

Jenifer Sutherland

Tight Turns

First she dropped her daughter off then she drove in circles. It was September and the afternoon was not going to last forever. She knew the city, but not this part of it; the names were getting more and more French, a sign she was out of her depth. *Non inveniendo invenire*. St Augustine's old Latin riddle caught her up in familiar circuits of association. *To find in not finding*. The sentence ended *Confessions I.6* with a subjunctive form of *rejoice: gaudet*, connected by a conjunction to a subjunctive form of *love: amet*. Putting aside *gaudet* for the moment, this meant something like, *He should love*. Or maybe, *Let him love*. Why? Probably because it's in his best interest. He's the seeker. Or she is. This woman driving alone in a strange city, summer fading, chest aching. Maybe the saint meant, *it behooves her to love because what the fuck else can she do!* She sighed, shifting her weight into the car's upholstery. The next part was even harder to translate: *potius quam inveniendo non invenire te*. This evaluation of the situation was so densely packed with gerunds and infinitives that it was hard to know what to do with it. The pronoun signalled an address. *Te* was *you* singular. It was not the seeker Augustine was addressing. It was *you: you who are found by not finding (whatever I thought I was looking for)*.

She turned with the traffic through the streets, lost. Latin made no distinction between upper and lower cases. Augustine was addressing God, some God you couldn't find unless you didn't find something else you were looking for. A smaller god made in your own image? Your child? She—the woman driving a car with out-of-province license plates in circles, trying not to obsess over her daughter's empty coffee cup squashed into the map pocket on the passenger door or her bag of discarded clothing in the back seat—was writing an article arguing that Augustine's God was more maternal than paternal. Saint Augustine was, after all, the beloved son of Saint Monica. The hand that rocked the cranium. Ha! What better definition of process? She, the mother driving away from her daughter, she was in the thick of it. Inside the thick god of process. *Non inveniendo invenire*—it was making her crazy. She opened the car window, turning her face towards the draught of city air. After a while she realized that the sort of brioche-shaped

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thing plumped in the rear-view mirror, vaguely green, was Mount Royal. *The mountain*, locals called it. She wound back through one-way streets towards it.

This was how it was now. She headed west, back to her ailing but not yet dying mother in Toronto; her daughter, young and light-hearted, headed east across the Atlantic to her life in Berlin. And they had spent their last hours together fighting over nothing. They would make up, of course. *Everything's good*, her daughter would assure her. *I love you. Tell Grandmother I love her*. But today, this afternoon, the absence of her daughter's body felt unbearably final. Her child had been raised. *Had been*: pluperfect. Yet so imperfect. They'd had two days together in Montreal, visiting the galleries, cafés, friends. Before the parting at the airport they went shopping for jeans. She, the mother, sat by the mirrors in front of the fitting stalls, gazing at her daughter's ankles and feet amidst the collapsed denim forms under the curtain, the thin flesh-colored socks that had previously been hidden by her down-at-the-heel boots reminiscent of the three-year old who wore only pink and lavender. *Happy, yes, happy! Deeply, breathtakingly happy*. The curtain parted and out came the girl, modeling the fit partly for her mother, but more for the male attendant, a solid fellow, pierced and tattooed like a pirate, who looked with practiced eye at the meeting of denim and flesh. In the old days jeans that hugged like that would take you some time to put on, lying on your back on the floor, easing them slowly and excruciatingly, inch by inch, up over the thighs, the pubic bones, the hips and then by millimeters over the gravity-flattened belly, finally fastening them at the waist and collapsing, arms limp, before slowly rising to upright, your lower organs squeezed against your ribcage. These jeans, her daughter demonstrated, turning first to give views from all angles, you could do yoga in—here the left instep slid up the right thigh, the slim arms lengthened above the head, hands pressing together. The mother looked sideways to see if her adoration was mirrored in the eyes of the attendant, but he seemed intent on inspecting the behavior of the material, like a captain surveying masts and rigging in a wind storm.

Why at the last minute, the mother and daughter standing together at the check-out, had the mother refused to pay for the jeans? At the counter near the front of the warehouse, where the seamstress did up hems, that's where it happened. Up until then she had every intention of paying for them. She thought with pleasure of her daughter wearing them on the streets of Berlin, going about her daily routine, something of Montreal, her mother, clinging to her skin, holding her warmly and sweetly, giving her form and identity. *Made in Canada*. But when she saw her daughter's eyes wandering over the merchandise on display around the cash, a chill entered

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the mother's heart. The seamstress, a thin Asian woman past her youth, sat behind a screen formed by racks of t-shirts and souvenirs, enclosed, nearly hidden, bent over an industrial machine, feeding the pant legs over the tread, removing pins, the parting of her black hair more visible than her face. The mother wanted her daughter to throw the seamstress a smile too, not the same one she had awarded the pirate, of course. A simple acknowledgment of her presence, the finishing detail that she was giving the jeans. Was there nothing the mother could do, no sign she could give to make the daughter see her there, stitching up hems, silent, invisible?

Anxiety had been building, she recognized in retrospect. Just the day before they'd been together at the Musée d'Art Contemporain. The scene played out the way it did at every art exhibition they visited. The girl moved through the rooms of the gallery inspecting whatever drew her attention, intent on the images, sometimes doubling back to revisit something before moving on. The mother shifted her attention between the paintings and the girl, nourishing herself vicariously on this stuff that was her daughter's food. She would buy the catalogue for her! The idea came with a surge of joy, the solution for the future. But later when they dawdled in the gift shop she felt depleted, exhausted. What good was a catalogue? How could a picture book build a bridge between presence and absence, today and tomorrow?

Instead, everything was collapsing backwards. She, the mother, was falling back into her old identity as the daughter of her own old mother, both of them worn out by caretaking. The old anger rose up. Whatever she might have given to her daughter vanished like the pair of earrings she had bought for her at the flea market one Sunday, last spring in Berlin. She put them in the zippered pocket of her pants for safekeeping. Later, only one was there. They searched together through the seams, concluding at last, because what else could they do, that the earring had worked through the pant leg onto the street and was gone. Then back in Toronto, just before she put the pants into the wash, there it was, peeking out of the zipper opening, mysteriously emerging from what seemed a simple tailor's art. But now, in the Montreal jean shop, there was no zipper and no seam to probe inside to retrieve her missing generosity. She was seized by some kind of panic. If only her daughter would look around and see her trouble. *Mom? Mom! Look at these tiny denim jackets! Can't you see my friend's baby in one of these?* But the girl continued to scan the racks of t-shirts and jackets, inaccessible. When they got to the car again, both of them hurt and indignant, the girl bewailed the fact she had no money to get to the Venice Biennale. *Welcome to reality, kiddo.*

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At the bed and breakfast the mother got a water glass from her bathroom sink, uncapped a bottle of wine she had bought in a cramped hole in the wall down the street, and unwrapped a container of noodles from the food court. She ate seated on a mound of cobalt and crimson cushions in the bow window, watching the news on the television, today's newspaper in sections beside her, her laptop open on the bed. After a while she set the empty glass down at a deliberate distance. She should check her email. By now, her daughter would have boarded the plane to Berlin. It was due to take off. There would be internet service during the flight. She could send her a message: *Sweetheart, I feel sick with the loss of our last hour together. I looked at you in the jeans shop and you seemed far away already, in Germany, wearing your new pair of jeans. I felt like the seamstress—endlessly and invisibly stitching things up. Or just, Sweetie, I have transferred money into your account to pay for the jeans.*

Easy enough. Her eye settled on the mound of clothes piled on the bed, things her daughter had unloaded from her pack with instructions to deliver them to Good Will. After a while she got up and pulled out from the pile a pair of grey track pants. Outlines of hot pink bicycles were stenciled onto the legs. The moment they were on she felt comforted. She poured herself a second glass of wine. Once, when the mother had to go away for a week, the young child went to bed clutching her mother's old t-shirt.

Mommy, will I be a mommy one day?

Yes, if you want to be.

When I'm a mommy will you be my baby?

No, you'll have your own baby.

How to understand time, with its bifurcations of space, moving out from infant and mother into the world? Did her own mother, almost ninety but still lurching along obstinately without a cane, pine for her in the same way she pined for the daughter she had just quarreled with over the price of a pair of jeans? No, her mother had never followed her around hoping to catch a glimpse of her separate being. Her mother had never looked for her. But you have to. You have to go looking for your child or whatever it is you care about. Like her friend who travelled to Norway to photograph the northern lights. Night after night the weather was overcast, the sky hidden. Then someone at the hotel told her, They're not going to come to you, you have to go looking for them! So she hired a driver. They drove for hours, almost to the border of Finland, before they found a patch of clear sky. The clouds opened and *ta da*—the friend flung her arms out wide

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over their dinner plates and wine glasses, thrilled by the moment as she recalled it—there was the full display of dancing celestial lights.

Seek and ye shall find. But that wasn't what Augustine had written in *Confessions* 1.6. He had written something more like, seek, but don't be disappointed when you find something better than what you were looking for. Some kind of rhetorical trope, at least partly. Besides, it was easier to persist when you yourself weren't lost. Even as a wayward young man the saint was never lost, not really. His mother, Monica, followed him across North Africa, then into Italy. Monica already knew from the beginning things would turn out well because her dreams assured her that her son belonged to God. Monica's God! Whereas she—she kept going back to sit in soul-devouring silence with a mother whose god was too bruised and battered to comfort more than one lost child.

In the dark of pre-dawn she was on the road again, eyes peeled for the highway heading home. It had started to rain and she missed the exit ramp somewhere between René Lévesque and Durocher. But at last she was rolling westbound on the dimly lit TransCanada and her heart had room again to breathe. The darkness and narrow expanse of barely illuminated road made her feel reckless with life and death. Slowing down and speeding up. Passing and being passed. Wheels spitting up a spray of moisture, wipers beating, headlights bouncing, the crescendo and diminuendo of engines, a skin of sound stretching and shrinking. Like Augustine's present moment in the eleventh book of the *Confessions*, distended by memory and anticipation. Like her mother's heart on the screen in the hospital when the young technician pulled the mobile scanner across her tissue-paper skin. He looked like he'd stepped off of Keats' Grecian urn, the nose straight from the forehead, except that he was suited in hospital green instead of vines and boughs. The old mother lay quietly on the white sheets, her withered chest exposed, pressed, manipulated. The middle-aged mother averted her eyes from the nipples that had nursed her and five other children, focusing instead on the strange image on the screen. Was this what a heart looked like, a mud bag mad dancing around a flickering fire?

An intern stuck her head in at the door, smiling, flirtatious. Anything abnormal? The technician kept his eyes on the screen, pulling the scanner across her mother's collapsed breasts, pushing into them to get an angle on the heart, snapping the shot, and then resuming. He made a fresh application of gel to the skin to smooth things along. The middle-aged woman studied the screen, secretly hoping that a valve was defective, that a blotch of decay would show up, that the

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heart would manifest itself for what it was, inadequate to sustain life, a shred of an organ, a hollow bric-à-brac you set on the bookcase to gather dust. But the old mother's heart was thick and powerful, lubbing away, this way, that way, the fire flashing, the heart dancing its wild dance of life. This was normal? This primitive simplicity, its urgent repetitions bulging and lurching, was this all that connected us to each other?

Her heart ached for her daughter. If you could have your moment again! *Mom, are you going to try on some jeans, too?* The shop was a factory outlet on the eastern edge of St. Viateur, a vast grey-washed cement warehouse packed and stacked to the back wall with racks of denim, only a few displays of leather jackets and colored t-shirts around the cash to break the indigo monotony. The girl's bright eyes were already planning a route through the plenitude. The mother dismissed her invitation breezily, offering instead to hold her things. Arms freed, off she went to inspect the racks, pulling them open, checking for sizes. The attendant with the tattoos and piercings showed up to help, his English good enough for commenting on pocket design, waist levels, straight, skinny and wide cuts and the aesthetics of faded, distressed, and light or dark. The girl listened, looking him directly in the eye. When she'd tried on the first picks, he disappeared into the racks to look for smaller sizes.

The girl's eyes followed him. Maybe a relationship was starting up between the two of them! The mother entertained a fantasy of their lives together in one of those high-ceilinged Montreal walk-ups. The pirate would rise in the company, handling global sales. *Captain of industry*. Eventually the mother would be summoned to help with the children. She would learn the local French, enough to do the daily rounds of the markets, purchasing croissants, fruit, tea and local produce. They would go to the parks and museums, the little ones dressed in adorable outfits. She would tell them stories about their great-grandmother, dead before they were born. Still wearing blue jeans to the bitter end! *There she is. You can see her a mile away, her white hair shining in the sunlight as she teeters along the busy downtown sidewalk wearing light-weight denim pedal pushers. Pedestrians recoil in horror from the spindly white and purple legs sticking out from the knee-length jeans. She started wearing jeans early in the decade of the Apollo 9 lunar landing, a year after Sears catalogue came out with a new model for women with a front fly. Imagine! One small step from the discreet side zipper to the full frontal fly—a giant step for womankind.* The heart, on the other hand, has no zipper back, side or front. It's a muscle bag of blood lurching and heaving its weight—no thighs, butt or belly in relation to the ventricles, no threat of seductive opening. No safe enclosure.

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Out of the dark a white transport nosed up behind her tail. She had slowed down because of the road-work signs. FINES DOUBLED. There were no men working at this hour. But her headlights lit up the warnings as the lane narrowed and twisted between emergency markers across the white lines, making her tighten her hand on the wheel. The other hand she raised in a rude gesture at the truck driver pressing up behind. Miraculously he fell back almost instantly. Could he have seen her finger in this gloom from his perch high above her in his cab?

She switched the radio on, was greeted by static, switched it off. Her daughter's empty coffee cup would wind up recycled back in Toronto along with the discarded clothes. The jeans would be forgotten. Their video conversations would bring them back together, in spite of the time difference, their pixilated smiles healing the wound. Now, though, the truck's cab hung behind her like a thing come up out of the deep. It was not an ordinary truck, battered and rectangular. Luminous it had smooth molded curves. Past the construction lanes she sped up. So did he. She pulled as far as she could towards the shoulder to let him pass. He stayed put. Surely he wasn't playing with her. She kept her eye out for an opportunity to ditch him and then took it desperately, veering onto the barely lit ramp of a rest stop at the last possible moment, heart pounding painfully.

The simple bright interior of the restaurant calmed her down a bit. She sat by a window, her tea in a paper cup, slowing her breath, in, out, watching through the reflection of her pale face for the white truck to haul back around into the station. What if the driver suddenly strode past the gas pumps and pushed through the door? Outside, the pre-dawn obscurity remained empty. But he could be waiting on the shoulder of the highway for her to come back out again. She felt trapped, caught in one of those eddies that swirl you around in circles, a piece of stick bumping against stones and clumps of overhanging shore. *Yorckstrasse!* She had set out one afternoon by Berlin's subway system to meet up with her daughter at the Neue Nationalgalerie. At Yorckstrasse she got off the U line to transfer to one of the S lines. She walked over ramps and under ramps, up and down stairs, inside and outside. The map was of no use; it showed that the lines connected somehow but it made no sense of stone, brick, concrete, air. There was another tunnel, a busy street with traffic lights, more stairs, and then she was back where she'd started from, hot with confusion and humiliation.

In the end of course she had arrived. Just as now she was here. Outside the restaurant window the eastern clouds swelled with something like daybreak, a pinkish bruise slowly

lengthening into sharp neon strips. Time to get back on the road. The driver of the white truck had probably crossed the Quebec border into Ontario by now. What was he hauling? She tried to imagine the vast belly of the van filled up with—washing machines? Crates of unassembled furniture? Toys for all the girls and boys? She did not expect, a hundred kilometers down the road, near Gananoque, to see the truck in plain daylight. It was pulled over onto the shoulder behind a highway patrol, a huge white whale, beached. The driver had not been pursuing her after all; he was just speeding. What would happen to him? Would he lose his job? Probably not. The company he worked for probably budgeted for highway fines. *Illegal practices. Illegal materials. A mammoth load of potato sacks stuffed with cocaine. Dead bodies.*

Outside Toronto the four lanes widened into six, and then split into express and collector lanes, the collectors filling up with traffic flowing in from the suburban centers. Sound barriers lined the shoulders of the highway, peeling with rust, the faded turquoise and blue stripes of siding reminiscent of summers come and gone. Her heart constricted. The last summer they had spent together in Canada—they were driving back from somewhere up north—her daughter had told her that the first memory she had of summer as *summer* was staring from the back seat at her mother's left arm resting on the rolled-down window, sun drenching the patch of bare shoulder. A few freckles had surfaced on the skin. This vision was the beginning of her career in art, the daughter said. And love? The heart danced its terrible dance while the sun turned the seasons around and around, every once in a while spinning off something that signaled some kind of connection. Something you could hold in your mind and turn into something else. Freckles. The rest of her was fallen away, or hidden behind the things around her. *Unbearable*. She wished that after all the truck driver had come off the highway out of the darkness into the restaurant, that back there, before dawn, she had grabbed him by his arm as he headed towards the pots of coffee, told him, stop! Stop! I'm the one you chased through the construction zone and into this eddy. Sit down with me. Let me tell you who I am!

In the near distance across the weave of the highway rose the towers of the city where she lived alone, day after day, teaching, writing, visiting her mother on the weekend, ashamed of the smallness of her attachment to the old woman who had survived so long and born so much and said so little. What if the connection between them was like the second earring from the flea market, working its way up through some hidden place to emerge suddenly, just when the old mother crossed the final sea? Sun glanced off of her side mirror as the east retreated behind her.

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Exit signs, signal lights flashing, cars crisscrossing, gaps opening and closing. St Augustine's moment distended by memory and expectation snapped into a single bead of attention. She was strung on an abacus, something to count on, not something to take inside or be inside. Life called with its line-up of urgent requirements. Yes, a bead on an abacus after all. She turned south onto the Don Valley Parkway. In Berlin it was midday. Her daughter would be sitting on a bus, looking vaguely out the window, or picking up text messages. If only the revelation of art had come through a song they had sung while they walked together alongside the shore of a lake, the waves clapping a gentle rhythm under their voices. Rhythm and cadence last long after freckles turn into liver spots.

She shifted gears. The traffic flowing onto the southbound exit ramp was slowing almost to a standstill. The windows of the towers blinked and winked as the city pulled her slowly closer, wrapping its foot around her leg, playful at first, like a boy on the beach. She would turn the radio on and he would speak to her with that get-with-it tone, tease her, make her laugh at his jokes. *I'll give you the inside story*. What did the seamstress behind the partition of cheap t-shirts and souvenirs one province over have to tell anyone? Or the clumsy, stubborn beating of her mother's ancient heart? Something massive and heavy sat inside her like a system of metal teeth, an incomprehensibly complex set of zippers that opened and closed. Pockets and pouches, caves and underground passageways. This mess of metal and darkness, what could anyone do with it? Who could help her give birth through it to something that belonged to neither her mother nor her daughter, some *te* or *you* or *me* that as yet she could not recognize?

In the lane next to her a driver leaned over his steering wheel, peering intently ahead through dark glasses. She followed his gaze. Above the sumac bushes and black willows mounded along the edge of the winding river rose the skyline. The familiar landmarks appeared oddly spaced, as if the office towers were parting to reveal the city's hospitals and graveyards. Jonah already arrived with his truckload of sackcloth and ashes.

Will you always be my mother?

Yes, always.

Even when you're dead?

She switched on the radio in time for the news. Maybe the mother's body was the unfound thing that became God, the patch of freckled skin turned into summer, which, in turn, turned summer into a turn. The news was followed by the traffic report. *Traffic is slow southbound on the Don Valley*

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Parkway. It was a woman's voice after all. *Pull yourself together*. *Amo amas amat is for beginners*. *Amet is next level*. *Unfound or unfinding, you've got to love*. She was stuck in traffic. There was nothing to be done but sit here and wait. And while she waited she would think about the other word, the word she had put aside because it was too difficult. *Gaudet*. Rejoice. She had to translate that too if she was going to get it right. *Gaudet et amet*. Rejoice *and* love. Why? Because. Because we're here and there's time.

Yes, mother, time.