

About the Author

Judith and Salome write fiction. They're in Edmonton.

TONSIL STONES

JUDITH AND SALOME

▲ few months together, and Heather and I are on our white loveseat, her legs thrown over my lap. “I like you a lot, Robert,” she tells me. “A lot a lot,” she says, almost sad.

I laugh. “Just say you love me, that’s what you mean.”

Her eyes brown and wet like coffee with cream, she says, “I do love you.”

And after this, she says it all the time.

Heather was fresh from Nova Scotia when I met her, living on her cousin’s couch. She slept over at my apartment more and more. Soon she was there more than she wasn’t.

I don’t remember our address. What I remember is a smiling, handsy Heather meeting me at the top of the stairs when I got home from work in my steel-toed boots and fire-retardant coveralls.

I used to think it showed how much she loved me—now I wonder, she must have been very bored.



We’re in the parking garage under our building, waiting for the elevator, both of us weighed down with grocery bags from the Superstore a few blocks away. This entire story could be set in this elevator. Inside,

Heather lets the bags fall to the floor and stretches her sore fingers, opening and closing them as the elevator starts to move. She gets close and smiles in my face. This time, the ride is mostly kissing.

At the door to our apartment, she can't figure out which way the key goes in. She used to live on a farm in Cape Breton, where they had no reason to lock doors, and she's never driven a car either, says she's terrified she would end up killing someone. She sticks the key in upside-down almost every time.

"Frig," she says, and it makes me weak when she says it, which is why I like her to be in charge of the keys. "Friiig," she says, laying it on thick because she knows I like it.



Heather is on Pinterest every day, looking up recipes and crafts. She's sitting at the kitchen table, painting jars with glow-in-the-dark paint, or coating cinnamon buns with cream cheese icing, skypping with her sisters and her niece in Nova Scotia.

New contact lenses mean she's not wearing glasses for the first time. New clothes mean perfect fitting dresses from Simon's, Forever 21.

She looks happy.



She grew up the second youngest of six children—four girls and two boys. Her parents were long married and too Catholic to think about divorce. They drank heavily—home-made moonshine often—and once their kids were halfway through their teens, most of them did too.

Heather felt her mother was indifferent towards her, but her father she loved, and they were close, until he died a few years before we met. She kept a picture of him on our fridge. Heather had his strong nose.

As a young woman, Heather played sports, and at Saint Mary's University was a star on the volleyball team, until she eventually dropped out, unmotivated. I asked her why she moved to Alberta and her answer was, "To make lots of money," which I chose to ignore. She did eventually find work, but mostly she took care of the apartment, cleaned, and cooked dinner.



December, about a month after Heather moves in, some of her friends visit from the east coast, and we go drinking with them. Heather brings a clutch purse the size of a laptop, is wearing too-small jeans and a floral blouse that zips up in the front. Halfway through the night, I find her standing at the bar, face to face with one of her guy friends, their palms on each other's elbows. I ask her what she's doing. She says, "Be right there." I tell her I'm leaving.

I linger outside hoping she comes after me. "Robert! I'm so happy you didn't leave," she says, smiling big, coming down the stairs fast, her hand on the rail. "I want everyone to see me go home with you."

At red lights I glance at Heather's sleeping face. I drive into our parking garage, shake her leg, kiss her, tell her we're home. She opens her door and ralphs—wet slaps hitting the

pavement. By the time I get around the car, she's squatting a few puke-pancakes away, urinating.



A thin creek descends across the parking garage and into the drain. I smile at the security camera.

She's an adorable drunk when we're alone. She gets reckless, touchy, salacious. All endearing. When we're by ourselves.



If I make Heather seem like the bad guy in this story, it's by leaving a lot out.



The night we met, the two of us the only ones not passed out after a party at her cousin's place, she grabbed a blanket from the closet and laid on the couch, covering herself to the neck. As she undressed under the

blanket, her curly brown hair splashing the arm of the couch like night tides, I asked her what she liked to read, since she had a pile of books beside the couch.

“Well, right now, I’m reading the *Left Behind* series.”

“Yeah? What’s that about?”

“The Rapture. They’re Christian books.”

“Really? Do you believe in that shit?”

“Yes,” she said. She opened her blanket to show me her sunburn, soft curves, light hairs, black bandeau bra, beat up turquoise panties. She rubbed the space next to her.



Heather and I are holding hands down Candy Cane Lane. A snow-lit night sky dumped over the high-end houses, a few playing Christmas music.

My toes are frozen because I picked a pair of boat shoes over my winter boots, just for their looks, to maybe impress Heather. I can’t hide that I’m cold, it shows in my walk. When we get back to the car Heather says, “Let’s get in the backseat and warm your feet up.” On the weathered, mint-green backseat of my decades-old Tercel, Heather pulls my feet into her lap one by one—slipping off my shoes, rolling off my socks, and tossing them to the juice-stained floor mat beside her. She unzips her coat, unbuttons her shirt, and holds my feet to her skin, holds them under her arms, gives me a remonstrant care.



Heather wakes up and tells me her feet are burning. The first time this happens, I turn myself upside-down in bed and blow on them, thinking of what else to do. Always there was a bottle of Absolut in the freezer—Heather liked fruit-flavoured vodkas. I wrap the cold bottle in a towel and hold it to her feet, and, half asleep, she sighs and murmurs at me. In a few months I’ve done it so many times it’s automatic. Even when I have to work at four in the morning, I’m always a little bit happy when she wakes me up to help cool her feet down.



She left the bar with someone. She sent me a few snotty texts from his front seat, telling me so. Said I shouldn't have been ignoring her. She texted me the address and I picked her up before anything happened. I took her word for it. I put my coat around her, pulled her into the neighbouring yard, and made sure she knew how much I liked her.



We went to a sex show downtown. I made sure her hand had a sheer, plastic cup of Budweiser in it at all times, and we went from booth to booth looking at colourful sex toys, watching demonstrations and seminars. Later, we bought a battery-powered, bullet-sized vibe that filtered through five settings as you pressed its one button. Heather picked the colour, black, and we killed its battery on drive home.



The morning sun wakes me up to a cold bed. She hasn't come home. My heart laments her absence, and I clutch her pillow to my nose. There are strands of her wavy brown hair stuck on and weaved into the white pillowcase. Heather likes white bedding, she said, "Because you know when it's dirty."

I roll over and grab my phone from the nightstand. I have no texts. Just the unanswered ones I sent Heather the night before. I call her. No answer.

When Heather does come home, around two, I'm standing in the kitchen, waiting for her.

"Why don't you answer your phone?"

"It's dead." She pulls out her phone and shows its black screen to me. "Can I just lie down? I walked all the way here."

"You walked? From where?" I grab her a glass of water and make her eat vitamins.

"Please, Robert, I'm too tired for a fight. Come cuddle me."

I'm not too tired, but I'm happy she's home.



She breaths silently when she sleeps, hardly moves. There is a valley in her chest, an unusual dip in her sternum. I put my arm around her and hold her stomach, and her hand moves in its sleep to rest on mine.



Heather has been trying to teach me to ice-skate all winter. We strap up in the Canadian Tire skates we bought together—matching black pairs—and skate out onto the schoolyard hockey rink by our apartment, which is quiet because it’s three in the morning. We hold hands, my naked one in her seal-fur mitten, and we do laps around the rink. I fall down lots, and always pull her down with me, and we laugh and kiss flat on the ice under the cold, crystal stars.



She cups her crotch and shuffles to the bathroom, naked but for the birth control patch on her outer thigh. “Come take a shower with me,” she says.

Once we’re dried and dressed, the day has us in the sun as much sun as possible. “True happiness for me is lying in the sun with a beer and a cigarette,” Heather says.

I take her everywhere there is to go, until Edmonton in the summer has nothing left to offer her.

Later, we hold each other on the couch, on the bed, on the balcony, in the kitchen, and Heather asks, “When are you going to marry me?”

We have sex on the couch, on the bed, on the balcony, in the kitchen, and Heather tells me, “You fit me like a key.”



At a house party, I come out of the bathroom, and Heather is very close with someone who seems to have just come in from the cold. She is bunched up against him and holding his hands in hers, rubbing them, bringing them to her mouth to breath on them.

I place my hand on the small of her back and ask her what’s going on, and she looks back at me.

The guy with the hand says to Heather, “Oh... I don’t think you should be doing that,” and pulls his hand back.

I take Heather to an upstairs bedroom to talk.

“He was cold,” she says. “That’s the kind of person I am. Was I supposed to let him freeze?”

“You can’t be so touchy-feely any more. Too much shit has happened.”

Her face turns red. “Don’t call me ‘touchy-feely,’ please.”

We sit on the strange bed. Heather looks at nothing, sad but buzzed, people laughing downstairs.

“Can we go home now?” I ask.



It’s my birthday, and Heather decorates the house while I’m at work. Streamers are on the ceiling, rhubarb pie is in the oven, a card is on the table. It reads, *My sweet Robert. I am so happy to have you in my life. You are like my missing piece. The key to my lock. You are the most kind, perfect boyfriend to me. I have never had anyone in my life that treats me as well as you do. Anyone who loves me as much as you do. You are my best friend and my soulmate, and I am 100 percent in love with you (even though you get under my skin sometimes.) There is nothing you can do to shake me. You’re stuck with me for good now.*

Happy happy Birthday! I love the shit outta you.

(Now come give me a big kiss!)



Heather loves the sun and doesn’t know when she’s had too much of it. Her hair is a curly mess and she wears glasses that make her eyes look teeny. Heather has tonsil stones, which I dig out with a Q-Tip on a weekly basis. Yellow and brown petrified and putrefied stones I lay out on a square of toilet paper on the edge of the bathroom sink, and we laugh about how disgusting they are as they stink up the room, and I embarrass her by tongue kissing her before she’s had a chance to brush her teeth.



Heather listens to Joni Mitchell and stirs cake batter in the warm light of the kitchen as I watch her from the couch. Her face moves with concentration as she looks this way or that for the paper towel or for the olive oil. “How big did we say this was?” she asks me, holding her forearm across the side of a glass pan to measure. “Thirteen?” She butters the pan with her fingers as she sings along to “River.”



I drive to where I think she is, and before I get there, she’s beside me at the red light, laughing in the passenger side of a minivan. I honk at her and she looks at me, and doesn’t lose her smile, but it fades from her eyes.

I think of pulling the driver out of the mini-van and beating him to death in the middle of the road. Instead, I go home and stuff all of Heather’s things into garbage bags. I stuff the flowers I got her in with everything else, and drop all her things off on her cousin’s porch.



It’s a mutual breakup, I tell myself, but immediately I want her back.

I don’t see Heather again for three weeks, when we sleep together for the last time. When we finish, she covers her face with her hands and says, “I’m a slut.”

She is nice to me that last night, her hand feeling my body most of the time. But already we feel like strangers—like we never knew each other in the first place.

I drive her to the airport—she’s going to Cape Breton, and though she’ll be coming back to Alberta, I’ll never see her again. I carry her suitcases stoically, wait with her while she gets her ticket from the desk. I act like I’m going to be okay, like it’s no big deal. I tell her I love her. I kiss her for a long time, trying to make her love me back again. Once she’s past security and on her way to the plane, she waves, smiles, and turns away forever.