a lake, waves crashing on shore. Lester told her that when his father died the doctors had contacted him. His mother, Marion, had passed years before that, rotting in a hospital bed waiting for one last visit from Lester, who never even attended the funeral. He went through the house, though he hadn't wanted to, having left it, he'd hoped, forever. In his father's study he found heaped books, medical journals, bottles, letters, as if the old doctor had spent the last years trying to bury his life. Under one of the piles was a box for a model airplane, a Messerschmidt Bf-109 G2, that Lester remembered building when he was a kid one afternoon with his father. It was the one thing they'd done together, the only one he could remember, and he tore off the cover to see it, this tiny memento of their time, as if it acknowledged something between them, as if maybe the safekeeping of the model meant his father had remembered those few hours too, maybe even treasured them. Instead, Lester found police and forensic reports, covered with post-its and handwritten notes, so many of them that in places they'd been erased and new notes written over top. He found newspaper clippings, photographs of the bodies of a girl and dog outlined in orange on the sidewalk. Finally, there was the picture of Erika herself, the sister that until that moment he'd never known he had, whose name no one in that house

had ever mentioned out loud, though they'd been speaking and screaming and crying it across the absolute silence of those years. She was sitting on a dog, a black lab that looked as if it could have lifted three or four of her. It had probably been some grown-up's idea of a joke, Lester had thought while looking at it. His father must have placed her on its back, something silly to do between tending to the barbecue and the next scotch and soda. In the picture, the dog was already bolting out the garden gate, and Erika's face, the look on it, seemed to be jeering at Lester: "You think you had it bad? You think you lost your childhood? You think it was a joke?"

Susie still has the photograph. It is the only thing she took from Lester. She thinks he left it on purpose, as a gift, not to keep Susie straight or to reform her, but just to help her think sometimes about what she was, what she still might be, before she too disappeared. Susie pulls it out now, smiles at the girl in the picture, and reluctantly turns it over as if afraid that another pair of eyes might steal its magic, as if afterward there will be nothing but a black square. But the girl in the photo is not so easily extinguished. She seems to grow brighter and brighter with every second she's looked at, as if her image were lit from within, too generous for the eyes. She's holding onto the dog with one hand, fingers wrapped in its fur for dear life. The other is tossed high, waving hello and farewell, as if inviting you to step forth into her vanishing. In a trick of the light, her skin looks silver.

