

Seagull

Anna Leventhal

At twenty-eight Ruth's normally straight hair went suddenly curly, as though frightened. Her hairdresser told her it was because she hadn't had babies, so her body had dumped its hormonal load into her scalp, corkscrewing her follicles. Around that age she gained fifteen pounds and her pubic region doubled in size, spreading like Germany in an animated map of Europe circa 1942, annexing parts of her body she definitely considered to be leg. It was a second puberty, or maybe a first, since her actual teenage puberty had been a quiet affair: a timid brownish-pink stripe in her underwear, triangular breasts that barely required a bra, a single pimple on her chin that would stay for a month, then burst, scab over, heal, and reappear. She cried a few times, unexpectedly, lying in bed, noting the feeling of tears wetting her earholes. That was about it. This, now- this felt like the real deal.

Ruth lies back on the crinkly paper and tries to adjust her body to the chair's shape. If she puts her butt in the divot where it's meant to go, her head lolls off the headrest, but if she scootches down so her head's in the right place, her feet dangle six inches off the bottom end. Her clothes are folded, t-shirt on top of sweater on top of leggings; there was nowhere obvious to put them so they went in the sink. She'd hesitated before taking off her underwear, but in a fit of *on s'en fout* slipped them off and stuffed them under the sweater. When she's as comfortable as possible, she rings a small, silver bell that's been placed next to the chair, and Claudia comes in, her navy-blue apron velcro'd tight.

She asks what it'll be today. Just the outliers, Ruth says. Nothing inside the leg crease. The wax is almost but not quite odourless; Claudia applies it with what looks like a tongue depressor. She works in small sections from the outside in, the cloth making small zipping sounds as it tears the hair from the skin, like running your nail over heavy upholstery.

The girls at the bar where Ruth works all go see Claudia. Roxanne with the bangs that would look stupid on anyone else, Marilyse who spends half her tips on perfume. Ruth misses working at the punk bar where nobody waxed or had a signature scent and patrons sniffed glue in the bathrooms. There was no central heating, so the bartenders kept a fur coat behind the bar that they all took turns wearing.

Are you getting ready for Christmas, Claudia says.

Claudia puts her Christmas decorations up in August and takes them down in July. Christmas is more than a holiday for her, it's a way of life. Ruth can pick out Claudia's salon because of the wreath on its door, sparkling and evergreen, just in time for Saint-Jean Baptiste.

Ruth tells her, I'm Jewish, I don't celebrate Christmas.

But Christmas is a holiday for everyone, Claudia says.

That's what Christians keep telling me, Ruth says. She regrets it immediately but Claudia takes it at face value, nodding without taking her eyes from Ruth's crotch. She taps on Ruth's knee and Ruth obligingly bends her leg up, bringing up her knee toward her face as she laces her fingers into a death grip under her thigh.

She uses two fingers, thumb as fulcrum, to hold Ruth's labia out of the way as she gets right into the crease. But you have Hanukah, she says.

Yeah, we have Hanukah. Ruth finding it difficult to keep her voice steady at this point, as the zips have gone from producing a clean, bright, almost zesty pain to a deeper, more complicated sensation that borders on nausea. But Claudia presses on. What's the story of Hanukah, she asks.

The story of Hanukah.

Christmas, she says, is the birth of our Saviour, which is why we celebrate. Why is Hanukah important to you people? Switch legs.

Ruth is a bit foggy on the origins of Hanukkah. There was a lamp? she tells Claudia. And it burned for eight days? When there was only enough oil for one?

A lamp? says Claudia.

Well, not a lamp, exactly. Sort of a symbolic lamp. With eight arms. Wait, no, six.

Like an octopus, Claudia says helpfully.

Ruth tells this story to Roxanne later at the bar. I don't think I got what I asked for, she says. I asked for a bra-thousand.

She feels a bit loopy, lightheaded, like she always does after a wax. It's the endorphins doing their job, protecting her from bottoming out on her own vanity.

A bra-thousand? Roxanne says.

Yeah. And what I got was a Brazillian.

Roxanne rolls her eyes and tightens her ponytail so her bangs lift like a curtain. Claudia is a genius, she says, you just have to get on her level.

While they polish glasses, Roxanne tells Ruth about a method she's using to control negative self-talk.

Whenever I catch myself in a repetitive internal monologue about how I'm destined to fail at everything, she says, I just think SEAGULL really loud, and I picture one. 'You'll never sell your piece of shit condo--SEAGULL. You'll never get a job better than this one--SEAGULL.' It's very effective. You just block out those negative thoughts and replace them with a sound and an image.

Ruth says, I'm not sure that makes sense--I thought that you had to work your way through negative thoughts, find their roots in your shitty childhood, and slowly build up your self-esteem from scratch.

I used to think that too, Roxanne says, but that process is a feedback loop. At the end of it all you've done is re-enforce your negative beliefs about yourself through repetition. It's like the guy who spent his whole life telling himself he didn't believe in God, and then when he died he went straight to heaven, because even in denying his existence, he had kept God present in his mind. Negative thoughts are like that--even if you're trying to work through them, you're still giving them space. The seagull method re-shifts the paradigm.

Onto seagulls, Ruth says.

Onto the *now*, says Roxanne.

Once, Ruth and Roxanne and some other girls went to the nude beach at Oka on their day off. Ruth thought about her body exposed to the sunlight, like an old mattress at the curb on garbage day, all its intimate stains out there for the world to look at. She knew she wasn't supposed to feel this way; she was supposed to be a feminist. She decided it would be fine--she'd strip down, there would be a minute of embarrassment and splashing and then she'd be in, the river lapping her limbs, a carefree otter.

Roxanne and Ruth walked down to the water's edge while the other girls lolled on towels, sipping from tiny cans of cider. The sun felt warm and good on Ruth's breasts and she was only just aware of the people on the shore getting a panoramic view of her butt and the way it rode high and flat on her body like a cleft inner tube. The water was bath-warm. She glanced at Roxanne and smiled, careful to keep her eyes locked on her perfectly-threaded eyebrows.

But the St. Laurence is shallow. They walked and walked and the water reached to Ruth's calves, then her knees, then somehow back down to her calves. They were on a long walk, naked.

I'm burning, Roxanne said. Me too, Ruth said, and they turned back to the shore. ♦

Anna Leventhal est l'auteurice du recueil de nouvelles *Sweet Affliction* (Invisible Publishing, 2014). Traduit par Daniel Grenier, *Douce détresse* a été publié au Marchand de feuilles en 2017. Ses écrits ont paru dans *Geist*, *Maisonneuve*, *The Puritan*, *The Montreal Review of Books* et plusieurs anthologies de nouvelles.