

CIRCLE OF STONES

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**DUNDURN
TORONTO**

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Nik and Jennifer

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He reaches up to turn on the lamp. Hand on his arm, pulling him back down onto the futon mattress. The hand is soft, cool, and he will do anything to feel it on his skin. He leaves the light off.

“I see you,” she says. “It’s like a vision.”

“What am I doing?”

“Walking.”

“Walking?”

Her face is obscured in shadow, and he doesn’t know if she’s joking. He traces the curve of her right ear, mapping it with the tip of his index finger. “You’re a vision.”

“I’m a performer. It’s just a dance I do.” She turns, sits up in the near dark. “It’s all an ill-ooohhh-sion,” she singsongs, her voice low and raspy. He watches the shadows cast by her hands as she sorts through their clothes scattered across the floor. The shape of her arms as she reaches up, slipping his black T-shirt over her head — like victory. He considers the triumph of this moment, the slick of sweat on his chest. A small clatter, then the sound of a striking match. Her face glows. He reaches for her. She blows the match out, darts across the room, lights another one, glows, blows it out.

“Hey,” he lunges toward her shadow, misses. Looks up at another glow. “Come here. I can’t keep up.” She whirls then

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stops. Two matches in a row fail to spark. She tries a third. Glows and spins.

“Your performance better not burn the apartment down.” He grabs her ankle. Narrow. Solid. “Hah — caught you.”

He pulls at her ankle, grabs at her waist, picks her up, and deposits her back on the middle of blankets on the futon. She thwacks him with a pillow, giggling, as he yanks the pillow from her arms.

“Wait — I’ll show you everything.” She jumps up again. Another match strikes. This time she lights the red taper jammed in the mouth of an empty wine bottle. She leans down, rummages through her bag then holds up a small velveteen pouch. She crawls back onto the futon, pushes him onto his back, and straddles him.

“Hold still.” She shuffles the cards and begins to lay them out on his chest. The cards smell like the inside of her dance bag. Feet, sweaty tights, rosin, and lavender.

“No.” He takes her tiny wrists in his hands. A gentle stop. “No tarot.”

She swats his arms away, turns over the top card in the deck, the one he’d inadvertently touched. Dread in her eyes. He looks down at the card now affixed to his chest with beads of sweat. A knight lying face down in the mud, stabbed in the back, a darkened horizon.

“Ten of swords.” She shifts off him. “It’s not as bad as it looks. See, there’s bits of light here, and here.” She points to the misty sky in the illustration. “It’s about change.”

“You don’t sound convinced.” He rolls over, knocks the cards off his chest, collects them into a stack, and hands them back to her.

“That’s not your reading, it’s just one card. It’s like the first sentence. Or one bar of music.” Nik is silent. She hesitates,

concedes, places the cards back into their pouch. She leans into him, letting him envelop her with long arms. He touches her hair. She tucks her legs against his, clutches the tarot pouch, pulls the duvet and a blanket over them.

“Come home with me,” he says into her ear. “Let’s go to the island for spring break. I’ll take you to the beach.”

“It’s too cold.”

“It’ll be like a little holiday.”

“I have rehearsals.”

“You can relax for a few days.”

“You know I have auditions coming up. A performance, too.”

“Jen.” He sighs and strokes her hair some more, examining the whorls and waves. He likes the dark coarseness of it and imagines the long strands as a series of strong ropes to climb, the way in to see what she’s thinking. “My grandma will cook us dinner.”

“Nikky.” She loosens his arms, leans off the bed, blows out the candle. Drops the pouch on the floor. He pulls her close, feels her hand on his arm again. She falls asleep first and her hand slips off. He falls to the steady rhythm of her breathing and does not let go.