

lauren
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places
like
these

stories

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*For my sister, Carey, with whom I've shared
so many places like these.*

Bones

The butcher was out on the highway, north of town. Luke and I drove out to buy bones for Barry Allen, a plastic bag of them, but a *Closed* sign hung in the darkened window. “He’s gone to deliver the pig,” said the man behind the counter in the furniture liquidation store that had moved into the community building next door. “For the Hawaiian supper,” he said.

All week I’d wanted to go to that. The letters on the signboard outside the hotel dining room said *Ho’olu Komo la Kaua*, which meant *Please Join Us*, according to the internet. In the forest behind our house, the poplar leaves and tamarack needles blazed yellow against the dark green of jack pine and black spruce. It was easy to see that winter was on the way. Already the car had to be warmed up, my breath a fog in front of my face in the early morning.

It was our second autumn up north, but the year before I had missed most of the changes. For all of last October, I'd been back home, helping sort my mother's dishes, books, and odds and ends into piles labelled *Keep* and *Give Away* for her move into a condo overlooking the eighth hole of a golf course outside Gravenhurst, and appearing in court for my stepbrother's trial. My sister was home, too, all the way from Vancouver, but she didn't really speak with our stepbrother anymore, had never seen the inside of his apartment, didn't know the streets he walked, sometimes skateboarded, late at night. We are not an ordinary family, never have been, if there is such a thing.

"Twenty minutes," the furniture guy said, so Luke and I talked about whether to wait or drive back into town, drop my books off at the library, pick up the mail, buy our weekly box of cheap Riesling at the Liquor Mart. Barry Allen was back at our apartment, in a corral-like cage in the corner of the kitchen, slowly healing from his knee surgery. He had a cone on, what the vet called an Elizabethan collar, but he still managed to work the marrow out of cut lengths of bone within a couple hours. Gently, he would take them from my hand in jaws designed to grip and hold. He'd set them down on the inside of his cone, which was flattened like a plastic placemat, before unpeeling the skein of frozen skin with his front teeth, licking the hard, yellowish cap. The bones kept him busy, gave him something to do during the twelve weeks it would take for his tibia to knit together underneath the steel plate.

It had already been a month, and in the corner of his cage a pile of hollowed-out bones clattered like wind chimes when-

ever he spun awkwardly around, lifting his healing leg, making a place to settle.

Luke and I waited a few minutes, strolling through the crowded leather couches, television sets, stacked microwaves, and boxed table settings—the things people might buy us, I remember thinking, if we ever got married. A couple times Luke had asked me what we were waiting for, and while I hadn't been able to verbalize a clear answer, I did know that, up until we got Barry Allen, it had felt like something was missing. Some kind of stability. Some kind of day-to-day sense of being rooted, so we could settle into the enclosure of a married life and feel secure.

The butcher was taking too long, so after Luke bought a new travel mug, we decided to drive into town. On the way past the IGA in the mall, I said, "Why don't we get a chicken."

"What do you want a chicken for?"

"For supper. Duh."

He shook his head sharply, pouting. He'd been in a bad mood for a while, and I thought I knew why. We'd gotten the dog, a black pit-bull mix, to go duck hunting and camping and fishing with us. We'd saved up a lot of money to buy a motorboat and then had to spend it all, plus more from my credit card, on the surgery, with another for Barry Allen's right leg on the way. The tendon in that knee was also fraying. "They go like rope," the vet had told us at the animal hospital in Saskatoon, gesturing to the model on his desk. "Strand by strand, until only a single thread remains." He touched his fingers together, pulled them abruptly apart. "One day—snap."