

A photograph of a pregnant woman with short brown hair, wearing a grey dress and a black blazer, smiling. She is standing next to a young boy with brown hair, wearing a white shirt, who is also smiling. They are outdoors in a vineyard with green leaves and a wooden post visible in the background.

# Honesty, Hope & Hard Work

Kim  
Waldron



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Hope &  
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2	PERFORMANCE
12	BEGINNINGS
22	FIRST MEETINGS
34	THE HARD YEARS
46	LEAVING
58	IMMIGRATION
68	WORK
78	LOGISTICS
90	MOTHERHOOD
99	ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
100	PHOTO CAPTIONS

CHAPTER ONE

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PERFORMANCE











## PERFORMANCE

I NEVER MET MY father's mother, Virginia Bacon, who was a Rockette during the opening of Radio City Music Hall. In the 1930s, my grandmother proudly owned her own New York City dance company. My mom says that when you would visit her, she'd pull out a chest filled with paraphernalia from her time as a dancer. This is how I know my grandmother—through the many photographs of herself that she left behind.

The images are glamorous and at times exotic: a row of women kicking up their long legs in unison; my grandmother dressed in silk, a fur shawl framing her face as she leans towards the camera, charming us with her bright smile. There is an image of her pointing a toe towards the sky while standing next to an elephant. In another stranger and dated shot, she appears almost unrecognizable in Blackface.

Virginia was an only child who started dancing at a young age. The quantity of photographs recounting the reach of her career, reveal that she was raised among wealth and privilege. They present my grandmother as well groomed, diverse and dramatic. Every image is carefully constructed. The costumes are elaborate and the poses eloquent. In more candid shots she is equally photogenic, as if always poised to be captured on film. Her glamour is seductive. Her flapper outfits, make-up and gestures are reminiscent of Hollywood movie stars. Staring at her photos, I fell in love with the surface

of things and her beautiful world. There is something idealistic about developing a relationship to your grandmother through images that always present her best side. My imagination was never tarnished by the disappointment that real-life interactions might have brought.

Virginia met my grandfather, Randolph, on a boat. Her dance troupe was the entertainment and he was the purser on the ship. She later gave up her dance career to move to New Zealand and help my grandfather run hotels. With her experience in entertainment, she took care of the guests while my grandfather was responsible for the business side. My father spent his early years living in a hotel with his two younger brothers. In my late 20s, I stayed with my dad at a historical, Art Deco style hotel in Budapest, furnished much like the one he grew up in. When we walked into the dining room with its elaborate chandeliers and five course place settings, my dad's eyes lit up and his shoulders softened. In that glimmer, I saw that he felt he'd returned home.

Of all of my grandmother's photographs, there is one that stands out. My grandmother is poised on the ocean shore, her chest arched horizontal with breasts exposed. She is wearing an African tribal outfit made of hemp with bone toggles. Her arms are outstretched, forming a delicate triangle. Most of her body is bare. If I look closely, I see my own body in her image. I inherited her breasts and strong, slender limbs.

**WORKING IN A KITCHEN** is physical. Your body is in constant movement during rush hour service. The stress of timing everything perfectly is held in your muscles long after it's over. Standing on concrete floors for seven-hour shifts produces a dull ache in your lower back. In summer, during a heat wave, the sweat in the air is palpable. You drink your weight in water. The repetitive chopping and flipping motion makes your wrist burn hot over time.

When I was 26, I worked for a couple of years at Laika, a bar with a decent lunch service on the Main in Montreal. I loved using my creativity on a daily basis. I enjoyed putting care into the food, even if people gobbled it down in 10 minutes flat. My boss, Bruno, hired staff that was implicated in the arts. He was very flexible with the schedules; you could leave for long periods and he would find a way to cover your shifts. Being surrounded by artists,



musicians and actors, I enjoyed the shared familiarity of the double life that most of us led.

Most days, I arrived for work at nine in the morning and Valerie, one of the servers, prepared a latte for me. I would return the favor when I would serve her a meal at the end of the shift. The next couple of hours were spent preparing the food, getting everything to a point where, if possible, I was mostly assembling plates and cooking individual servings of meat during service. The orders could start coming in as early as 11:30. During a big rush, I might not stop until two in the afternoon. I would spend the last couple of hours on prep for the next day and tasks related to the shift changeover. Cooking is preparation and timing.

I used to stick my tongue out while working in the kitchen. It was an unconscious action, not really appropriate for working with food (although licking one's lips while thinking about food is quite acceptable). I also didn't have the best posture. I have always been slim, with gangly arms, and a bit shy and retreating in my movements. The kitchen was an open concept at Laika, and all of my mannerisms were on full display.

One day there was a lull around 11 in the morning and I found myself chatting with the wait staff to kill time. I fumbled and dropped my chopping knife. As I reached down to pick it up, Valerie blurted out, "You're very funny, your body is funny."

Valerie was an actress with a clean blonde angular bob and large round eyes. She always struck me as contained, even though her arm gestures were very expansive. I could feel her presence in the room. I didn't know Valerie very well so I wasn't quite sure how to respond.

"How so?" I replied cautiously.

"You speak through your body movements. It's like a form of slapstick comedy."

In this moment, I understood what she was getting at. Growing up, my body movement was marked by awkwardness. As I get older and more comfortable in my own skin, some of that discomfort lingers, but more as an old habit. My body is a conduit for what I feel.

**E**VENTUALLY I DISCOVERED that it's difficult to make a decent living as a chef. I couldn't shoulder the student debt I had accumulated

during my Fine Arts Bachelor's degree with kitchen wages. At 28 I also had a newfound desire to start a family and I knew I would not subject my pregnant body to the stress of a kitchen. My time as a cook came to an end.

Around this time, my dad gave me a box of old photographs that belonged to my grandmother. It was full of headshots of other dancers with notes inscribed to her. "To Jinny, with love, Russell" penned in black marker next to the image of a dancer balancing on a champagne bottle. These images outlined her network of peers and broadened my understanding of the social contacts she maintained. I could see that she had built a community of creative support.

As I continue to find my way with my own art practice, I have intuitively sought like-minded individuals. In these images, I came to understand that my grandmother's experience in some ways mirrors my own.

I am not sure what made me turn the camera on myself. When I was 20, there was a certain amount of narcissism that probably propelled me. What I discovered when I started taking pictures was that I liked the exchange with others that the pretext of the photographs provided. I convey my humor and drama through my movement and facial expressions. Inserting myself into diverse situations and capturing my reactions proved provocative. In the beginning, I thought I was just *being*. As my art practice progresses, I approach a similar level of stagecraft and performance that I recognize in the images of my grandmother.

Most of my projects terrify me initially. It is through the process of finding my way that I come to terms with the actions I perform. In these moments of doubt, I draw upon the images of my grandmother as a professional dancer, as though I have inherited the right to pursue a career in the arts from her. I admire the confidence she exudes, the focus on the body and the grace of muscular movement in dance. I, too, come back to the body in my photographs. I find meaning in the actions I perform and trust the knowledge that my body provides.



CHAPTER TWO  

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BEGINNINGS







## BEGINNINGS

I'LL NEVER KNOW HOW my family's history warped over time. The stories I've been told form the stories I tell myself. Like how my great-great-great grandfather, John Waldron, stole two silk handkerchiefs in London, England and was subsequently shipped to the penal colonies in Tasmania. He was one of 136 convicts transported in the Prince of Orange on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1822. The ship arrived in Van Diemen's Land on March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1823. On his record, he is listed as a baker who was sentenced to prison at the age of 21 for stealing.

As the tale goes, when released from prison, John married the warden's daughter, Elizabeth Bellord, and became one of the first settlers down under. He and Elizabeth settled in Launceston, Tasmania, and had six children over a span of 10 years. He went on to make a substantial fortune dealing and exporting flour by sailboat.

I was six the first time I recall visiting Tasmania. My brother and I were traveling alone with my father. My mother rarely made the trip to visit my father's family. She told us she was afraid of flying. She experienced terrible turbulence when I was a baby and had written off air travel altogether. I have always suspected that her true fear was different than the one stated.

I couldn't have been much farther from my home in Montreal than I was in Tasmania. We drove to the middle of nowhere to visit land my father inherited. We stopped at a zoo along the way; there I saw kangaroos, a platypus and a Tasmanian devil.



I only knew of the Tasmanian devil from the Looney Tunes cartoon. It was strange to compare that whirlwind creature to the thing itself. True to what the caricature represents, I recall something wild and unruly about Tasmania. I imagine settlers like my great-great-grandfather trying to conquer the wilderness, barreling forward like the animal in the cartoon, and molding the new.

The land we visited was unpopulated. We stopped on the side of a dirt road in front of a dense forest. We climbed out of the car and my dad wandered off to case the property. I needed to pee. I followed my brother to a spot away from the road. It was the first time I'd ever found myself in the woods, needing to use the bathroom. I wasn't sure what to do, so I decided to copy my brother. I watched him undo his pants and arch his belly forward. A stream of pee landed on the dirt in front of him. I pulled down my pastel flowered, cotton pants to follow suit and proceeded to pee all over myself. I started sobbing, embarrassed by my miscalculation.

My dad was in-adept at the details of child rearing. Things went more smoothly on these trips when I was old enough to cook, clean and generally take care of myself. That day, he hadn't brought any extra clothing with us, so I sat in my urine soaked pants for the next couple of hours. I can still remember the wet sting on my legs.

My dad comes from a long line of doctors, lawyers and businessmen. My great-great-grandfather, James Bellord Waldron, was a proctor of the Supreme Court who expanded his wealth through the Tasmanian property he acquired. My family has two large oil paintings of him and his wife dating from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that attest to his affluence. As a child, I was scared of the paintings. My relatives looked stiff and austere, painted against black backdrops. I could feel their eyes following me in the dark.

It was my grandfather, Randolph Vivian Eustace Waldron, and my grandmother, Virginia Bacon, who decided to leave Tasmania to start a hotel business together. They settled in Christchurch, New Zealand and raised three sons. In New Zealand, there are more sheep than people and sailing is a right of passage. True to his heritage, one of the only supper meals that my dad knows how to cook is roasted lamb. He has owned a sailboat since before I was born, which he uses at his country house on lake Champlain. At the cottage, he has a small collection of chinaware from the

hotel his parents owned. The cups and saucers are smaller than regular coffee cups, their monogrammed images of Hotel Cromwell signaling an era where travel was reserved for those who possessed small fortunes.

My dad is a doctor by profession and a man of few words. He has kind, watery blue eyes and is generous towards his patients with his time. Making his way in Montreal, far from his home, my dad was always hopeful about the opportunities that seemed possible for him and his family. A renaissance man, he encouraged the pursuit of higher education and provided my brother and me with whatever we needed financially.

My mom comes from the opposite end of the spectrum. My grandfather, Asa Boler, worked in construction in the United States and my grandmother, Margaret Boler, was a homemaker who never finished high school. My mom and dad withheld this information about my grandmother from my brother and me until we were older. We were attending private schools and they didn't want to draw attention to the differences between our two families.

I have the impression that life was rough for my mom's family. She lived in a trailer with her brother for a few years. Her family moved around a lot. She switched schools often and lived with her aunt in her senior year of high school.

I never met my mother's father; I only know him from the few photographs my mom retained. In the images, he appears tall and fit. He wears a white t-shirt and work pants, with a crew cut and dark-rimmed glasses. At some point, someone in the family told me that he drank a lot. When I repeated this to my mother a few years ago, she adamantly denied it. This often happens in my family, where one person's take differs dramatically from another's. All of this was straightened out recently when we visited my great aunt, Ada, to introduce her to my newborn son.

Aunt Ada has perfect skin and a silver bouffant bob. She is always made-up with pink lipstick, a crisp blouse and fitted trousers. She smells like flowers and her house is impeccably clean. My husband, Jean-Michel, and I visited her with my mom and dad. Thomas, my son, was eight-months old and I remember feeling very self-conscious about how much he was drooling all over her clean carpets. Ada tried to dab him with a tissue periodically.

She told us the story of how my grandparents met. My grandmother worked at a candy store where my grandfather often bought mints to hide the liquor on his breath. She went on to explain that my grandfather kept a bottle of bourbon hidden in the medicine cabinet, in the spot usually reserved for mouthwash. My mom never really registered that this was not how she'd described her father. I was happy to discover that I hadn't imagined these facts about him.

My grandfather died of a brain aneurism in the late 1970s. My grandmother outlived him by over 25 years. She is the grandparent I spent the most time with growing up. When we'd visit her in Winchester, Kentucky, I'd attend Sunday school at the local Baptist church where she volunteered. She would make us home-cooked fried chicken, pancakes with Aunt Jemima syrup and pull candy at Christmas. She canned her own vegetables. I would sleep in her bed and my brother would sleep on the couch, while my parents would take the guestroom. She would belch loudly while getting ready for bed. I liked how comfortable it was to be around her. She was warm, with a loud and rolling laugh.

My mom inherited her mother's sense of humor. A registered nurse from Kentucky, my mom is all smiles and Southern charm. She likes the routine of the operating room and the witty exchanges with her coworkers. Even after officially retiring, she continues to work at the Montreal Children's Hospital. When she was 20 she bought her first car, a British racing-green MGB convertible, with her own money. She has always insisted that my brother and I work for what we have.

My mom has remained an American landed in Canada for over 40 years. American television shows and my parents' cottage on Lake Champlain in Vermont help sustain her cultural ties. In darker moments, when faced with the cold, never-ending winters, she glibly refers to Quebec as, "The asshole of the universe." My mom has always easily shared what's on her mind.

I HAVE ALWAYS FELT a tension between the two worlds of affluence and struggle in my cultural inheritance. Sometimes I feel it's as though my parents are balancing on either end of a tightrope, and the gulf that exists between them is impossible to reconcile. My upbringing has allowed me to straddle both worlds and the lessons I learned from each of my parents have formed who I am.

## BEGINNINGS

My grandmother's background in dance is one of the reasons my dad encouraged me to go to university and pursue a career in the arts. His belief in higher education allowed me to embrace the exposure to new ideas and time for reflection that my university studies afforded. I think it's my mother's insistence on the importance of working for what you have that has allowed me to survive as an artist. There is no direct path one can follow when trying to find a way to fund making artwork. Over the years, I've learned to take a more holistic approach to the relationship between my art practice and my work life. Without the belief that ideas are worth pursuing that I gained from my dad, or the insistence on working toward security that I learned from my mom, I would not be able exist as an artist today.



CHAPTER THREE  

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FIRST MEETINGS

















## FIRST MEETINGS

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF HOW I came to be born in Montreal, Quebec are largely unknown to me. It is hard to imagine how a New Zealander and an American managed to cross paths and then immigrate to Canada to start a family. When my husband, Jean-Michel, and I visited my relatives in Kentucky to introduce them to our son, Thomas, we decided to take a day trip to Cincinnati with my parents. Jean-Michel and I thought it was a great idea to visit the city where they met. I thought it might prompt them to share more about their courtship. My mom was in a particularly sour mood that day as we drove around the scenic hills of Cincinnati. Out of nowhere, she started uttering expletives about the women my father dated while he was living there. It was clear she was not up for taking a trip down memory lane.

When asked about their first meetings, my parents have always been reluctant to provide details. They have stuck to events and facts rather than sharing their first impressions. I think that what transpired between them over time makes it difficult to reminisce about earlier moments and their original affection for each other.

The details I know are these: they met at a wedding between a resident and a nursing student somewhere in Ohio, just outside Cincinnati. The best man at the wedding had invited my mom. She said he was nice looking, but very boring. My dad was one of the single interns at the wedding and everyone called him “The

Aussie” because no one knew the difference between an Australian and a New Zealander. My mom was studying to be a nurse and had a paper to write. My dad offered to give her a lift back to her dormitory in Cincinnati. My mom’s girlfriends were angry that she was missing a sorority party with them after the wedding. She paused before telling me once, “At that point, I thought it would be more interesting to get a lift home with Jim.” I think she saw my dad as a little mysterious in the way he was quietly reserved. She always told me that what she discovered when she got to know him better was that there was no big reveal: what you see is what you get. She thought that when she met his family for the first time she might learn more about him. When she travelled to New Zealand before they were married, she said that, while everyone liked her, and she liked them, her impressions about my dad didn’t change.

Neither my mom nor my dad have ever offered details regarding what they talked about during that car ride or what they thought about each other. They’ve both pointed out that my dad went the wrong way on the Freeway ramp and had to back-up. My mom was scared. He had only lived in the United States for a year and must have not been accustomed to driving on the opposite side of the road.

I imagine my father felt proximity to American culture and to my mother because his mother was from the United States, much like I feel a proximity to New Zealanders, Australians and people with heavy Southern American accents. When I was watching T.V. one day, an elderly republican senator from Kentucky was talking about the policies he supported. My political interests couldn’t have been further from his, but there was something comforting about the gentle lilt of his accent. His voice reminded me of the warmth of my own family in Kentucky.

The only time I heard my grandmother’s voice was on a recording my Uncle John played for me. At 18, I travelled to Christchurch, New Zealand and stayed with my uncle and aunt for a month. Uncle John built his house on land adjacent to the house that my dad, he, and their brother, George, grew up in. On that day, John and I were standing in front of his semi-circular bay window looking at their childhood home. Uncle John had good speakers, and because of their placement in that open circular

room, my grandmother's voice surrounded us. Someone remote to me was suddenly enveloping the space. It felt like she was right there speaking to me.

It was in this moment that I realized I had always imagined my grandmother as a New Zealander. Hearing her speak, she sounded distinctly American, warm, and kind as she talked about how my family had decided to move to Christchurch because the weather was temperate and the town provincial. I had never thought about what her voice would sound like. I was surprised to discover that I had been associating her with the sound of my dad's voice and his family in New Zealand. This tape recording shifted my imagination. For the first time, I saw her as similar to my own mother, making her way in a new world with a different culture and customs.

My dad decided to do his residency in Cincinnati because his mother grew up there and still had family in the area. My great grandmother moved to Cincinnati from Germany right before the First World War. My dad knows very little about his German heritage. He never met his grandparents, and like many people who immigrated to the United States at that time, it seems his family chose not to share much about their history in hopes of making a fresh start. There is speculation among the Waldron family that my great grandmother was Jewish. When I see pictures of her, I assume she was Jewish. My dad says my grandmother never mentioned anything about this.

My mom and dad must have exchanged phone numbers on the day he drove her home. They went to the indie 500 for their first date. Apparently my mom was annoyed about being the second girl he'd asked, after the first girl had turned down his invitation. Whenever my mom speaks of their courtship, she sounds a bit suspect of his motivations. One story she tells is that he was delivering babies at the time they met and had gotten involved with one of the mothers. Another detail is that my dad lived in an apartment where all the married interns brought their girlfriends.

Back then my mom must have been willing to take a leap of faith for my dad. During the first year they dated, my mom returned to Kentucky for a job. She was living a couple of hours from Cincinnati and would drive up on weekends to visit him. In the second year of their courtship, my dad moved up to Montreal to specialize in ophthalmology at McGill University.

WHEN MY FATHER WAS 14 years old, he met his next-door neighbor, Guy Daignault. Guy had been in the Canadian Merchant Navy and jumped ship when he reached New Zealand. He fell in love with a local New Zealander; they married and had four kids. My dad developed a passion for learning French from speaking with Guy and reading *La Presse*, the Montreal newspaper that Guy had sent to his home in Christchurch. Because of their friendship, my dad minored in French during university. He subsequently applied to McGill, and a year before he was to begin school, he made a trip to visit Expo 67 in Montreal. It was the most modern city he had ever seen, a space-age town. Brightly lit tunnels and elevated super highways allowed him to drive everywhere fast.

Every time I saw Guy, he had a beer in his hand. His house was always filled with cigarette smoke. It had a shag carpet and there was an intriguing oil painting of himself, bare-chested, hanging in his living room. Later in life, he became my grandfather's business partner and helped him run his hotels. When we visit New Zealand, my dad goes over to Guy's house every morning for breakies (my dad's word for breakfast). Guy had 14 siblings, most of who still live in the Montreal area. Having contact with Guy's extended family must have been helpful for my dad when he moved to Montreal. I met Guy's sister a couple of times while growing up. She was a nun and lived in a convent on the corner of Atwater and Sherbrooke Street. During my last visit, she gave me some stationary with a duck motif that she had printed on it.

I can see how my dad's friendship with Guy made Montreal a more familiar place. It is harder to imagine the feelings that precipitated my mother's decision to follow my dad. More than 40 years later, my parents don't openly share their initial attachment and affection for each other. Instead, my mom says that when they were finally tired of being in a long-distance relationship, they decided she should relocate to Montreal. My dad had already started school and she could find work there as a nurse. My mom moved to Montreal in 1969.

My grandmother made my mom a heavy coat to keep her warm during the cold Montreal winters. I inherited this coat and still put it on when the temperature dips below -20. Its weight and sturdy structure are comforting. My mom's family was supportive

## FIRST MEETINGS

of my parents union. Granny, my great grandmother, loved my dad because he was a doctor. Around the time my mom moved to Montreal, she took her first trip to New Zealand to visit my dad's family. My mom said this made my grandmother cry. I assume that all of these places felt very far away for her.

After about a year of "living together in sin," as my mother likes to refer to it, my parents married. My mom was raised Baptist and was more religious than she is now. The wedding took place with two friends in attendance as witnesses on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1970 in Plattsburgh, New York. Seven years later my brother was born and I followed two years after.

Having parents with diverse backgrounds influenced my worldview. It opened me up to appreciating the many different cultures co-existing in Montreal. In my family, small preferences represented different perspectives. My dad likes marmite on toast and eating dinner in fancy hotels on special occasions; my mom likes to eat McDonald's in foreign countries because she can't get over how it tastes the same as in the US. I have had to find my own place amongst their different approaches to almost everything. Negotiating these two perspectives has encouraged my development of qualities such as openness and tolerance. For similar reasons, I appreciate living in a city where more than one language is spoken. I like the challenge of negotiating so many cultures in the place I call home and how it continually expands my worldview.





CHAPTER FOUR

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THE HARD YEARS















## THE HARD YEARS

MY MOM AND DAD lovingly cared for my brother and me. Living far from our extended family, the two of us were the center of my parent's family life. During our early years we lived on the corner of Gladstone and Tupper, on the border between Westmount and the city of Montreal. Those years of my childhood were happy. My mom stopped working as a nurse and stayed home to raise us. We spent carefree summers at our cottage on Lake Champlain and during holidays we visited family in Kentucky and New Zealand or family friends in Toronto.

The distance between my parents started to grow when my dad decided to convert our childhood home into an office building. After I started practicing art as an adult, my dad told me that designing a building had been his dream creative project. He had always shown an aptitude for drawing and painting. When he was in medical school, he painted a life-sized reproduction of *The Dream* by Henri Rousseau, which now hangs above their living room sofa.

To make room for my dad's architectural project, we planned to move up the hill in Westmount. My mom returned to work a couple of days a week at the hospital. In the car one day, she explained to us kids that in preparation for our move, we wouldn't go on vacations and there would be less money for buying things. Shortly after this conversation, at the age of six, I began swiping change whenever I saw it lying around. I stored it in a box under



my bed and one day my mom caught me showing my stash to my brother. I was in a lot of trouble, especially because of the American, New Zealand and Australian coins collected while visiting relatives.

The first year we moved out of my childhood home, my brother and I shared a bedroom in an interim apartment. This was a big deal, up until that point, we'd had our own rooms. I was nine and my brother was 11. We built a room divider with our desks and dressers, to block our view of each other. Neither of us was particularly happy with the situation.

The following year, my parents purchased a new house on Montrose close to the private schools we were attending. We moved in and the stress mounted. I remember becoming quieter, speaking less with others, my eyes opening wide to take in all the new changes in our family life. I was able to walk to school on my own. I took to heading out an hour early each day to work on my studies. I found a peaceful space away from the stress in the quiet time before everyone else showed up to class. There was something reassuring about getting ahead.

In hindsight, I understand that constructing the building did not create the issues between my parents. That big hunk of concrete and wood was more of a symbolic wedge that increased the tension and fighting between them. My dad was looking to expand his wealth, to have more time for leisure and visiting his relatives in New Zealand. My mom fundamentally mistrusted investment and risk, preferring the clarity and dependability of a steady paycheck.

I began to separate from my family at the age of 12. It was the beginning of the 90s and I was self-righteous, influenced by PC trends and ideas of equality. I loved to go dancing. It was a space where I could let myself go. I looked forward to YMCA dances on Friday nights. One night, I met a boy named Liam Mayes while *Let Your Back Bone Slide* played. I remember the smell of his sweat on the back of his neck as we slow danced. He attended a play I was in at my school with several of his friends. His friends made a big deal about the fact that Liam and I liked each other. Their chatter brought our interest in each other to the attention of my mother, who was also in the audience. One day after my performance, while my mom was entertaining her friend Janis on our back porch, she asked me, "What are you doing with that black boy?" Without pausing to think, I reached out my hand and struck my mother's cheek.

Looking back on this moment, I am still surprised by my actions. At that time, I fully believed I knew better than my parents. The inherent racism in my mother's comment emboldened me. I thought my actions were beyond reproach, and never questioned that slapping my mother was indefensible. I was too focused on judging her based on the differences between the culture of acceptance I was being taught in Canada and her American heritage.

To be fair, my mom grew up in a very different environment than the multiculturalism that exists in Montreal. Once, when I was visiting Kentucky, my aunt Betty Jane gave me a tour of Winchester and pointed out the black part of town. Up until this point, I hadn't noticed that everyone I saw on the street or in a shopping mall was white. It was only when she identified the black neighborhood that I noticed the traces of segregation that lingered. When I was a kid, Grandma Boler called black people niggers. She would use the term as though it were just a name like any other, devoid of all the hardship and cruelty I associated with the word. I once heard a recording that my brother made for a school project when he was 10-years old. It was an interview with Grandma Boler on the subject of Christmas. On the recording, Grandma explained that people used to make chocolate covered candies called "nigger toes" for the holidays. She went on to caution that we didn't call black people nigger anymore, because times had changed.

THROUGHOUT MY TEENAGE years, my relationship with my parents deteriorated. I stopped talking to them about what I thought or how I felt. Eventually, I stopped participating in our family life altogether. All that mattered to me during those years were my friends. As I pulled away, my mom became suspicious of me and imposed stricter rules. She monitored everything I did. Consequently, I was not entirely honest with my parents about where I was going or what I was doing. I felt I wasn't being given the necessary room I needed to figure out how to be myself.

When I was 14, my mom wrote a text about everything I had ever done wrong that she titled *Kimma's History*. The title references the perjorative nickname, Princess Kimma, that my mom and brother gave me. When my mom handed me this text, I was mortified. I did not see my actions as problematic, at least not to the

degree that she had outlined. I also perceived this gesture as proof that she was a bad mother; I thought good parents didn't make lists about everything their kids had ever done wrong.

Rereading this text 20 years later, I can see that my mom was filled with a lot of normal worries about her teenage daughter who had shut her family out. Mixed in with this, she seemed concerned about how others perceived our family and her actions. My mom once said to me that she wrote all of this down in case something happened to me. This text would be a record to help trace the events that led up to any horrible, potential future event.

There were hurtful feelings and anger expressed in *Kimma's History*. In my mom's words, the following events took place sometime in the fall of 1993,

“One Sunday in the last month, Kim talked to her dad and told him she hated Mother, but that he and her brother were okay. Jim recounts this to me and I feel it's time dad takes over giving all permission and communicates with 'her'. I'm hurt but understand it might be part of the reason she resents me so much, because I've been the one to be the heavy. So it's time for Jim to get the first hand pleasure of being the police. She'll have to clear all activities etc. with him.

~

This status is reduced to phone calls and Kim telling her dad where she'll be and what time she's coming home—curfew lengthened by Kim to 12 p.m. Jim seems to rarely check if parents are there, but gets the phone number to reach her. The only words that pass between Kim and Mother are when she requests something. A very unpleasant uncaring situation. I feel so used.

~

She continues to lie to him and I have to tell him about it, feeling I have no control and everything worsens.

~

It's a Sat. night and we've planned a dinner out with friends. At 7 p.m. she asks me if her friend can spend the night. I said I couldn't give the okay and her dad is due back from the cottage. We are to go out at 7:30. The mother of the girl is on the phone, verifying we will be at home, and I have to tell her, no we won't. Jim drops me at the restaurant and goes back home to find Kim and friend hadn't planned on staying at our house anyway. The father of the other girl comes to the house and they scour the neighborhood with a portable phone trying to find these girls. They were at the Shapiro's house but they didn't find them there. I arrive home with friends to find Jim calling people looking for her. No punishment for this evening."

In retrospect, my dad's lack of rules was not the solution. I remember how scary it was to finally be free of my mom's constraints. Suddenly, my parents were gone and I could taste the danger that a 14-year-old girl could get herself into. I still needed rules and someone to watch over me, even if the guidance my mom provided was overbearing at the time.

During my struggle, I decided to leave behind the private girl's school I was attending and almost all of the ties I had made there. I decided to switch to an alternative high school downtown called Moving In New Directions (MIND). The population was comprised of over-achievers and kids on their last chance. It was here that I was introduced to a world that extended beyond my privileged upbringing. It was also where I met my close friend Alie. Her whole family took me under their wing. Her mom, Louise, was an artist and a phenomenal cook. It was Louise who encouraged me to go to art school and taught me the basic fundamentals of cooking.

Alie witnessed the fallout of those years of strain. Upon seeing my mom again on my wedding day, she remarked that my mom looked great. She had forgotten how funny she was. Alie mused out loud, "Why was it so difficult for both of you when you were

growing up?” She explained how, to her, it seemed like whatever my mom was going through in that moment mixed explosively with my internal struggles. It was helpful to look at it this way—as an instant’s bad chemistry rather than a fundamental rift.

Throughout my teenage years, I was entirely consumed with trying to define myself as different from my family. The truth is, my mom and I are more alike than I liked to admit. I have her fighting spirit and her opinionated, strong will. I also inherited my father’s shy reticence, as well as his ability to embrace risk and solve problems. I was not always able to reconcile these opposing forces, but over time I’ve learned to integrate these qualities in my own particular makeup—together they have become my strengths.

CHAPTER FIVE  

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LEAVING

















## LEAVING

GROWING UP, I FELT I was always trying to find a way to leave Montreal. When I was six, I packed a suitcase and hid in a cubbyhole underneath the stairs at the back door. I was angry that day, although I can't remember why. I lived in a house surrounded by an alleyway and three parking lots, in a commercial district adjacent to Saint-Catherine Street. I was too chicken to really go anywhere. I could hear my mom periodically open the back door and call my name. Her voice sounded more and more concerned as time passed. I felt comforted surrounded by those wooden planks in the company of my stuff. Being close to my home, but also separate from it, satisfied something inside me. My anger dissipated.

Eventually I tired of sitting underneath the stairs, I came out of my hiding place and found my mom inside the house. She was upset with me but relieved that I was back home and hadn't really gone anywhere.

During high school I decided I wanted to be a pilot. I always had a natural aptitude for the sciences, and when considering professions, I also gravitated towards the opportunity to travel. I decided to apply to a subsidized flight school in Chicoutimi, Quebec. While I was researching the school, a mutual friend introduced me to Hamid Zaidi. He was also preparing an application for the same school. Hamid gave me some textbooks he had been using to study for the exam.

Even after months of preparing, I had still left too many details to the last minute. I stayed up all night studying and finalizing my application but certain parts of the package remained incomplete when it was time for my mom to drive me to the exam. The school turned me away at the entrance. My incomplete application barred me from taking the exam. I was crushed by my own lack of resolve to realize my dream. In the meantime, Hamid and I had become friends. When he got into the program, I made a trip to Chicoutimi to see how he was doing. He was extremely stressed. The program was very rigorous and the expectations high. Eventually I learned he'd dropped out. From his experience, I knew that my pursuit of a career in piloting would have had me facing steep competition and an unrealistic demand for perfection. I wasn't sure this was the right direction for me.

Since I had expressed such interest in becoming a pilot, my mom suggested I enlist in the army. After I was born, my mom secured my American citizenship by way of our blood relationship. She made an appointment for me at the American recruitment office and we headed across the border.

Walking into the US Army office that day, I felt like I had crossed a greater divide than a mere border. My diminutive frame receded as I grasped the large hand of the recruitment officer towering above me. He wore crisp beige army fatigues. I, on the other hand, had decided to sport cut-off jeans, a pink mini-tee and sandals. He escorted me to a private room with fake, wood paneled walls and a desk in front of a window. We sat facing each other on either side of his desk. I became self-conscious about my slouchy posture. I felt like I was floating above my body as he began to ask me simple questions. His stern demeanor made me wonder how I'd fare in boot camp. He proceeded to ask me, "Have you ever done any drugs?"

I answered honestly and described my modest experience with narcotics, including acid. Quite abruptly, my interview was over. He informed me that having taken acid in one's life automatically disqualifies you from entering the army corps. My mom was waiting for me outside in the car. I was suddenly gripped by the dread of explaining the situation to her. My eyes filled with panic and I stammered something to the effect of, "Do we have to tell my mom



why I can't enlist?" There I was, a teen who shared nothing about her extra-curricular activities with her parents, about to be outed by the US army. What happened next is a complete blur. I thanked the army officer for the interview and headed towards the car to face the music. Deflated, I climbed into the front seat. Without going into specifics, I explained that I wasn't able to enlist because I had tried drugs. We did not speak about it any further, ever.

Looking back on that moment, I imagine my mom must have thought I really needed straightening out to enlist me in the army. What was worse was that I'd proved her right.

THE REALITY OF JOINING the army scared me, but I was happy I'd gone through the uncomfortable interview regardless. I discovered that it's often through putting myself out there and trying something that doesn't work, that I learn where I do belong. It was only when I moved to Halifax, Nova Scotia to attend the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) University for my bachelor's degree that I understood my desire to be a pilot was driven more by my want to travel away from what I had known.

It was exhilarating to leave home for the first time. I loved the feeling of newness that hovered around everything I encountered; the salty air sweeping in from the Atlantic; the crisp, pink sunsets. Halifax felt like a small town where everybody seemed to know each other. All I knew was big city living and the loneliness you encounter being surrounded by strangers. The familiarity of Halifax was filled with potential.

NSCAD attracted students from across Canada. In the 1970s, the school had a reputation of inviting influential conceptual artists from the US to teach and show their work. This legacy lingered when I attended at the turn of the century, and was still largely responsible for the influx of students and faculty from all over the country. During my time there, I learned a lot about what it means to be part of a large territory separated by so much distance. I developed a better sense of the different kinds of people and perspectives that are cultivated outside of Quebec.

To help pay my way, I waitressed at a bar called the Khyber Club in downtown Halifax. One night when we were drinking after our shift, my boss told me the story of how NSCAD had built

its international reputation. In the late 60s, Garry Neil Kennedy, a young artist in his early 30s, bluffed his way into the role of University President. Up until this point, the school's focus was on traditional art forms: drawing, painting and sculpture. Located in a provincial town, far from most major cities, interest in the school was waning. My boss described Kennedy as a gambler of sorts. When Kennedy found himself at the helm of the University, he proceeded to fire all the older teachers and hire new blood.

One of the most remarkable things about Halifax is its close proximity to the countryside. The ocean is a brief 20-minute drive from the city center. Kennedy enticed teachers with the prospect of living in the country, while working in a small city. He invited influential artists from the conceptual art scene and radically changed the education the school offered. He introduced a pass/fail grading system to emphasize that education is about the process of learning and not the end result.

This tale and the remnants of that teaching philosophy appealed to the part of me that cultivated anti-authoritarian beliefs as a teenager. MIND, the alternative high school I graduated from, had also been formed in the 70s and ascribed to a similar restructuring of education. The school's philosophy was about giving more responsibility to the students in deciding how the school functioned. The board was comprised of six students, three teachers and three parents.

In reality, by the time I had enrolled at NSCAD this progressive approach was part of the past. The art program was structured like those at any other university. When I entered my third year, I began to tire of the expectation to produce a project at the end of each semester. Certain projects required more time for development and I longed for room to experiment.

In my third year, I took part in a four-month exchange program at École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts (ENSBA) in Paris, France. It was the complete opposite of my experience at NSCAD. There were no classes. I was told that I shouldn't try to learn any new techniques. Instead, I was instructed to work on a project and report to a professor a few times during the semester to show my progress. I had complete freedom to produce whatever I wanted, at my own pace. I found this a bit disorienting—much like I had found my dad's lack of rules unnerving.

To gain my bearings and create an opportunity to meet other students, I decided to audit a class Sophie Calle was teaching. I first encountered Sophie Calle as a character in one of Paul Auster's books. In the novel, she was depicted as a woman who chooses a color for each day of the week, and then only eats food of that color. Years later, I tried this out when I was working at Laïka. I made sweet potato orzo, steamed carrots and fried tilapia with an orange cardamom reduction. It felt too much like a gimmick manifested on a plate. I preferred the personality that this idiosyncratic habit conveyed in Auster's novel.

I was impressed by Sophie Calle's photography work, which I had been introduced to in a class at NSCAD. One of her early projects, *Suite Venitienne*, was comprised of photographs of her following a stranger she met at a party from Paris to Venice. It wasn't clear if she was really following the stranger or if everything was staged. I had become interested in her photographs because they often involved working with strangers. While in Paris, I decided to work on a project of my own that involved asking men I didn't know to borrow their clothes and their workplace, and take a picture of myself as though I was doing their job. I could see parallels between her practice and the project I was working on. I was interested in learning more about the ambiguous use of fiction in her photography.

The course I joined was the first one she'd ever taught. Sophie Calle arrived wearing a well-tailored black blazer over a black dress. The frame of her glasses was made of thick bright-red plastic that popped against her black hair. All the students sat around a large table, facing each other, and when class started she joined the group.

She explained that she was working on a new project. She was asking a writer to write the story of her life for a year and then she would spend the following year using the novel as a script that she would reenact. She explained that she had asked Paul Auster to write the story, but he had declined. He was uncomfortable with the ethical considerations. She had brought another writer to the class who was sitting at the table with us. His introduction was awkward, given that it had just been explained to us that he was her second choice.

I attended one more class after that day. I dropped the course when it became clear that our time would be spent helping Sophie Calle work on her projects. I realize now I was judgmental

about her teaching style. I remember thinking that her inexperience as an instructor made what she had to offer unappealing. I didn't understand yet how learning by apprenticeship could be helpful. I was accustomed to the instruction I received at NSCAD where everything was centered on your own project. I can now see how my impetuous nature, left over from my teenage years, often made me miss out on certain experiences.

I BENEFITED GREATLY FROM my time in Paris, though I'm not sure how I would have fared if I'd spent my entire four years at ENSBA. Having some time away from the handholding I'd experienced at NSCAD gave me the space I needed to grow and develop my own approach to art making. On the other hand, the close mentorship I encountered at NSCAD initially gave me the structure I needed after leaving home for the first time. Throughout my education, I have sought out independence, and yet I also thrive within certain limits. Experiencing these different approaches to art education ultimately helped me find my own way.

CHAPTER SIX  

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IMMIGRATION















## IMMIGRATION

**I**N 2008 NATHALIE MIHÉE-LEMOINE contacted me about collaborating on an art project. She wanted to make a series of photographs that depicted the opposite of her experience as a Korean girl adopted by a Belgium family. She proposed that we find a Korean family in Montreal willing to pretend they had adopted me, and take photographs as though I was part of their family. She also wanted my parents to get involved and pretend that we were reuniting many years after they'd given me up for adoption.

Exploring this kind of self-portraiture appealed to me. I'd recently made an art project using my family photographs and home videos, titled *The Dad Tapes/The Mom Photographs*. For a video from that project, I assembled all the moments that my mom had photographed and my dad had filmed simultaneously. The end result was an hour of clips spanning 20 years of my mom continually placing my family members for the camera. Nathalie's project would allow me to build upon the constructed nature of my parent's archive of family photos and video. I liked the idea of introducing fiction to the depiction of my relationship with my family and seeing what would emerge.

Nathalie was working with a Christian church to find a family who'd be willing to take part in the project. Through one of her contacts, we were introduced to the Kims at a Korean restaurant on Rachel Street in Montreal. I was blown away that the family

willing to participate had the surname Kim. It seemed so perfect. From that point on, the project was called *Kim Kim*.

The Kim family generously allowed us into their home and invited us to various church-related events. Nathalie spoke Korean with the Kims and acted as an interpreter. I felt very comfortable around the family and enjoyed speaking with their son. He was born in Montreal and was a few years younger than me. He spoke perfect English and would often communicate with me on behalf of his parents. There was something very familiar with this arrangement. It felt similar to my own relationship with my parents.

Ever since I can remember, my parents have needed help from my brother and me. As a child, I don't think I really knew what I could do for them. In my early teens, I was too self-absorbed; but by the time I switched schools at 15, I was able to start offering support. I periodically worked as a medical secretary and did bookkeeping for my father's medical practice. Once, my dad was supposed to hire movers but he'd left it to the last minute. I got on the phone and called every moving company in the phone book until I found someone who was available to move them that same day. My mom was very grateful.

There are clear differences between my situation and my Korean brother's experience, but I could identify with his manner of looking out for his parents and helping them interact with others. Being from other countries, my parents sometimes struggled with integrating in our community. My parent's families lived on either ends of the earth and many of their friends had moved away from Quebec in the 90s. Their circle of support was quite small. I grew up in Canada and felt I was in a position to help. As I grew older and more formed as an individual, I increasingly felt I needed to watch out for them.

To make the *Kim Kim* fiction more convincing, we planned to Photoshop my own image into several of the Kim's family photographs. As I looked through their albums to find suitable photos, my Korean brother explained to me that they had experienced a huge loss a couple of years prior. His older brother, who would have been the same age as me, had passed away from cancer. As I flipped through the pages of the album I saw many images of what used to be a happy family of four.



At the end of the project, the Kims came to a photo studio to have our family portrait taken. To thank them for the time they had given, we also shot and printed a large photograph of the three of them. When I compare the two images, the Kims appear more at ease in the photo of the four of us. Maybe having another person, even a stranger, was more reassuring than negotiating the empty space created by the passing of their son. Perhaps the Kims decided to take part in the project because they were looking for ways to deal with their loss by helping others.

THE NIGHT BEFORE the photo shoot with my own parents, I had a dream I hadn't dreamt since I was a child. When I was six, I saw the *Twilight Zone* episode entitled *Children's Zoo*. It left a strong impression on me. The premise is that a little girl is unhappy with her parents for yelling at her and not giving her enough attention. She receives an invitation in the mail to take her parents to the Children's Zoo. After months of pleading with her parents, she finally succeeds in convincing them to go for a visit. Upon arrival at the zoo, an attendant leads the parents into a waiting room with a couple of couches, a table and a large mirror. They are assured that their child will be well cared for while she visits the zoo. The girl is led to a dark corridor filled with one-way mirrors that look into many different waiting rooms inhabited by the parents of other kids. She is instructed that she can choose new parents. As she leaves the zoo, she passes by her own parents who are left behind for some other kid to choose.

Unconsciously, I think I once wanted to choose other parents. Growing up, my mom yelled a lot and my dad worked all the time. He had a habit of tuning out when my mom would raise her voice, which would make her scream even louder. On the eve of the photo shoot, my childhood dislike of this dynamic came flooding back. Somehow I had stumbled upon a project that would allow me to role-play the *Children's Zoo*.

Pretending that my parents had given me up for adoption also touched on a difficult memory. When I was 17, my mom asked me to leave the house and my dad went along with her decision. I went to stay at my friend Alie's apartment for a month or so and then we both moved into a new, Plateau-Mont-Royal apartment

with two other girls. Even though I had checked-out from my family long before this moment, I was still hurt by the realization that my parents wouldn't always be there for me and that I was no longer welcome in their home. For a few years, I cut off all contact with my mom.

This time period in my family's history was particularly difficult for everyone. A few months after I left home, my mom separated from my dad. She returned to Kentucky for a couple of years where she worked as a nurse and spent time with my ailing grandmother. My dad was sad that my mom left him. He moved into the office building and lived there with my brother. My brother also took my mom's decision to leave Montreal pretty hard. The following summer, he found a job in Lexington, Kentucky so that he could live with her for a few months.

Eventually, my mom moved back to Montreal to be with my dad once again. I started speaking with her, and little by little, we repaired our relationship with each other. I was glad we were in contact again, even if there was still a distance between us.

To get ready for the photo shoot with my parents, I went over to their house the day before to plan what they were going to wear. Watching my dad try on shirts and ties and helping my mom choose pant-suits was surreal. They had spent years dressing me when I was living under their roof. Telling them what to wear was a very strange role reversal.

The *Kim Kim* project was full of reversals. By enacting my secret childhood wish for a different set of parents, I finally understood that my mom and dad were my parents. I didn't get to choose. This realization took place shortly after making *The Dad Tapes/The Mom Photographs*, where I perceived my family history more objectively for the first time. Through looking at all those photos and videos, the family difficulties I had experienced began to fall away and I saw the images as a testament that my parents loved and cared about me. The combination of this newfound objectivity and the fact that they were willing to play along with a fictitious adoption narrative finally put whatever ghosts from our past I'd wrestled with to rest.

CHAPTER SEVEN

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WORK

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- Longtemps je me suis couché de bonne heure.
  - Sois sage, évite la douleur, et tiens-toi plus tranquille.
  - c'est ici, u... bonne foi, lecteur; je m'y suis peint moi-même.

الاسلامية



BOUCHERIE MENGUELLET

Epaule de Veau

3 kg 3.99 F

BOUCHERIE MENGUELLET

Boeuf Sans Os

3 kg 3.99 F

3.70

3 KG  
100,00

3.50

3.70



مركز









## WORK

I DISTINCTLY REMEMBER the moment I understood that all the wonder and excitement surrounding artwork could also bring great hardship. I was sitting in the auditorium at NSCAD and a visiting artist, Allan McCollum, was giving a talk about his art practice. While showing us images of his artwork centered on the mass production of one-of-a-kind objects, he explained that he supported himself for years in New York City by working as a janitor during the graveyard shift. I had been struggling to find work that paid above six dollars an hour while studying in Nova Scotia. When I, too, worked as a janitor, I discovered that cleaning up after people paid well—up to 15 dollars an hour. Listening to Allan McCollum, it dawned on me that part-time jobs were going to be integral to my career.

Since then, I have worked as a medical secretary, ice-cream shop attendant, personal assistant, cashier, waitress, bar maid, daycare educator, an eyeglass salesperson, gallery attendant, newspaper proof-sheet editor, reference librarian, research assistant, telephone-survey project assistant, teaching assistant, bookkeeper, accountant and chef.

I directly questioned my career prospects during the project I made while on exchange in Paris, *Working Assumption*. In this series, I staged photos of myself wearing other people's clothes while pretending to do their jobs. The undercurrent was that I was attempting to figure out what my own career would be. To recruit

participants, I approached businesses in the 18<sup>ième</sup> arrondissement where I was living. I also cold-called businesses from the yellow pages because people seemed more open to talk with me about the project from their workplace. I would explain that I was a student from Canada on exchange in Paris. It seemed that many of the participants agreed to take part because I was from somewhere else. Perhaps they saw this project as my way of engaging with Parisian culture.

I had always planned to execute *Working Assumption* while on exchange. Before leaving, I did a dry run in the office of the president of NSCAD, but the images never amounted to much. The playing dress-up aspect was too prominent. When I arrived in Paris and was faced with a curriculum devoid of social interaction, my project became more of a necessity for engaging with others. I started treating the project like a job that I would wake daily for and diligently work on. Through meeting the participants and taking photographs, I found myself learning, step by step, how to assume the role of an artist.

A friend of mine from Montreal, Morgan, who was living in Paris at the time, challenged me one day that he could get more people to take part in the project than I could. A future businessman, he thought he would be the better salesperson. We chose a page in the phone book and Morgan went first. He tried a bunch of numbers but no one was interested. Then it was my turn. I called people from the same page in the phone book. I ended up calling someone he had already spoken to. The man explained that he was interested in participating, however, Morgan's description was too vague. My conviction and enthusiasm for realizing the project convinced him to agree to take part. From this experience, I came to appreciate that I needed to be involved in every step of the execution of a project.

When I showed up at the man from the phone book's house on the day of the photo shoot, I discovered that he was the godfather of the artist Sophie Calle. He was an avid art enthusiast with an impressive collection of artworks related to sex and human bondage. We talked extensively about art that day. He explained that most of the strangers Calle took pictures of while sleeping, in *The Sleepers* project, were actually people she knew from the neighborhood where she grew up. Even though I had passed up on the opportunity to learn directly from the artist herself, it was fascinating to learn from her godfather that my perception was a partial invention. When her artwork was

introduced to me at NSCAD, I was impressed by the vulnerability of the people sleeping. Their vulnerability seemed to be heightened by the knowledge that they were strangers to the artist. Discovering that her subjects weren't in fact strangers didn't necessarily diminish the artwork, but it did elucidate a fundamental tool for making art: how you frame things changes their meaning dramatically.

THERE IS ALWAYS a moment before starting a project where I feel like I am standing on the edge of a precipice about to step off into an abyss. There is a certain amount of hope involved in taking that first step. Uncertainty exists on the blank page in front of me. I fear the next move I make might destroy all the potential.

It was the roll-play—trying on another person's profession at a moment when I was not yet certain of the job I would settle into—that became my central interest in the project. I was figuring out what I wanted to be, and the photographs recorded that process. For me, the conditions of the participant's work environment, for example, the lighting they live with each day, were of just as much interest as the particulars of their actual profession. I wanted to capture the meeting point of my state of flux with their work situation; how my body would register their environments while pretending to be them.

Up until this point, most of the jobs I'd had were in the service industry. Unsurprisingly, the images depicting professions closest to my work experience were the ones I appeared more comfortable in. The uniforms for those jobs also fit me better than the suits I wore while depicting most other professions. When the clothes were too big for me, the images often appeared goofy, and it was this balance between playfulness and seriousness that set the tone for *Working Assumption*.

The participants did not know that I was only asking male strangers to take part in the project. In fact, I exclusively selected male names from the phone book and only approached men in their places of business. I made this decision early. At the time, I felt I could learn how to be less sensitive and more assertive from men. I thought I needed these qualities in order to join the workforce. In the end, *Working Assumption* didn't teach me those traits, although in order to approach strangers I did develop a thicker skin. The cross-



dressing aspect of the project turned out to be the most provocative; there was something transgressive that emerged from propositioning men to borrow their clothes.

Often the men would not understand that I wanted to borrow a full set of clothes. In several instances, they ended up giving me the shirt off their back or the jacket they were wearing. When I met the doctor I photographed, he had brought a separate set of clothes. When it came time for me to take the picture, he changed into his extra outfit and gave me the clothes he had been wearing all day. When I put them on they were still warm from his body heat.

Borrowing religious clothing proved to be difficult. When I arrived at a church basement for my meeting with a Catholic priest, I brought all my equipment with me ready to take pictures. I was quite disappointed when he explained that he had conferred with the other priests and decided it would not be possible for me to take pictures wearing his habit. The priest had met with me wearing jeans and a button down, striped shirt. I quickly piped up that I would be happy to take a picture wearing his plain clothes. He took a moment to think this through and then agreed to lend me the habit and the lectern where he addressed his congregation.

My frame swam in the priest's habit. He hadn't given me his shoes. I was trying to stick to the idea that every piece of clothing I was wearing needed to belong to the participants, and so I took the pictures in my bare feet. In reflection, these small details added to the playfulness of the photographs and pointed to the process involved as I found my way.

WHEN I WAS MAKING these photographs in Paris, my family was the last thing on my mind. My friends Alie, Morgan and Phil were all living there at the time. Being in a new city and meeting new people—everything felt exciting. Looking back over the images, I can now see that I was using this project to sort out my own understanding of the opposing approaches to work that my parents had come to represent.

In *Working Assumption*, I found a way to integrate both the practical side of my nature and take a leap of faith to create something new. Through trying on those professions, I began to find a path towards being comfortable in my own skin and becoming a working artist.



CHAPTER EIGHT  

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LOGISTICS















## LOGISTICS

**I**N 2007 I BEGAN WORKING part-time in a financial advising firm to supplement my income as a chef. I was having a hard time paying my bills while working in a kitchen and had begun looking for extra work to make up the shortfall. A friend I'd met while working at Artexte, an art documentation centre, recommended me for an accounting job. I was taking an accounting course at Concordia at the time, but I was performing poorly in the class; I had just met my future husband, Jean-Michel, and I was busy falling in love. I was lucky to have someone vouch for me, as my studies weren't likely to help me much with my job search.

The accounting work started out part-time, for two days per week. I remember talking with a friend at Laika about whether or not to leave the kitchen. I had become quite attached to the restaurant's community and rhythms. She counseled that if I had a way out, I should take it. Around that time, I was also offered an artist's residency in Vienna. When I told my new boss at the financial advising firm about the opportunity, he offered to give me an advance to help with my trip. I was incredibly grateful. When I returned from my residency, I would start working with his accountant, Martin, four days a week.

Because of all of the time I'd spent searching for extra work, it had been several years since I'd made my last art project. I felt my practice had been pushed to the back burner. At this particular

moment in my career, realizing the project in Vienna was extremely important to me. My applications for government funding had been unsuccessful. But I had managed to secure an artist residency that provided a room and a studio in the centre of Vienna without charge for three months. By then, I was living with Jean-Michel in an apartment in Montreal. He agreed to let me sublet the apartment to a roommate for the three months. My dad stepped in and offered to help by paying for my plane ticket.

Despite all of my good fortune, I still had a lack of funds. Nevertheless, I decided going to Vienna was worth the financial risk. I paid for the surplus with my credit card. The residency took place in the fall of 2007 and I showed my project, *Triples*, for the first time in the spring of 2009. It took me two years to find a way to pay for the printing and framing.

MY ART PROJECTS OFTEN involve making sense of things that are not natural to our logical minds. Through photography, I try to challenge our social norms and the structure we impose in order to make our world comprehensible.

The project *Triples* questioned the convention that two people make up a couple. The project idea originated from a book set in Vienna entitled *Malina*, by the Austrian author, Ingeborg Bachmann. In the book, there are three characters: the narrator, her roommate, Malina, and Ivan, the man she loves. The relationship between these three characters is not entirely clear. I was drawn to this ambiguity because of our social expectation that mostly couples live together. I had just broken up with a boyfriend of seven years and was questioning how we conform to the outlooks of another person. I thought it would be interesting to join couples in the private context of their homes, and take pictures as though I belonged with them.

In preparation for the residency, I had a black dress made—a uniform that I wore for the pictures. The design was based on a description of a black dress that the narrator wore in the book. I approached everyone I knew in Montreal with a connection to Vienna and asked if they could put me in contact with people who might be interested in participating. This proved to be the right approach. Once I arrived in Vienna, those contacts often offered to help out by suggesting my project to someone else they knew.

I had sought out a residency in Vienna because I thought I would be able to get people involved based on the project's relationship to Bachmann's book. In the end, no one was interested in that connection. They responded more to the idea of questioning the convention of two, by taking a picture of three. I've often found that the original spark is merely what ignites the process rather than what binds it. In retrospect, I probably could have taken these photos in any city. I thought the interiors of people's homes would showcase the beautiful, ornate architecture in Vienna, I was surprised to discover that most of the interiors were painted white and furnished from IKEA. This, too, unexpectedly created the effect of continuity in the photographs.

There was, however, one aspect of this project that I believe was determined by Viennese culture: I was only able to get heterosexual couples to participate. Someone put me in contact with a lesbian couple, but when they learned that I would, if the opportunity presented itself, be interested in showing the photographs in Vienna, they backed out. Apparently, the gay community had only become publicly visible over the past 10 years; there was still a lot of fear surrounding the social and economic repercussions of being gay. This would not have been the case if I had done the project in Montreal. In the end, making the project in Vienna accentuated the idea I was trying to explore by setting up a norm of the heterosexual couple. By adding a third person to that norm, my attempt to reveal our social constructs was emphasized.

WITH THE PROJECT *Beautiful Creatures*, I similarly explored the illogic created by our disconnection from the meat we consume. In order to make sense of my own relationship to processed meat, I decided to learn how to slaughter and butcher animals.

The idea for the project came from an experience I had while I was working in the kitchen at Laïka. One day, I received a shipment of rabbits I'd ordered and they still had their heads attached. Their size reminded me of my cat, Ticket, and when I went to cut off their heads, I couldn't do it. I had to ask the person I was working with to do it for me. I thought it was crazy that I spent countless hours cooking meat for people, but I couldn't handle thinking about where the meat came from.

*Beautiful Creatures* ended up taking almost four and a half years to realize, when I include the eight months of slaughtering and butchering training I underwent. In Quebec, trades people learn to slaughter by apprenticeship at different processing plants. I wanted to learn about all of the different animals in one place, so I travelled to an agricultural college in New York State. I then learned how to butcher the animals at a school in Montreal North.

Fortuitously, I knew someone who was running an artist residency in Newfoundland and he pitched my project to his Board of Directors. They were interested and I secured a residency. From there, I applied to the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for funding, which they granted me. As with most of my projects, the photo shoot represents a fraction of what is actually involved.

I spent one month in Newfoundland for my artist residency, where for the first couple of weeks I gathered animals, slaughtered and butchered them. During the last couple of weeks, I served two private and three public feasts. The first public feast took place at the English Harbour Arts Centre and the other two were hosted at the Fisher's Loft Inn, where I stayed during my residency.

The legislation involved in this project was more complicated than I anticipated. I wanted to cook the meat and serve it to the public free of charge. I had the romantic notion that I would slaughter the animals outside in a field somewhere. Not so. In Canada, you cannot share meat with people other than your family members unless it is processed in a licensed facility. I did not need any form of government certification myself, but I needed to find a slaughterhouse that would let me take photographs while I slaughtered the animals in their facility.

Slaughterhouses do not want people taking pictures. As one owner put it, "How is what you are doing any different than the media?" From his perspective, people see blood in relationship to animals and it produces negative public opinion. Especially in Newfoundland, where images of the seal hunt led to an international ban on seal meat. Through my search for a slaughterhouse where I could execute the project, I came to understand that pictures of slaughtering really only exist within a negative context in our society. With *Beautiful Creatures*, I was interested in creating images that documented the processing of animals in a more neutral manner. If I was going to eat meat, I wanted



be able to face what was involved in order to process it, and I wanted to share this experience with others through the photographs.

The most difficult part of the project was killing the animals. A man who sold me a calf had put me in contact with a small facility that agreed to let me photograph the slaughtering and butchering process. On the day of the photo shoot, I had a panic attack while driving to slaughterhouse. I had to pull over at a gas station and catch my breath. I could not drive a car in that instant. I got out and leaned against a large concrete block in the parking lot.

The moment when I had to kill an animal was always stressful. I didn't know how the animal would respond. I also didn't know how I would feel. This was the x-factor during the project—the moment I could never entirely plan for. The other parts of processing the animal became routine. Like any skill, I learned through repeated execution over time and I became comfortable with the task. These moments of not knowing, the act of killing the animals, became central in the photographs. I felt everything from shock at the ease with which I could pull a trigger, to remorse when I made novice miscalculations, to gratitude for the animal's life as it expired before me.

I decided to taxidermy the animal heads as a way of commemorating my experience. I was proud I'd gone through the whole process. The animal heads were also a way of preserving the animal and putting it back into relationship with the photographs of the meat we ate in Newfoundland.

*Beautiful Creatures* marked a shift in my approach to art making. I had never taken on a project with such a large scope before. During the nearly five-year-span of the project, I'd returned to school for a Master's degree in photography and had secured scholarships for my studies. I'd also married Jean Michel and become pregnant with my first child. I think this expansion—both in my life and my artwork—was made possible because of the stability that my accounting job provided. I was able to embrace bigger ideas and find a way to manifest them because I had integrated supporting myself financially into my art practice.

Part of the cultural struggle of being an artist stems from the idea of either/or, all or nothing. For me the antidote is both more simple and time consuming than I once could have imagined: do both.



CHAPTER NINE  

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MOTHERHOOD



## MOTHERHOOD

MY SON, THOMAS HENRY ROSS, was born 10 days late on October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2010. He wasn't ready to come out on his due date. He was my thanksgiving turkey; he needed to cook a little longer.

Before he was born, my friend Alie threw a baby shower at my house. She brought t-shirts and permanent paint for my friends to create their own personalized baby shirts. One of my favorites was made by one of his godmothers, Sarah. She painted the word "NEW" across the belly and surrounded it with a jagged-edged magenta talking bubble.

Thomas ushered newness into our family. When I saw him watch his first sunset, it triggered my restart button. It was exhilarating to see him grow. I grew with him. When he took his first steps, he released a barking giggle. I loved witnessing each wobbly step forward. I treasured going through all those firsts with him. I remembered how I felt throughout my childhood. Through Thomas, I experienced everything all over again.

Before I met Jean Michel, I had planned on doing my master's degree in New York City. During the first couple of years we were together, he supported me through the application process. I was accepted at Hunter College in New York. We married and applied for a Green card so that he could come with me and work.

I sometimes wonder if we would have married so soon after meeting each other if we hadn't been trying to move to the US. He



likes to say that he doesn't believe in marriage; he believes in love, and that I don't believe in love; I believe in marriage. This is his funny way of explaining that he didn't feel the church or government had anything to do with his love for me. I, on the other hand, felt very strongly about making a symbolic commitment before having kids. I am the one who asked him to marry me. We were walking down the street while traveling in Berlin and I unexpectedly blurted out, "I want to marry you." I immediately covered my mouth with my hand. I couldn't believe what I had just said. He took my hand in his and led me forward.

Shortly before our planned move to New York, the 2008 recession hit. It quickly became clear that it would be extremely difficult for Jean-Michel to find work. I had also received a generous scholarship to Concordia in Montreal. Although Jean Michel was willing to move for me, he loved Montreal and his enthusiasm for the city was infectious. We ultimately decided we would be better off staying put.

Since having Thomas, we both feel increasingly happy with our decision. Going to school in New York would have been challenging. In Montreal, there is so much financial support for young, working families, not to mention the help with Thomas we receive from my mom and dad on a regular basis.

I became pregnant with Thomas in the first year of my master's degree at Concordia. Although I am glad the pregnancy happened when it did, it was not planned. I don't think anything could have prepared me for the challenge of balancing work and family. My income was less than in previous years because I had returned to school. I was thus entitled to a very small amount from the Quebec Parental Insurance Plan. Luckily one of my scholarships gave me one semester of paid maternity leave to supplement my QPIP payments. This meant I had one month off leading up to the birth and three months off once the baby was born. Jean-Michel and I decided he would take paternal leave for eight months after I returned to school and work at the financial advising firm.

Resuming my obligations when Thomas was three-months-old was hard. At school, I carried around a black fake-leather handbag for my breast pump. On breaks and at lunchtime, I pumped milk in the family restroom to stay on Thomas' feeding schedule. I was always running, arriving late for classes, struggling to find time

for coursework. I also worked as a teaching assistant that semester for Chih-Chien Wang, a professor in the photography department. I appreciated having the opportunity to learn from him but it was yet another challenging time commitment.

At the financial advising office, preparation for the tax season started up. One of the great things about my job was the six-month down season after tax season. The schedule worked well for attending artist residencies, as long as they took place during late summer or fall. My boss was relieved that my maternity leave had coincided with down season, as he didn't have to find anyone to fill in for me. But I quickly learned that tax season and school schedules don't mix. As the semester progressed and the tax deadline loomed, the pressure mounted. In May, I enrolled in a couple of summer courses to catch up on what I had missed during my maternity leave. Somehow I scraped by until both school and tax season ended in July.

By mid summer, the fog began to lift. When we received a call from Quebec daycare, we felt like we had won the lottery. The long wait lists are notorious. Thomas started daycare, which helped lessen the stress. I couldn't have survived my master's degree without the nurturing support that CPE (Centre de la Petite Enfance) Graffiti provided him.

In fall of 2011, Thomas turned one and Jean-Michel was awarded a curatorial residency at the International Studio and Curatorial Program in New York. I was able to take time away from the financial advising office and our family moved to Brooklyn for three months. I opted not to take classes that semester; I spent most of my time hanging out in parks with Thomas and going to see art shows in Manhattan. I caught up on the time I had lost during his first year. I savored every moment.

When I returned to school in the winter of 2012, I decided to enroll in two Art History courses because my Studio Arts program didn't offer a broad range of theory. I did not know what I was getting into while raising a toddler.

Daycare is a breeding factory for germs. Thomas was sick almost every other week. At one point, he contracted a mysterious disease where his skin broke out in sores all over his hands, arms and legs. We took him to the doctor, but they had no diagnosis to offer.

Given his history with severe eczema, they counseled us to take him home and wait it out. Thomas was an easygoing kid. He started laughing when he was two-months-old and never stopped. He was such a trooper through the entire ordeal. I would have been wailing in his situation. He just sat on Jean-Michel's lap and waited it out.

While Thomas convalesced, I wrote two large end-of-term papers and tried to prepare an Art History presentation. I had struggled with the course all semester. I was not used to the heavy reading workload and found my foray outside of the Studio Arts program intimidating. At one point, Thomas' sores were festering and multiplying rapidly and my presentation was due the next day. We spent a stressful evening trying to decide whether we should go to the hospital.

This was the first time I actually discovered a useful diagnosis on the Internet. Normally when I searched an ailment, I became a hypochondriac from viewing all the worst-case scenarios. This time, I found a blog with pictures of a baby covered in identical sores. It turns out that Thomas had Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease, which is common among children, but his eczema had caused him to break out in undiagnosable sores. I was so relieved to finally know what was wrong with him.

I woke up the next day with a fever of 103. I could not move. I was so sick I had to wait until the following day to visit a walk-in clinic. I needed a doctor's note because I had missed my presentation. Adults don't normally get Hand, Foot and Mouth Disease, but I was so run down, I caught the virus. As I handed in the doctor's note to my Art History instructor the following week, I felt like a cliché—a knocked up teenager who couldn't keep up with her studies. In reality, everyone at the university was accommodating. I was given extensions and granted independent-study courses. But this didn't change the fact that I was underperforming in school. I was doing poorly because I had a toddler, a job, and couldn't keep up with everything. I found it difficult not to be hard on myself.

It took me four years to complete my three-year Master of Fine Arts program. At the end of my studies, I was awarded the Claudine and Stephen Bronfman Fellowship in Contemporary Art. This accomplishment rendered everything I had just experienced worth the struggle.

LAST DECEMBER, I RECEIVED letters of acceptance for two different artist residencies in China. My proposed project was to work for Chinese workers in their homes, doing chores they don't have enough time for because they are too busy making products for export. In exchange, I would request permission to photograph myself working for them.

Jean Michel and I had decided that attending a Chinese residency would require me to leave him and Thomas for four months. I had spent extensive time sorting out the project. I was excited to travel to Beijing and Xiamen. I was gearing up to leave my family when I discovered I was pregnant. We had been trying to have another baby for some time, but it came as a surprise to us. The project was on the brink of happening when I realized I would have to postpone everything.

To be honest, I was concerned about leaving my three-year-old son to make artwork in China. Jean-Michel and Thomas planned to join me for one of the four months of the residency, but I was worried about the three months we would be apart. I feared Thomas wouldn't understand that I would return. I knew it would be difficult to miss his everyday changes.

There is no roadmap for being an artist and a mother. It is not obvious how to juggle the two successfully, especially given the expectation to travel, and the fact that I always work on a limited budget. I often think about my grandmother and how she had waited to have her first child until 32. Back then she was extremely progressive. She chose to pursue a dance career when most women were busy raising their families. But she still ultimately had to choose between her career and having kids.

Today the expectations for having kids *and* a career are amplified. I feel like I need to do everything, all at once. But for all that has changed, there are still only 24 hours in a day. It becomes very hard to judge what corners are appropriate to cut. While I worked through accepting this change in plans, I came back to my body. It chose this moment to accept a baby. I realized that many of my worries about my career were based on timelines I'd created.

At eight months pregnant, I can now see how fortunate we are. Jean-Michel will be able to take time off work in 2015. We now plan to travel to China as a family for the entire four-month

residency. With my master's degree complete, I don't have school to contend with. We have secured a spot for our newborn in the same daycare as Thomas when we return from the residency next July. I have more control over of my maternity leave this time around. It is up to me to determine what my path as a mother and artist should be. The future feels wide open with possibility.





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## PHOTO CAPTIONS

All photographs are copyright Kim Waldron except where otherwise noted:

### CHAPTER ONE

**PAGE 3** Photograph of my grandmother, Virginia Bacon, circa 1926.

**PAGES 4–5** Virginia Bacon's ballet in "Variety Show," 1927.  
Photo by National Photo Service.

**PAGE 6** Portrait of Virginia Bacon.

### CHAPTER TWO

**PAGE 13** Virginia Bacon dancing.

**PAGES 14–15** *Mom and Dad from the Perspective of my Twenty-Year-Old Self*,  
intaglio print, 2014.

### CHAPTER THREE

**PAGE 23** *In the Lobby*, from the project *Kim Kim*,  
Nathalie Mihee-Lemoine and Kim Waldron, inkjet print, 2008.

**PAGES 24–25** *Photograph with the Waldrons*, from the project *Kim Kim*,  
Nathalie Mihee-Lemoine and Kim Waldron, inkjet print, 2008.

**PAGES 26–27** *Birth Parents*, from the project *Kim Kim*,  
Nathalie Mihee-Lemoine and Kim Waldron, inkjet print, 2008.

### CHAPTER FOUR

**PAGE 35** *Sunset #1*, from the project *The Dad Tapes/The Mom Photographs*,  
inkjet print, 2007.

**PAGES 36–39** Two-frame video stills from *Chronology*, 52 min,  
main projection of *The Dad Tapes/The Mom Photographs*, 2007.

## CHAPTER FIVE

- PAGE 47** *Rabbit Slip Trail*, inkjet print, 2010,  
from the project *Beautiful Creatures*, 2010 – 2013.
- PAGES 48–51** *Before and After*, diptych, inkjet prints, 2010,  
from the project *Beautiful Creatures*, 2010 – 2013.

## CHAPTER SIX

- PAGE 59** *Anthem*, from the project *Kim Kim*,  
Nathalie Mihee-Lemoine and Kim Waldron, inkjet print, 2008.
- PAGES 60–61** *Father*, from the project *Kim Kim*,  
Nathalie Mihee-Lemoine and Kim Waldron, inkjet print, 2008.
- PAGES 62–63** *Kim Family Portrait*, from the project *Kim Kim*,  
Nathalie Mihee-Lemoine and Kim Waldron, inkjet print, 2008.

## Chapter Seven

- PAGE 69** *French Teacher*, from the project *Working Assumption*, C-print, 2003.
- PAGES 70–71** *Butcher*, from the project *Working Assumption*, C-print, 2003.
- PAGES 72–73** *Mechanic*, from the project *Working Assumption*, C-print, 2003.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

- PAGE 79** *Couple #6*, from the project *Triples*, inkjet print, 2009.
- PAGES 80–81** *Couple #10*, from the project *Triples*, inkjet print, 2009.
- PAGES 82–83** *Couple #4*, from the project *Triples*, inkjet print, 2009.

## CHAPTER NINE

- PAGE 91** Photograph with my son, Thomas.

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In this insightful memoir, first-generation immigrant and artist Kim Waldron explores the ways she has defied, and is ultimately defined by, her family history. Raised in Montreal, Waldron is the daughter of an affluent New Zealand doctor, and a hard-working rural Kentucky nurse. She examines the polarity of messages she received from her parents: *pursue your artistic passions* versus *financial conservatism and day jobs will never leave you high and dry*. In a tale anyone who has ever been young and idealistic can relate to, Waldron confronts how the divided messages she inherited formed her character. Now an artist, wife and mother herself, she stands poised to pass forward her hopeful and hard-working values.

“...I am inclined to see Waldron’s project as one of bravery and great sensitivity.”

— Mark Clintberg, *ETC*

“Kim Waldron stages herself in a ritual of putting to death in order to overcome her own fears.”

— Jacques Doyon, *Ciel Variable*

“The profound reflection on human behavior, the status and the representation of the artist at work in Kim Waldron’s practice captivated the jury for the Pierre-Ayot Award.”

— *Ville de Montréal* and AGAC

Kim Waldron is a Montreal-based contemporary visual artist. She is the recipient of the Claudine and Stephen Bronfman Fellowship in Contemporary Art and the Pierre-Ayot Award in 2013.